



Brainworx bx_masterdesk PRO

\$349 **PC** **MAC**

'Tis said audio mastering is the darkest of arts. If so, posits **Stuart Adams**, bx_masterdesk PRO is an entire grimoire

> Brainworx' homespun line of bx_masterdesk plugins pack a combination of compressor, limiter and basic tone controls into a single unified processor. The second edition of the plugin saw the inclusion of Brainworx' True Peak limiting tech, but this new third edition represents a much larger and more significant advancement for the series.

Input processing

The new features start at the beginning of bx_masterdesk PRO's signal chain with a new pair of dynamic processors. Glue introduces a gentle

dynamic smoothing via a simple analogue-style VCA compressor, adding body and cohesion to a mix. Clipper functions more like a limiter, preventing any peaks that exceed 0dBFS from passing through. A dial allows the input signal to be pushed into the Clipper by up to 6dB, making it a very useful tool for boosting the signal level whilst ridding yourself of troublesome peaks.

The input signal can be further shaped with high- and low-pass filters and a new three-band parametric EQ. These sit prior to the plugin's main dynamic processing stages (not that you would know this from the plugin's layout),

allowing you to adjust how those stages respond to your mix.

Enhanced compressor

bx_masterdesk's Resonance Filters are in essence a pair of notch filters for cutting away intense resonant frequencies. Where previously each band offered a choice of just two switchable cutoff frequencies they are now fully sweepable so that, between them, the entire 20Hz to 20kHz spectrum is covered, and they offer a choice of two bandwidths, making them so much more useful than they were previously.

The deeper levels of control directly translate to the potential for better-sounding results

The Volume section now offers enhanced control over its underlying compressor in the form of Ratio and Release controls. The four ratios that can be selected range from 3.2:1 to 7.9:1, which seems very high for a mastering processor. However, the softness of the compressor's knee means that you will only get these high ratios when driving the input and Volume control hard, and in practice the compressor has a wide sweet spot in which gain reduction is both effective and transparent. Conversely, with just 30ms difference covering all four selectable release times - 100ms to 130ms - the new Release control is useful but has a fairly minimal impact on proceedings.

The Foundation stage sees a single new addition in the form of Brainworx' XL processor, which enhances third- and fifth-order harmonics to add warmth, weight and loudness. The Tone section remains much as it was, but a new stereo enhancement feature has been added. This applies one of a choice of four EQ curves to the stereo side channel, impacting the perceived width and character of the stereo field.

True peak features

Other than the smart modern appearance, the most noticeable change in bx_masterdesk PRO is the limiter stage that now incorporates many of the controls found in bx_limiter True Peak, and so giving much more control over the responsiveness and character of processing. That plugin's magnificent metering, showing peak and RMS level, gain reduction, dynamic range and loudness for both input and output has also been transplanted here.

The bx_masterdesk series is notable for its ability to deliver great-sounding results quickly, without demanding any particular expertise, but by preventing deeper control that ease of use can be a double-edged sword restricting sonic

flexibility. The enhancements and additions brought to bx_masterdesk PRO go a very long way to blunting this longstanding criticism, with the deeper levels of control directly translating to the potential for better sounding results, all while having little-to-no impact on the rapidity and ease of the workflow. It's a heck of a solid tool. **cm**

Web www.brainworx.audio



The core bx_masterdesk recipe remains unchanged from the original edition of the plugin

A masterful recipe

The core bx_masterdesk recipe separates the mastering process into three key stages - Volume, Foundation and Tone - and provides the simplest of controls over each of those stages. These controls reach into multiple parameters of the underlying processors, but for simplicity's sake such details remain completely hidden.

In the Volume stage, a single large dial drives the input signal into the fixed threshold of a compressor. Similarly, the Foundation stage, ie a tilt EQ that shifts the high/low tonal balance, also has just a single large control for getting your mix into the

general tonal ballpark that you're aiming for.

From here the tonal balance can be perfected using the four broad-brushed EQ bands of the Tone section - Bass, Mid, High and Presence - with each band's fixed frequency well chosen to suit a wide range of material.

A number of embellishments sit atop this core recipe: Control over the amount of THD (harmonic distortion), stereo width adjustment and low-frequency mono-maker, low- and high-frequency Resonance (ie notch) filters, and a de-esser bringing up the rear of the processing chain.

Alternatively

Waves Abbey Road TG Mastering Chain \$199 (regular price)

A flexible mastering plugin modelled on Abbey Road Studio's EMI TG12410 Transfer Console

Eventide Elevate Mastering Bundle \$199

Mastering-grade processors for balancing tone and loudness

Verdict

For Delivers excellent results quickly
Glue and Clipper provide ideal dynamic pre-treatments
Resonance Filters now fully sweepable
bx_limiter True Peak-inspired metering

Against Order of sections does not always reflect signal flow

This latest one-stop mastering solution provides extra control over the process yet still makes great-sounding masters a cinch



The smart new interface is not the only thing that's been improved in bx_masterdesk PRO