Roger Mayer 456 Stereo
Analogue Tape Simulator

Reviews : Processor

Real reels are a thing of the past — but not all tape emulation comes in software form.

Matt Houghton

Analogue tape is expensive, and using it inconvenient, yet the unique sonic characteristics that tape and tape machines can impart seem ever more desirable. Thankfully, there are plenty of emulations available, in both hardware and software form — but this one brings something a little different to the table.

Paul White looked at Roger Mayer's 456 mono guitar pedal back in SOS April 2014 (http://sosm.ag /mayer-456-mono). I also liked that pedal, but I found myself more interested in the potential of its circuitry for use in the studio. I said as much to Roger who, to my delight, said he'd already been refining his product to that end and offered to send the finished product for evaluation. The result of his endeavours is the 456 Stereo, but there's more to this update than suggested by the name. Not only does this version boast a second channel, but the whole assembly is now housed in a sturdy 1U-high, half rack-width desktop unit. Where the pedal's I/O were unbalanced jacks, the stereo version sports balanced line-level XLR connections, which are much more suitable for studio work. As with the pedal, the stereo version is powered by an external 48V DC PSU.

From an end-user point of view, everything's wonderfully simple, with only a handful of controls: stereo input gain, output level, bass, treble and 'presence' controls, and individual channel bypass buttons. But what about the sound?

In common with some other devices I've used, notably Sound Skulptor's STS and Rupert Neve Designs' Portico 5042, the results are tape-like in many respects, but not all. The head bump is there, as is a pleasant tape-like saturation, and some nice harmonic distortion at moderate levels of drive. Roger has deliberately ignored authenticity-chasing features like wow and flutter, and tape hiss, though. That's the right decision, in my view — I'm forever cursing the need to switch such features off in plug-ins when I later add compression! Also, as with the other units I mentioned, when you really cook the input levels, you're rewarded with a distortion that's more reminiscent of overdriven analogue electronics than of tape; a kind of bright, slightly fizzy sound. It's not unpleasant to me. No doubt it will be to some — but all they need do is back off the levels a bit. Although this effect is not really tape-like (some tape machines may exhibit similar characteristics when overdriven, but it's not the classic tape sound) it makes this a useful distortion/saturation device in its own right. The presence and tone controls allow you to shape this sound too, taming the brashness to render the result more tape-like, or, with the Presence control in particular, brightening it yet more, to give a source a sharp cutting edge.

I used the 456 on various sources including electric and acoustic guitars, electric bass, synths, vocals and both drum and master stereo buses. I found it a really useful tool when tracking bass and vocals in particular; it lends a richness or thickness to the sound without it becoming in any way dull or syrupy. Except when hitting it with unexpectedly high levels (eg. with the upper reaches of a very dynamic vocal performance), I found it hard not to like the effect. In fact, it's really addictive.

When mixing, it worked as beautifully as I'd anticipated on a rock drum bus, operating in a sort of half bus-compressor, half tape role. Unlike with real tape, which can't be used in real time, I was able to set up the 456 as a parallel effect, which yielded some really nice results. On the master bus, though, I often found the effect a little much; I'd try it, like it for a while, and then switch it out later. Perhaps further experimentation with it in parallel would help to make the effect more subtle (I'd love to see a blend control to make this easier).

Two sources which seem to benefit from tape more than most are distorted/overdriven electric guitar and snare drums. Using the 456 with either was a delight. Careful juggling of the input and output levels allowed me to tame the edge of the distorted guitars in a way that didn't make it retreat too far in the mix. It's a similar thing with a bright, aggressive snare, whether processed directly, or in the midst of a drum

loop: the 456 helps peg it firmly in it's place, without sucking the life out of the thing.

Whether or not this is an authentic recreation of 456 tape running on a particular machine is the wrong question to ask, and as I wasn't able to make a direct comparison I'll not attempt to answer it here. Yet this unit definitely does deliver a very tape-like saturation and distortion, and the front-panel controls make it easy to fine-tune the sound. It doesn't sound like any plug-in I've tried (several of which I compared directly with the 456), and neither does it sound like the RND Portico 5042 or the Sound Skulptor STS, or, from memory, the Anamod ATS-1.

It's not particularly cheap, but I don't consider it overpriced given that what's on offer here is both unique and genuinely useful. It costs no more than countless stereo compressors and saturation devices of similar quality. This box is very much its own thing — it's something that I've enjoyed using a great deal, and I can highly recommend trying one out. Matt Houghton

£1300 including VAT.

www.roger-mayer.co.uk

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