

CUSTOM EQ BANDS
Like the classic gear that inspired it, Custom Series EQ uses fixed frequency settings

BOOST
Custom Series Lift's parallel EQ bands only boost

HIGH LIFT
'Present' affects the upper mids, and 'Silky' affects the highs

METER
Shows the post-input, pre-processing level, to find the processing sweet spot

FILTERS
The high- and low-pass filters are very gentle, delivering a highly musical outcome

DRIVE/INTENSITY
Set the Drive so that the meter peaks roughly at the 'bomb' in the middle, then set the effect blend with the Intensity

TONE
Choose one of three frequency focuses: two low and one mid-range

LOW LIFT
'Big' influences the weighty lows, and 'Punchy' emphasises the low to low-mids



Slate Digital PC MAC Custom Series Bundle & FG-Bomber \$149/\$99

Slate's API 500-influenced plugin package delivered impressive sonics on release, and now, as promised, new modules are starting to appear for it

> Slate Digital's Virtual Mix Rack (9/10, **cm214**) is a rack-style modular effects plugin that hosts the company's range of proprietary processing modules. On initial release a year ago, five such processors were available, four of them bought as a bundle (FG-N 'Brit-N' EQ, FG-S 'Brit-4K' EQ, FG-116 FET Compressor and FG-401 VCA Compressor), the fifth (Revival, a simple two-band EQ) included with the VMR rack itself - which is a free download - as a 'taster' option. A physical iLok 2 key is required for all VMR authorisations, including the rack and free plugin.

When VMR was launched, it was made clear that further modules would follow - and indeed they did. The first was a revised version of Slate's Virtual Console Collection, plus a free gain and phase reverse module (Trimmer). Now, the second wave is upon us in the shape of the two-module Custom Series Bundle (\$149), comprising Custom Series EQ and Custom

Series Lift, and FG-Bomber (\$99), described as a "dynamic impact enhancer".

Playing the Classics

Custom Series EQ is a four-band hybrid emulation with additional high- and low-pass filters, based on custom combinations of classic hardware EQs. Slate don't say which ones specifically, but they do state the type. When boosting, the HF (high frequency) band is a

classic valve design combined with mastering EQ-style air, while the HMF (high-mid) band combines multiple discrete analogue designs, the LMF (low-mid) band is a mixture of valve and solid state, and the LF (low) band is modelled on two classic mastering EQs. In contrast, all the cut curves are based on a modern transparent mastering EQ.

The crucial thing here is that the boost curves emulate combinations of EQs rather than a single unit, and although this may seem like an odd approach, it actually emulates the way in which many pro mix engineers work. The frequencies are at fixed points, rather than sweepable, which is also to be expected given the finely tuned methodology.

The HF and HMF bands are great for adding focused edge and musical air to vocals, snares and acoustic sounds such as guitars and orchestral instruments. Viewed in a spectrum analyser, it's also clear that while the HF band is

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“All three plugins make worthy additions to VMR, offering a fresh take on analogue-style audio processing”

a peak filter, HMF combines peak and shelving shapes. The behaviour is more typical in cut mode, with broad, predictable dips that are good for taming harshness in cymbals and electric guitars, but not narrow enough to notch out specific problem frequencies. Boosting with the LMF band delivers an incredibly broad peak that fills out the low mids, while the LF band boasts quite a steep shelf, aiding low-end weight. The low- and high-pass filters are very gentle, rolling off at about 6dB per octave.

Going up

Custom Series Lift is a two-band boost-only sweetening EQ based on the same hardware analysis behind Custom Series EQ. Each band (High and Low) has just two frequency settings and delivers up to 10dB of boost. The result is upper mid articulation at 5kHz (Present), high air at about 10kHz (Silky), overall low end weight at 90Hz (Big) and peaking lows at 90Hz (Punchy). It's a simple concept with a musical sound that we fell in love with instantly, and although it's tempting to 'hype' everything with it, if you just stick to key elements such as vocals, beats, submixes and mixes, it's incredibly effective.

Bomber command

Achieving punch, depth, liveliness and impact in sounds and mixes requires tailored use of compression, saturation, transient processing and, often, filtering. FG-Bomber combines all of these in a single plugin with just three controls: Drive, Intensity and Tone. The first two set the input level and effect blend, and the meter includes a handy target marker for optimising levels. Meanwhile, Tone offers three options, focusing the processing on the mids (Present) and lows (Fat and Tight).

Clearly, FG-Bomber is one of those 'black box' processors, but it's one capable of doing good things to a range of sources when handled with care. For isolated kick and snare drums, light Intensity settings bring up the tail, but as you wind the intensity up, transients are increasingly

squashed; and the Tone setting simply focuses this effect towards its designated frequencies. On mixed drum material, high Intensity settings can easily suck the life out of the signal, and once again, playing it safe pays dividends in the form of a more energetic sound. As the manual says, a little goes a long way.

On both synth and electric bass, the Present Tone setting adds real bite, while the other two Tone settings increase weight. In all cases, keeping the Intensity to around 30-40% achieves the best results by far; and on fully mixed material, extra care is required to avoid pumping. However, a little Intensity (up to 20%) liven up loops and submixes nicely.

Put it on the slate

All three of Slate's new plugins make worthy additions to VMR, offering a fresh take on analogue-style audio processing. We're still quite disappointed at the lack of internal rack routing options in VMR though, and the inability to use the plugins on their own away from it (or at least to collapse the interface down to show just the modules you're using, for instance). Even so, we'll park that thought for now, and sum up by saying that this trio of new modules makes an excellent addition to the lineup. **cm**



The new modules have integrated output trim, but VMR Trimmer is there if you need it, complete with metering



Slate's subscription option kits you out with some of the finest mixing plugins on the planet

Sub machine

If you like the look of Slate Digital's various plugins but can't afford to buy them all outright, you might consider their new subscription option. The monthly subscription (currently \$25) enables access to the full current range as well as any new ones introduced during your subscription period. That means all the VMR modules, Virtual Bus Compressors, Virtual Tape Machines, FG-X Mastering and LX480 Reverb. They'll even throw in the required iLok 2 key for free if you don't have one.

On the upside, you can pay for your subscription annually or monthly, the latter including the option to pause and resume at any time - very welcome for

sporadic users. However, the benefit in paying a whole year up front equates to a saving of about 50 pence, which isn't much of an incentive.

Also on the downside, although Slate are quite prolific in terms of adding to the product line, ultimately you have no control over how many new plugins you'll get each year. It's also obviously impossible to insure against subscription price rises or plugin discount purchase deals, both of which will influence the long-term cost of each purchase method.

However you look at it, getting ready access to Slate Digital's entire stable of plugins is seriously enticing.

Alternatively

Soundtoys Decapitator cm152 » 10/10 » \$199

A seriously useful fattening processor with five preamp styles, drive and EQ shaping

Softube Tube-Tech Classic Channel N/A » N/A » \$489

Full-on valve EQ and opto compressor experience

Verdict

For Excellent hybrid EQ

FG-Bomber is a solid alternative to regular dynamics processors
Lift is a great sweetening tool
Integrated output trim

Against Rack still lacks flexible routing
Plugins only work in the Rack

With Custom Series EQ and Lift, and FG-Bomber, VMR becomes an even more flexible, interesting mix processing system

FG-Bomber 10/10
Custom Series Bundle 9/10

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