



iZotope Neutron 2 Advanced

£389

PC MAC

It's not been that long since the original first began guiding our mixes, but version 2 of this cerebral channel strip plugin is upon us already...

> A year after Neutron's debut (9/10, **cm238**), version 2 adds some intriguing new technologies to iZotope's futuristic "mixing assistant" plugin, enhances some of those that were already there, and gets a visual overhaul to bring it in line with the simultaneously released Ozone 8 (10/10, **cm251**). As per the iZotope norm, it's available in Elements (\$129), Standard (£195) and Advanced (£389; the one we're reviewing here) editions, with the last including all of the main software's component modules as separate plugins, and enough exclusive goodies to make it the one to go for if funds allow.

Neutron 2's (VST/AU/AAX/RTAS) primary remit remains unchanged, so we'll focus on what's new in this review, rather than go over the fundamentals again. In summary, though, it's a comprehensive and incredibly high-quality channel strip, along the same lines as its stablemate Alloy 2 (9/10, **cm184**), comprising two Compressors, a 12-band EQ (featuring

Dynamic mode and the revelatory Masking Meter), a Transient Shaper, an Exciter and - new to v2 - a Gate (see *Gate keeper*). The big story, however, is the innovative Track Assistant, which uses machine learning to generate instrument-specific presets as starting points for further mixing decisions. Partnered with this, the Neutrino algorithm uses adaptive

"The new Track Assistant can set the Compressor Ratio, Attack and Release, and Exciter Drive"

multiband processing to optimise the sound according to its instrument type. Welcome to the future...

Assistance is useful

We were very impressed by Track Assistant in our review of the original Neutron, and v2 makes numerous improvements to it. You can now select your instrument type (including the new Piano option) manually, and choose whether or not to accept the results that the Assistant ultimately comes up with - albeit with the UI so heavily faded out behind the Accept dialog that you can't see the module settings properly without committing to them.

More importantly, the new Assistant can set the Compressor Ratio, Attack and Release, and Exciter Drive, handing it more control over dynamics and colouration than before. It still doesn't go touch the Transient Shaper, though, or the new Gate (see *Gate keeper*).

“The Visual Mixer is tapped into by every track in your DAW hosting Neutron 2”

The Tonal Balance Control (Advanced only) plugin lets you view the spectral distribution of your track relative to one of three target curves, designed via analysis of thousands of commercial masters, and gives centralised access to the EQ controls for all running instances of Neutron 2 and Ozone 8. We looked at it in detail in our Ozone 8 review, but it's even more relevant here, as the ability to tap into multiple EQs makes more sense with Neutron than Ozone, which you'll usually only run a single instance of.

Eyes and ears

Taking the same 'plugin aggregation' idea a step further, the new Visual Mixer plugin is inserted on your master bus and tapped into by every track in your DAW project hosting Neutron 2 or a component plugin. Each track is represented by a 'node' in the Visual Mixer's XY interface that changes the volume setting in the tapped plugin's I/O section when dragged on the Y axis and the pan position on X, while handles on the sides adjust the Width parameter. Channels are named by user titling of the tapped plugins, and hidden and revealed via the eye icons in the right-hand list; the nodes provide level metering; and three mix Snapshots can be stored. Tracks that don't need any Neutron processing can be added using the Mix Tap plugin (Advanced only), which routes to the Visual Mixer, Tonal Balance Control and EQ Masking Meter. Mix Tap offers a range of handy 'utility' controls: level, pan, stereo width, polarity inversion, channel swap, mono summing, a high-pass filter, up to 100ms of independent L/R channel delay, and peak/RMS metering. Most of these are also now included in Neutron 2's I/O section, incidentally.

The general idea behind the Visual Mixer is simply to give a better representation of the mix than you get from your regular mixer. It's a good idea, and we can see the potential, but in its current form, it feels more like a basic technology demo than a fully realised system. For starters, the visual angle is hindered by the limited iconography, with all channels represented by the same dull node graphic. We need to at least be able to colour them, if



The Visual Mixer obviously has great potential, but it won't be changing the mixing game any time soon



The Gate module adds another dynamics string to Neutron's bow

Gate keeper

There's only been one change made to the modules at the heart of Neutron 2 – the integration of a tasty input Soft Saturation mode into the EQ – but that particular paucity is more than made up for by the all-new Gate device.

At first glance, this unassuming dynamics processor seems predictable enough, offering expansion ratios of up to 30:1, a Hysteresis threshold (0-30dB), from 0.01ms to 500ms of Attack time, up to 5000ms of Release, and variable Hold. However, like its Compressor, Exciter and Transient Shaper siblings, the Gate is a multiband device, with two adjustable crossovers splitting it into three frequency bands,

each one effectively a separate frequency-targeted instance of the effect. Each band can also be keyed off a sidechain input, either internal (the output of one of the other bands) or external (an outside signal, in full or routed through any of the Gate's three bands). It's a hugely welcome addition to Neutron's core channel strip, not only for its basic noise gating, but also its creative multiband capabilities. Indeed, hitting the Learn button, which uses Neutron 2's AI savvy to position the crossovers at the “natural” frequencies of the input signal, often throws up interesting results with drum loops and other complex parts.

not give them meaningfully representative icons. Oh, and the Pan and Width controls only work with stereo instances of the Neutron 2 plugins.

The biggest problem, though, is that the Visual Mixer only gives access to levels and pan, which, if we're honest, can make setting up its 'mixer within a mixer' paradigm more hassle than it's worth. We'd guess/hope that merging it with the Tonal Balance Control – and thereby incorporating EQ (and, ideally, dynamics) manipulation into the visual mixing workflow – is at the top of iZotope's to-do list.

New 'tron

Neutron 2 is a solid and substantial revision, with more than enough compelling features to make the £145 upgrade fee well worth splashing. iZotope's ongoing mission to centralise all instances within a project is starting to deliver real benefits, and we look forward to seeing where the Visual Mixer, in particular, goes next.

Beyond all that high-concept stuff, though, Neutron 2 is, at heart, a stunning channel strip – now all the more so thanks to the excellent new Gate. Throw in the amazing Track Assistant and you have one of the most forward-thinking, powerful mixing tools money can buy. **cm**

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Alternatively

iZotope Alloy 2
cm184 » 9/10 » £149

If you just need a pro-quality software channel strip without the AI, Alloy 2 is a beast

SoundRadix SurferEQ 2
cm237 » 8/10 » \$199

Impressive pitch-tracking EQ plugin that keeps monophonic sounds timbrally on-point

Verdict

For Gate module is superb
Tonal Balance Control is very productive
All five modules are truly excellent
Track Assistant gets even brainier!

Against Visual Mixer is very basic
Can't see modules clearly behind Track Assistant Accept dialog

It still won't do the mixing for you, but Neutron 2 is a stunning channel strip and a genuinely smart engineering assistant

9/10