

INTERVIEW: Daniel Lanois on producing *Player, Piano*

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sonible smart:comp 2

The latest evolution in creative AI-assisted compression

The versatile sonible smart:comp 2 is a significant upgrade to the company's already impressive flagship AI-driven dynamics processor. Like the original, the new iteration uses model and data-based algorithms to generate intelligent, automatic broadband and spectral compression parameters. Those automatic settings may be tweaked to subjective perfection. Version 2 adds clever processing options, sound shaping tools and enhanced metering.

Looks and Layout

The interface and workflow remain similar to previous entries in the sonible smart series, dominated by a large, animated time-domain compression display. The real-time display is flanked with extensive spectral and level metering, and a compression histogram.

It all begins with the Learning section. A drop-down menu offers a host of instrument and bus-related profiles that aid the AI in creating settings appropriate for the source audio. Pressing the Learn button while audio is playing engages the AI analysis. After a few seconds, the software tailors and adjusts the parameter settings (e.g., ratio, threshold, attack and release settings) to the input signal. You also get eight snapshot slots for easy comparison.

Processing can be stereo, mid/side or 5.1 surround mode, and you can control how the processing is integrated between the channels.

Tweaking

Horizontal lines representing the compression ratio and the threshold can be altered with a grab and drag. Attack and release settings are adjusted in numerical values. There is also a slider to modify the slope of the compression knee. More detailed refinements can be made with the Attack and Release Shaper. You can draw in the attack's shape and release slopes and assign hold times for both. As a nice extra touch, you can sync the release time to the tempo settings in your DAW.



Multiple Bands

In addition to standard broadband compression, smart:comp 2 continuously analyzes more than 2,000 frequency bands and applies tonal compression to unbalanced frequencies—becoming a massive multi-band compressor. A dedicated knob controls the degree of spectral compression. Set to 0, smart:comp 2 operates as a broadband compressor. Turning the knob up engages progressive degrees of spectral compression. A Color setting tilts the spectral compression tonally from dark to light, and the degree of opacity in the spectral display indicates the amount of attenuation happening to unbalanced frequencies.

You can also restrict the spectral compression to a defined frequency range. This excludes frequencies outside the specified frequency range from being processed. This can be set manually or through a Spectral Link function to apply a user-defined amount.

Shaping Up

A free-form transfer function allows for even more complex dynamics control. A set of “thumbs” may be grabbed and modified to shape the compression slope that extends below the threshold. Example applications for the transfer function include using it to expand or restrict specific frequency ranges or to set up a gate. This function can also completely transform audio for sound design purposes. A set of presets provides templates to get you started using it effectively.

The plugin has a well-implemented internal side chain with a dedicated EQ featuring pass filters and parametric bands with selectable filter types. And you can also set up external side-chain options.

Feed the Meter

A three-stage meter shows input, output and gain reduction levels. There are dedicated controls to adjust the levels of input, output and makeup gain. Along with a wet/dry control, there is a control to automatically ride input levels. The plugin monitoring also includes an animated histogram with overlapping input and output levels.

Use it Smartly

Utilized as a broadband compressor, smart:comp 2 is highly effective at managing gain in a clean, transparent fashion. Think, mastering level transparent—it's that good. The attack and release shaper and the exquisite sidechain EQ allow for a meticulous degree of refinement of the compressor's responsiveness.

If you're after more of a vibe, no problem. In the spectral display area, you can use the Style control to inject some personality. Turning the Style knob from clean to dirty engages saturation effects akin to cherished analog devices. From subtle to very apparent, I found the saturation colors

you can achieve to be attractive and effective for use on vocals, synths, snares, electric guitars and basses.

Smart Spectral Magic

Based on its performance as a broadband compressor, smart:comp 2 would garner rave reviews. That said, the distinctive magic of smart:comp 2 manifests when you start to engage spectral compression. The degree of smoothness you can achieve is astounding, again making a good case for its use in mastering. I have been using this plugin extensively on acoustic guitar tracks, where the spectral compression does well to balance out the boxiness and resonances that many acoustic guitars exhibit.

Using smart:comp 2 in external sidechain mode is also quite effective. Combining subtle EQ attenuation and level compression lets similar toned mix elements coexist respectfully in their shared sonic territory. Obvious applications are kick drum and bass. I also have been using it effectively on instruments and

voices that fight for supremacy in the busy, cluttered mid-range. It's like the sonic equivalent of Windex!

The Smart Bus

The list of profiles has been greatly expanded in smart:comp 2 and now features buss profiles where I find it excels. On the drum bus, I focus spectral compression in a range between 200 to 700 Hz to clean up muddiness and open the mix for other elements in that range. A bit of "dirty" color helps in this application as well. It's also a versatile mix-bus compressor offering a cornucopia of "glue" degrees and colors.

Even Smarter

The unique AI-driven smart:comp 2 is well conceived, and its features are impeccably implemented. I can't recommend it highly enough. The sonible team may have delivered its smartest AI-driven processor yet! ➡

Price: € 129 and € 39 (upgrade)
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