Crane Song Phoenix TDM plug-in

In the last several weeks while I was writing this review, Quantegy closed its doors for financial restructuring, Studer 24-tracks were listed on eBay for $7000 with Dolby SR, and the tape-using community began a frenzied quest to stockpile what remained of the dwindling tape supply. Now here I am reviewing the new Crane Song Phoenix, a TDM plug-in for Pro Tools that simulates the characteristics of analog tape. Ironic. I'll preface this review with the following. I have a 2'' 16-track at my studio, and I love it. I don't think any piece of technology can replace tape. I also own a Pro Tools HD rig that runs like a fine-tuned machine. I love that too. Now let's begin. Dave Hill and his crew at Crane Song created the Phoenix plug-in. They are known for making audio gear that is well built and sounds amazing. It was that reputation that lured me to their web site to download the demo version. Phoenix requires a Pro Tools TDM system running on Mac OS X or Windows XP with iLok authorization. Phoenix is actually a set of five different plug-ins: Luminescent, Iridescent, Radiant, Dark Essence, and Luster. All share the same simple interface design. There's an input trim, a big knob that controls the effect amount, and three buttons affecting the color of the effect named Gold, Sapphire, and Opal. Phoenix is very DSP efficient, which is good since I fell into the habit of putting it on everything in a mix. On individual tracks like electric guitar, I noticed it made the track sound more full, punchy, and louder, even though the tracks were already well recorded and sounded good. When placed on tracks that were not well recorded, I wasn't feeling the need to EQ and compress as much because I was hearing a sonic quality that was pleasing to my ear. When you put the plug-in on every track, the build up of its sonic character starts to become familiar. You could say it sounds like tape. As I was mixing away with Phoenix on almost every track, I thought things were ounding pretty good. I decided to turn all of the instances of the plug-in off and listen to the before and after. I played the mix, listened for a bit longer with it on, then hit the key combination that made all of the instances of the plug-in inactive. When playback resumed, my jaw hit the floor in complete disbelief. The tracks simply sounded empty or rather naked without Phoenix. I was officially hooked. My only real complaint about Phoenix is that I would have preferred a naming setup that described different tape formulations, tape speeds, bias settings, or levels instead of terms like Gold, Sapphire, Dark Essence, Radiant, etc. Those names are a little too New Age for me. Other than the naming thing, I think this plug-in rocks. As far as tape emulation goes, the only thing that's missing is the tape hiss! ($450 MSRP; www.cranesong.com) -Matt Boudreau

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