

Column by Renzo van Riemsdijk (Masterenzo):

Outboard gear

Doesn't it sound great? *Outboard gear*. If you look at it closely it's a rather strange term: gear that's meant to be placed outside the board. Well, there's certainly something special about it, when placed against plug-ins.

Even in other languages outboard gear is the go-to expression to point out analog (or digital if we look at the Weiss gear) pieces of gear with real knobs, pots and switches.

We actually look at outboard gear as something special, as real toys for boys. Usually corresponding plug-ins are a lot cheaper than their analog counterparts.

Is that for a reason? Yes and no. Actual metal boxes with real switches require research and design and a workshop or factory to produce and build them. Plug-ins require a different type of R&D and skills. It's much more an ICT related job to build a programme that calculates algorithms to let music sound better.

A very important question comes to mind: does an analog outboard piece sound better than a digital plug-in? A decade or so ago the answer was easy: yes, analog outboard gear sounded way better than plug-ins. More depth, more space, more definition, more of everything.

But technology hasn't stood still. Nowadays their digital counterparts come awfully close to the original. In fact, many manufacturers of outboard gear also release a plug-in version of that same piece. This gives clients the option: go for the plug-in with all easy functions like recallability and the use of multiple instances of the same plug-in. Or do they choose for a more unique approach: the use of a single analog piece lacking the aforementioned ease of use.

If we look at it this way the choice would be an easy one. Why hassle with the extra space needed, no recall and only one piece to use at a time?

But wait, there's something special about these analog things. Sometimes they have tubes and/or transformers that do something with the sound. It's that something plug-ins have a hard time getting done. It's a kind of three dimensional feel and sound that sets a piece of outboard gear apart from a plug-in in a computer. We could actually say it degrades a plug-in down to a simple calculator. It only calculates numbers and algorithms to get to the desired result.

This effect gets amplified when using multiple pieces of outboard linked together to form a chain, a chain of fools, a chain of beautiful sound shaping tools, knobs, sliders, switches and pots.

And I haven't even mentioned the most important factor of all: the humanoid operating all this and the ease of use of the physical apparatus.

He or she determines the settings and decides what it should sound like.

In that light the automated online mastering services cannot be taken seriously at this time of writing. Perhaps in the future a custom made algorithm will determine how certain types of music should or could sound.

By that time the earth's temperature has risen to a level where we wouldn't be needing winter jackets anymore thus facing ourselves with serious other problems than the sound of a recording.

Renzo

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