

review

Crane Song Ibis

The Ibis is a family of wading birds of distinct appearance. The Crane Song Ibis is a stereo EQ, also of distinct appearance. **GEORGE SHILLING** can tell them apart and he can spot a C sharp at 40 paces.



FROM 40 PACES you can spot the trademark turquoise knobs, along with the black toggle switches that are the tell-tale signs of a Dave Hill design. This well-ventilated 2u device with a thick brushed-aluminium front panel contains discrete Class A circuitry.

The Ibis's unique selling point is that the frequencies are described not only by the conventional numbers, but also by musical note names. The four overlapping bands each have 12 selectable frequencies spaced a major 3rd apart, with an accompanying Step pushbutton shifting them all up a major 2nd to give a total of 24 frequencies spaced a whole tone apart, i.e. four octaves' worth. So Band 1's centre frequencies cover 33 to 466Hz, Band 2 is 139Hz to 1.976kHz, Band 3 from 466Hz to 6.645kHz, and Band 4 from 1.568kHz to 22.350kHz.

Each channel's continuous bandwidth knob ranges similarly from 0.2 to 4 octaves, astonishing variation compared to most parametrics, and this does exactly what it says on the tin. Varying this does not affect the 12dB range of the cut/boost knob at the centre frequency, so the wider the bandwidth the more audible the effect. I found 12dB to be plenty, and in most instances where using the Ibis as a vocal EQ or in a mastering situation, cuts and boosts were usually around one or two dBs at most.

Although the Cut/Boost knobs feel precise and undamped, there is no centre detente and no individual band bypass, so setting up must be done carefully to avoid unintentional EQing. This is made slightly trickier because the knob pointers end a good few millimetres away from the panel legending. The

recently released fully-detented mastering version presumably bypasses this problem. The top and bottom bands also include a Shelf pushbutton. In this setting, the bandwidth control apparently has no effect, the shelf sounding quite steep.

Each channel also features a Low Cut section, with eleven switched frequencies from 20 to 150Hz, and a switch to select between 12 and 24dB/octave filters. This works wonderfully, and it is a nice bonus to have such variation available in a low cut filter.

The idea of dual-labelling the frequencies with note names is to help 'musician-types' who prefer referring to notes. Now, as well as twiddling knobs in studios, I can also lay some claim to musical ability, being as I play instruments including the cello. I also possess perfect pitch, meaning that I can spot a C sharp at 40 paces (*Just like you can spot a Crane Song then. Ed*). So the Ibis should, in theory, be right up my street. But while this is a terrific EQ, and it is undoubtedly of some academic interest to know the frequencies of the notes and vice versa, for me, there is little practical application in the studio.

I use EQ for mainly tonal changes, and if I want to hone in on a particular note with a narrow Q, I'll usually do that by ear with a sweepable unit, rather than referring to charts or note frequencies. I found the note labelling slightly confusing and distracting, as you need to know the frequency anyway to be able to tell which octave is being referred to. However, there is some logic in frequencies being note-related, and I certainly prefer this musical approach to the completely alien and unmusical idea of certain manufacturers' 'x 3' or '÷ 3' frequency shift buttons.

The other interesting and unusual feature is the Color section on each channel. This comprises a six-position selector, with Off, Bands 1-4 and Full positions, and a continuously variable knob with a range of 0 to 10 (thankfully no Spinal Tap jokes here). This circuit adds second and third harmonic content and is fed from the filter output. Hill describes it as 'somewhat like additive compression without the fundamental frequency.' I'm not sure exactly what he means, but using high settings it adds a very obvious and fairly horrible distortion in Full mode, but a very subtle and sometimes useful richness using individual frequency bands with moderate settings on some material.

The black toggles are for Power On (indicated with a bright green lamp) and separate In/Out switches for each channel. Reassuringly, if power is lost or accidentally switched off, the relays seamlessly flick to bypass mode.

Along with the usual signal XLRs and mains socket, the rear panel intriguingly includes a pair of D-type connectors labelled Side Chain which I am told are insert points between the filters and the main audio. However, with no manual available yet, more information was not forthcoming.

The discrete Class A circuitry and expert design results in a very clean and open sound, and while expensive (UK£2800 +VAT), it undoubtedly sounds expensive, adding a sheen of quality that enhances any signal.

With 12dB boost on each channel and powerful bandwidth controls, this unit is suitable for a wide variety of applications. This flexibility is enhanced with the Color controls, which can spice up the otherwise pristine sound quality. It is everything you expect from Crane Song – quirky design and extremely high quality. Now, I wonder if Hill is planning any international versions for ethnic musical scales not of equal temperament? ■

PROS

Very flexible; powerful; clean and/or dirty; expensive-sounding.

CONS

Expensive; note names confuse the legending; Color distortion not always pleasant; no centre detentes.

Contact

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