Brainworx PC MAC

bx_saturator $229

Multiband saturation for mixing and mastering, with the potentially killer inclusion of mid/side processing

> Brainworx have been purveying fine mastering and mixing plug-ins for a few years now, designed in conjunction with some of the best engineers in the business. Their speciality has always been mid/side processing, and their latest offering makes no exception.

bx_saturator is a saturation plug-in with mid/side decoding/encoding functionality. The idea is that by processing the middle (mono) and side portions of a stereo signal separately, you can accentuate and manipulate sounds within the stereo field with great precision.

The plug-in itself is very simple. The stereo input is split into mid and side signals, with each of these split into two frequency bands at user-definable crossover frequencies. Each of the resulting four frequency bands has its own section in the interface, hosting three controls. Gain is self-explanatory; Drive sets the strength of the distortion; and XL is effectively a wet/dry control for balancing the original and distorted signals. The Drive control includes two levels of Compensation: one keeping the volume constant as the Drive is raised; the other raising the volume with the Drive, but by less than when Compensation is turned off altogether.

The remaining primary controls are Master XL and Master Drive, as well as Auto Solo, which solos a section automatically when you click a parameter within it. This is useful when you're working on a full mix or a soloed channel, but just confusing when you're working on a channel within a mix.

Satu-great!

So how does it sound? The saturation is quite subtle compared to many other plug-ins – it's tasty and gentle rather than extreme and 'wild'. In the context of mixing, this is a good thing – it doesn't stray into full-on distortion territory even at extreme settings, allowing softening of bass or adding bite to the top and upper mids with a fine degree of control. If you want broken valve and distortion pedal emulation, look elsewhere (brainworx's forthcoming bx_rockrack might fit that bill); this is a precision mixing tool rather than a creative effect.

bx_saturator is also great for mastering and group/bus processing. With careful frequency targeting, instruments and vocals can be brought out beautifully, with the stereo and mono components processed separately.

There's not much that we would change about bx_saturator. Perhaps a metered input gain control would be good, and maybe section metering would help as well. As it is, it's not obvious what the levels are doing, although that encourages you to listen rather than look. Some users might also prefer a few different saturation algorithms to choose from, but we wouldn't: like a classic hardware unit, bx_saturator has its own distinctive sound.

bx_saturator is a good saturation plug-in made excellent by the inclusion of mid/side operation. Whether used on a stereo channel, group or even master output, it's hugely effective. For mixing duties, it's probably best suited to acoustic and rock styles rather than electronic and synthetic, as it is quite a subtly enriching tool. For mastering purposes, though, there's no genre that wouldn't benefit from its warming touch. **cm**

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Alternatively

FabFilter Saturn
cm179 » 10/10 » £114
Mid/side effect with great saturation but less effective control/operation

iZotope Ozone 5
cm174 » 10/10 » $249
Great saturation model variations for both mixing and mastering

Verdict

For Intuitive layout
Lovely saturation
Versatile
Excellent sound
Great mid/side operation
Mono Maker is ever-useful

Against Saturation might be too subtle for some

A really good saturation plug taken to much greater heights by its fantastic mid/side functionality

9/10

Mad for mids

bx_saturator is almost worth owning for the mid/side processing alone. This technique can sometimes introduce phase issues, but Brainworx have ensured that there are no such problems with their plug-in – we certainly didn't come across any, at least.

The plug-in provides separate Mid and Side level controls. A touch of mid boost can add punch and accentuate a vocal, say, while a bit of side can enhance the stereo image. In practice, it's often better to **attenuate the opposite parameter instead of boosting the one you want to 'increase': while the internal drive and gain structure is designed to create saturation, there's no such processing on the master output, so you'll want to keep your levels in check.**

bx_saturator also features Brainworx' Mono Maker, which converts everything below a specified frequency to mono. Setting this to 100Hz will add clarity and punch to bass-heavy sounds and full mixes.