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HARBAL HARMONIC BALANCER

by Craig Anderton

Is this supposed to replace mastering engineers? Is it a miracle cure-all for bad recordings? Is it another of those dynamics-killers? Is it a really, really useful tool? The answers are no, no, no, and yes.



If you have the ears to know how to use this clever program, HarBal makes fixing equalization problems in everything from samples to master recordings just that much easier.

HarBal Harmonic Balancer

Price: \$95
Contact: HDQTRZ/TAQUIS, www.har-bal.com

Strengths:

- Transparent equalization
- Effective, cost-effective tool for mastering EQ
- Reads/writes multiple formats
- Handles up to 32-bit/96 kHz files
- Loudness compensation when changing EQ settings

Limitations:

- Not available as a plug-in

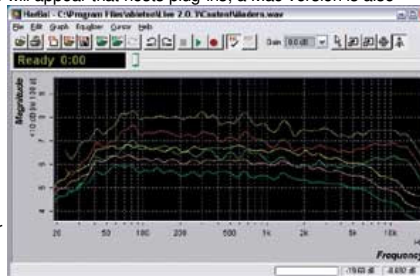
HarBal, a standalone Windows application (95-XP), is an 8,192-point linear phase digital filter designed to deal with the equalization aspect of the mastering process. It loads WAV, AIFF, and other file formats, and while emphatically not a "curve-stealing/morphing" program, you can simultaneously view a reference file of well-mastered music (examples are included for rock, jazz, hip-hop, etc.) to get an idea of what a well-balanced response curve looks like.

To use HarBal, you correlate visual anomalies with audible ones. For example, if the sound is "tubby," you'll likely see a low-end boost that could use a bit of dipping; "stridency" could correlate to an upper midrange peak. The interface makes it extremely easy to adjust the displayed curve to compensate for these anomalies, and there are multiple levels of undo if you overshoot the mark. A great feature, loudness compensation

for EQ changes, means you're not fooled into thinking something is "better" because it's "louder." (HarBal can't be used as a plug-in, but according to the company an update will appear that hosts plug-ins; a Mac version is also forthcoming.)

Based on the web site's hype, I was prepared to be disappointed. Instead, I found a cleverly implemented tool that fixes EQ problems with astonishing speed and precision. I tried it on several songs, unmastered and mastered, and in each case, was able to obtain at least some degree of improvement (the better the mastering job, the less difference HarBal made).

Those with good ears will get the most out of HarBal. Although it won't turn a neophyte into a mastering engineer (nor does the company claim it will), HarBal is a welcome, important, well-designed program for those who believe mastering has much more to do with subtle response touch-ups than squashed dynamics. Very cool.



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