



Mäag Audio EQ4M

The re-incarnation of a classic EQ sprinkles fairy dust for **GEORGE SHILLING**

The Mäag Audio EQ4M is a 1U six band stereo mastering EQ. It features the acclaimed AIR Band shelf boost — a circuit included on Mäag Audio EQ devices since the company was founded in 2009. We looked at the Mäag EQ2 in *Resolution* V12.7, but to quickly recap: Cliff Mäag Sr. introduced the AIR Band to the world in 1993 with the NTI EQ3. Mäag was the Production Manager at NTI and Nightpro, and following the success of the EQ3 he also designed the Nightpro PreEQ3 and EQ3D before setting up his own company.

The new EQ4M is beautifully constructed, with a solid, precision build and a high quality finish. The blue front panel is glossy, and you don't get the impression that the similarly shiny white lettering is going to rub off over time — I suspect there is a layer of lacquer over the whole panel. All controls are stepped with just the right amount of resistance for easy operation without inadvertent movements, and the knobs are clearly calibrated for ease of recall. With 21 positions and boost/cut of an indicated +15/-5dB in half-dB steps, the legend marks are very slightly off the clicks at the extreme ends of boost and cut, but this is not a problem.

The box is not particularly deep but feels heavy enough to indicate the quality of construction and components. On the left rear are the (Neutrik) XLR connections for inputs and outputs, and on the right is a mains panel with IEC input, Power rocker switch and voltage selector, with integral fuse holder. A rear power switch is always slightly impractical, but with a rating of only 15W it's not a big problem to leave the EQ4M powered on. A lovely design touch is the front panel "mäag" logo's umlaut which lights up orange to indicate power is on. The innards are neatly crammed, most noticeably with about 40 square-shaped red capacitors. The EQ4M is the successor to the earlier (*Resolution* Awards 2012 winner) EQ4, and the main difference is that this now boasts +/-18v rails (from an internal power supply), a 2V increase which boosts headroom to a remarkable +29 dBu.

The two channels are logically arranged alongside each other, with the six bands ranging left to right from low to high frequency bands on each channel. However, centrally and in between the channels are the 'In' buttons with accompanying green LEDs which allow true bypass of all circuitry, and there is a reassuring click from a relay when either of these is

operated. The left-most knob is an Input Attenuator, which steps down the input level in half-dB steps by up to 10dB. Alongside are LED level indicators. The green one for Signal starts at -20dBu, with the red Peak indicator coming on at +23dBu. Next come the EQ bands' controls. The first five bands' frequencies are fixed, so each simply comprises a boost/cut knob. The first four bands are bell curve type. These are labelled Sub, 40Hz, 160Hz and 650Hz. The fifth is a 2.5kHz shelf. Then to the right is the AIR BAND. This comprises Gain (boost only) in half-dB steps from 0 to 10dB, a six-way rotary frequency selector, and a separate 'In' button in between the knobs for this particular section, with a slightly darker blue background to delineate the AIR Band controls. The frequencies available here are 2.5, 5, 10, 15, 20 and 40kHz. The 15kHz setting is new — a useful addition to the EQ4M.

I love that on each channel every control has a different coloured knob cap, allowing you to easily and subconsciously find the pairs of knobs when working in stereo, or even perhaps to think of their characters as having a particular colour without having to think too hard about which one you are adjusting. This feature didn't even occur to me initially, but I immediately worked more intuitively and efficiently than when using other rather mono-toned devices.

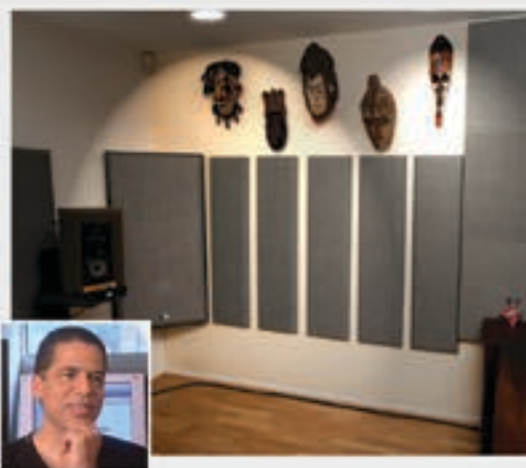
The Sub band is defined as being centred on a remarkably low 10Hz, but the interacting bands are very broad, so on most material the effects are

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"I love the way the control and tracking rooms sound now... and so does everyone that records here!" ~ Butch Walker

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certainly very audible, making you imagine the centre frequency to be higher. Similarly, the 40Hz band is surprisingly warm, and I often found myself reducing very low Sub rumbles below and boomy stuff above at 160Hz, while adding some wonderful fatness with a healthy dose of 40Hz. I rarely wanted to boost the 2.5kHz shelf as the AIR band provides all the top end you need, and although it includes a similar frequency, the AIR version is much, much gentler sounding than the dedicated 2.5kHz shelf band which seems very powerful, even with ostensibly the same setting. But de-harshing can be achieved by cutting this 2.5kHz band whilst reintroducing some treble by boosting with the AIR circuit at a higher frequency. At 15, 20 or 40kHz it always sounds expensive and very hi-fi.

This is one of the cleanest and purest sounding analogue EQs I have ever encountered. The manual (a PDF from the website) states that the design ensures that phase shift is kept to a minimum, which explains the pristine sonics. And headroom is extremely generous; when the red Peak lights come on there is still 6dB to spare. With the relatively small range of boost and cut of 5dB on each of the bands

(apart from the AIR band) one might imagine this to be a subtle device. It is, in that full boost or cut never sound horrible, thanks to minimal phase shift and wide curves. But at the same time, these boosts and cuts are quite powerful, with often a half-dB click making a significant difference when honing-in to get the sound and tone 'just so'.

The AIR band by its nature increases overall gain of the signal, so for fair comparisons it's worth nudging the Input Attenuator down a touch. Frequencies below the defined settings are affected, as the AIR shelf is not at all steep. 40kHz is undoubtedly way above the extent of my hearing, yet with a response up to 75kHz (where it is 2dB down) there is very audible sweetness and joy to be had by boosting at this setting.

The Mäag is particularly good on program, with the AIR Band lending tracks a truly hi-fi quality, and the remaining bands perfectly suited to general tone-shaping. Although the range of frequencies might seem limiting, they're really not. Appropriately described as a mastering EQ, the sonics are incredibly clean, transparent and natural sounding. But I found the EQ4M's well-chosen frequency bands equally

useful when processing individual signals. A known combination of guitarist, acoustic guitar, Sontronics Aria microphone, UA 610B preamp and 1176LN was beautifully enhanced by adding the EQ4M to the end of the chain. With settings from left to right of -2.5, +1, -1.5, -0.5, 0 and +1.5dB at 5kHz on the AIR band, some undesirable subsonics and unpleasant low-mid boom were reduced, and the high end was crisp and detailed, without becoming overly-bright or getting in the way of other mix elements (like the vocal). When the track was mixed the acoustic guitar track was the only element requiring no further insert processing, it just sat beautifully with a touch of reverb. And for multitracked stacked female backing vocal 'Aaahs', a large (6.5dB) AIR Band boost at the (new) 15kHz setting was just the ticket when committing each individual track, a bit like the ancient trick of recording BVs through a Dolby A but not decoding them for extra sizzle. You can use the AIR Band to add a little extra detail to dynamic mics, and it is especially useful to add some openness to ribbon mics that sound wonderful but lack those ultra-high frequencies.

I had already been enjoying the plug-in version of the EQ4 from Plugin Alliance, and there is now a UAD version available too. But the hardware EQ4M is just the most stunning sounding piece of hardware — it's, well, 'Mäag vellous'.

PROS

Broad, sweet and powerful EQ, AIR band's unique enhancement.

CONS

None.

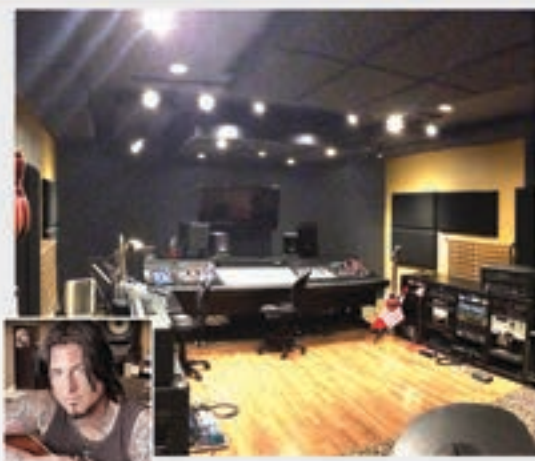
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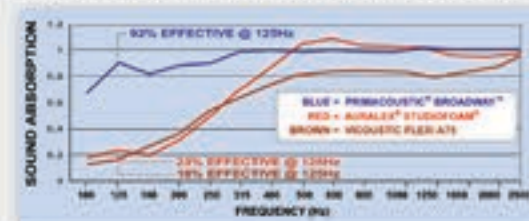


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