Squeezer

Flexible general-purpose audio compressor
with a touch of citrus

Last edited on 5th April 2020

Contents

1 About Squeezer

I wrote this compressor[1] *to learn all I could about audio compression. It took me several months to gather all the specs and papers I needed and convert them into code.*

Squeezer is different from all the compressors I know: its knobs are stepped to fine-tuned *preset* values, but can be changed to *continuous* values by clicking a small red light located next to them. This allows you to find nice settings fast while not preventing to optimise these settings.

Squeezer also adapts easily to many tastes and use cases:

- feed-forward & feed-back design
- linear, logarithmic & smooth release stage
- optical & FET detectors
- peak & RMS sensing
- hard, medium & soft knee
- flexible side-chain & parallel compression

[1] In this manual, I will use *compression* synonymous with *downward compression*. There are other ways to reduce dynamic range, but in audio, downward compression is used almost exclusively.

Squeezer has given me a deep insight into compression. But above that, it has quickly became my go-to generic compressor!

2 What is compression?

2.1 The Tale of the Barkeeper

Once upon a time there was a bar. Customers enjoyed their drinks and music played in the background. After a while, the barkeeper noticed that his drinks sold best when the music had a certain loudness. Unfortunately, almost every record they played had a different loudness.

So he bought a loudness meter and wrote a set of instructions for the DJ:

80 dB SPL	set mixer's output gain to 0 dB
85 dB SPL	set mixer's output gain to –5 dB
90 dB SPL	set mixer's output gain to –10 dB
95 dB SPL	set mixer's output gain to –15 dB

This worked quite well and he could finally afford to buy a shiny new bar counter. Upon which the DJ gave notice (he had always dreamt of getting a *stereo* mixer, so the new counter didn't go down too well with him).

After an initial shock, the barkeeper was quite content. The DJ really *had* been lousy. But how to keep the high number of drinks?

Being an entrepreneur, the barkeeper took his challenge and connected the mixer's output to a simple amplifier. The amplifier's input gain was regulated by a level sensor which in turn was connected to the amplifier's output – a classic negative feed-back loop.

Although the new device exactly followed the DJ's instructions (and didn't smell as bad), customers complained about its bad sound. The barkeeper had invented a *wave shaping* device – gain changes were applied instantly which *distorted* its output signal.

Fortunately, the barkeeper remembered a very important thing: the DJ had often been drunk and taken his time to apply gain changes. So the barkeeper improved his device by smoothing the level sensor's output.

He could have become very rich. But he didn't realise the magnitude of his invention and continued being a happy barkeeper. Which is not the worst thing, when you come to think of it.

To this day, however, sound engineers fall silent in awe when they hear his name – the name of the barkeeper who **invented the compressor**.

2.2 How does a compressor work?

Compressors are inherently complex sound processors. Their technology is quite simple – complexity arises from the dynamic interaction of their controls. While this is definitely a downside when you try to understand compression, it is also what allows you to use compression creatively!

A compressor is a device for reducing the dynamic range[1] of audio material. In its most basic form, it consists of four modules:

Level detector	measures level of audio at input and sends it to gain computer
Gain computer	calculates difference between input level and desired output level and sends resulting gain reduction target to smoothing filter
Smoothing filter	smoothly adjusts *current* gain reduction in direction of *target* reduction and sends result to gain stage; the "speed" of smoothing can often be adjusted (*attack and release times*)
Gain stage	attenuates audio input by current gain reduction

The first three modules are also called *side-chain*. That's because they form a sideline of processing that will only be *utilised for*, but not *heard in* the compressor's output.

[1] difference between loudest and quietest signal

2.3 Level detector

As its name implies, a level detector senses the level of an audio signal. It can either detect the input wave form directly (peak sensing) or an estimate of its loudness (average sensing, usually with a RMS[2] filter).

Peak sensing allows a compressor to quickly react to sudden changes in level, whereas *average sensing* detects changes over longer periods of time.

There are also two ways of connecting level detectors: vintage compressors sense the gain stage's *output* level (feedback design), leading to a very distinct "bouncing" sound. Modern compressors sense the compressor's *input* signal (feed-forward design) which results in a more natural sound.

2.4 Gain computer

The level detector's signal is sent to a gain computer[3] which determines the output level the signal should have. It then calculates a corresponding gain reduction ("attenuate the current input signal by 3.14 dB"). This **gain reduction changes constantly** over time.

[2] root mean mean square

[3] in the sense of *calculator* – some gain computers are entirely built from analogue circuitry!

The most common gain computer design is a *threshold* control. It sets a level below which all input passes unchanged. Levels exceeding the threshold are attenuated by a *compression ratio*, set through a second control. Higher ratios effect more compression than lower ratios.[4]

Need an example? A threshold of –20 dB FS yields a gain reduction of 0 dB (no compression) for all levels below –20 dB FS. A signal of –18 dB FS will produce a gain reduction of 1 dB for a compression ratio of 2:1[5] and 0.5 dB for a ratio of 4:1.

There may be a third control called *knee width*. It defines a transition zone around the threshold. In this zone, the compression ratio gradually changes from 1:1 (no compression) to the selected ratio (full compression) – quiet signals receive less compression than loud signals. This reduces another type of distortion which stems from abrupt transition between compressed and uncompressed signal.

2.5 Smoothing filter

This was the easy part, but from now on explanations usually fail. I'll try my best and continue anyway …

If you stopped here and let the gain computer control the gain stage directly, you'd have a wave shaping device.[6] By

[4] a compression ratio of 1:1 effectively bypasses the compressor
[5] a ratio of 2:1 means that 2 dB on the input yields 1 dB at the output
[6] *wave shaping* is a fancy way of saying *distortion*

reacting immediately, the compressor would relentlessly change the shape of *single wave forms*. Don't get me wrong: this already *is* compression and I occasionally *do* like the sound – but it's not something you want to have on every track, let alone a full mix.

Listen for yourself! Load a drum track into your DAW, add the Squeezer plug-in, unlock attack and release time[7] *and set them to their lowest value. Make sure the compressor uses peak sensing*[8] *and a high compression ratio. Now lower the threshold until you can clearly hear the wave shaping. Keep the DAW open for now.*

To change *sounds* instead of *single wave forms*, the *current* gain reduction has to be slowed down and smoothly adjusted in the direction of the *target* gain reduction.

One possibility is using averaging level detectors,[9] employing photo cells is another.[10] Both solutions effectively slow down the compressor's response time, but somewhat crudely.

Play the drum track and engage the "RMS" button – the distortion vanishes. Disengage the "RMS" button and enable the "Opto" button instead – again, the distortion vanishes, but the track sounds different. You can now close the DAW.

[7] click on the red lights next to the knobs so they light up
[8] "RMS" button is not engaged
[9] this is *not* the reason why compressors have averaging level detectors; they let compressors react to changes in *loudness*
[10] photo cells react to level changes in complex time-dependant ways

2.5.1 Attack and release time

With a little experimentation, it becomes clear that compressors sound best when gain reduction is increased quickly, but released much more slowly.[11] Moreover, a single smoothing "speed" could not accommodate the many different types of sound we encounter. So it makes sense to split response time into (at least) two controls:

Attack is the length of time it takes to apply roughly[12] two-thirds of an *upward* change in gain reduction.

Release is the length of time it takes to apply roughly two-thirds of a *downward* change in gain reduction.[13]

With this in mind, here are the important facts that almost every explanation gets wrong:[14]

- compression starts **the very moment the detected level passes threshold**, it is not delayed by attack time
- compression continues **even after the detected level falls below threshold**, at least for a short while
- compression occurs **whenever *current* and *target* gain reduction differ**; this means **all of the time the detected level is above threshold** and slightly after

[11] incidentally, that is *exactly* how vintage photo cells react to changes
[12] every manufacturer defines attack and release times differently
[13] these definitions were shamelessly paraphrased from Demolishing the Myths of Compression by Gregory Scott, one of the few articles on compression actually worth reading
[14] for simplicity, I will elide the effects of knee width

The last list item may need some explanation. Imagine a signal above threshold.[15]

Whenever the signal's slope is rising, *current* gain reduction will fall below *target* gain reduction and will be smoothed using the *attack* time. Even when the slope starts to drop, *current* gain reduction may still be below *target* gain reduction and will be affected by the attack time.

If the slope keeps falling, *current* gain reduction will eventually rise above *target* gain reduction and will be smoothed according to the *release* time. This continues until the slope starts to rise again and *current* gain reduction falls below *target* gain reduction. Now, the *attack* time will once again take over.

In other words: with any real-world audio signal, compressors enter an ever-changing dynamic state as soon as the input signal passes threshold. This is what makes them so hard to explain – and I'm quite confident that it also makes them sound so damn good.

The good news is that you can use compressors without fully understanding this dynamic state. However, the information contained in this chapter will help you in ignoring the countless erroneous explanations out there.[16]

[15] with a compression ratio above 1:1 and below $1{:}\infty$
[16] they were the reason for developing Squeezer in the first place

2.5.2 Curve shape

Attack and release times can be implemented in a number of ways. Vintage compressors use simple analogue filters with *logarithmic* curves. Speed depends on the difference between current and target gain reduction – initial change is fast and slows down as the difference gets smaller.

Newer compressors often have *linear* curves – the target gain reduction is approached with constant speed.

In Squeezer, attack time always has a *logarithmic* curve. The curve of its release phase can be set to *linear*, *logarithmic* or *smooth*. *Smooth* behaves like a logarithmic curve, but when the attack phase changes to release, a smooth transition between the curves prevents a sharp drop in gain reduction. This reduces yet another type of distortion exhibited by compressors.

It is hard to say which curve sounds best, as it really depends on source material and personal taste.

2.6 Gain stage

The gain stage is an amplifier that attenuates the input signal using the current gain reduction. There may be an additional gain control to make up for any level lost during compression ("make-up gain").

That's it.

2.7 Advanced topics

2.7.1 Stereo link

When each channel of a stereo signal is compressed separately, the stereo image may shift uncontrollably. This can be prevented by mixing the outputs of all level detectors and sending the *mixed* signal to each gain computer.

Squeezer automatically links its channels when placed on a stereo channel. Occasionally, you may want to override this behaviour, so Squeezer lets you control the amount of stereo linking.

2.7.2 Parallel compression

So far, I have described *downward* compression. As you know, it works by bringing high-level signals down and leaving low-level signals (mostly) untouched. In other words, downward compression changes (and possibly damages) the *transients*.

This may not be what you want, so *upward* compression works the other way round. Low-level signals are brought up and high-level signals are left alone. This approach has a huge problem, though – it amplifies the noise floor, which is why I have yet to see an upward compressor in the wild.

Parallel compression[17] is similar to *upward* compression, but it preserves transients *and* leaves the noise floor alone. Here is how it works: you compress a signal (often heavily) and add some of the compressed signal to the original.

Squeezer provides a latency-compensated *wet/dry* control that allows you to apply parallel compression easily.

2.7.3 Side-chain filtering

Bass frequencies contain most of a signal's energy, so bus compression will often "pump" in the rhythm of the bass instruments.[18] A filter that removes bass frequencies (*high-pass* filter) from the side-chain helps in achieving better compression results.

Squeezer also provides a *low-pass* filter to remove treble frequencies, although this is used less often. For frequency-specific compression, you can leave only desired frequencies by employing both filters simultaneously.

2.7.4 External side-chain input

Squeezer also lets you feed an external input into the side-chain. You can use this either for advanced filtering or as an

[17] also known as *New York compression*, where the signal is also equalised prior to compression

[18] the human ear is least sensitive to bass frequencies, so music also tends to contain more bass frequencies than treble

effect. In electronic dance music, compressor “pumping” triggered by the bass drum has become rather cliché …

Depending on your DAW, setting up an external side-chain can be easy or highly complicated. I cannot (and will not) help you with it, so please refer to your DAW’s manual or manufacturer.

I will however provide some information to get you started. The input channels of Squeezer’s stand-alone application and VST2 plug-in are doubled: main inputs (first half of the channels) and side-chain inputs (second half). Channels of the other plug-ins formats are properly tagged and should work without problem.

3 Installation

In order to use the pre-compiled binaries, simply extract the Squeezer files from the downloaded archive. For the plug-ins, you'll then have to move the extracted files to your respective plug-in folder.

Squeezer requires a processor which supports the SSE2 instruction set. On Windows, you might also have to install the Visual C++ Redistributable for Visual Studio 2017.

Should the stand-alone version ever fail to start, you can reset its settings by deleting the file `squeezer_stereo.ini` or `squeezer_mono.ini`. These files are located in `~/.config` (GNU/Linux) or `%appdata%\.config\` (Windows).

4 Controls

Sorry, I have yet to find the time to finish this manual.

5 Final words

I want to express my gratitude to the **Audio Engineering Society** and to the **Rane Corporation** for their wonderful E-Libraries. This includes everybody who wrote the fine papers and notes, especially Dimitrios Giannoulis *et al.*[1] and Rick Jeffs *et al.*[2]

I must also thank the **beta testers** and **users of Squeezer** for sending kind words, suggestions and bug reports. Finally, I want to thank the **open source community** for making all of this possible.

Although coding Squeezer has been a lot of fun, it has also been a lot of work. So if you like Squeezer, why not send me a short email and tell me so? Write a few words about yourself, send suggestions for future updates or volunteer to create a nice skin. I also really enjoy listening to music that you have produced using my software …

Here is my email address (please remove "`-nospam`"):

[1] **Giannoulis, Dimitrios; Massberg, Michael; Reiss, Joshua D.** Digital Dynamic Range Compressor Design – A Tutorial and Analysis. *JAES Volume 60 Issue 6 pp. 399-408; June 2012.*

[2] **Rick Jeffs; Scott Holden; Dennis Bohn.** Dynamics Processors – Technology & Application Tips. *Rane Corporation; Rane Note 155; 2005.*

"Martin Zuther" <code-nospam@mzuther.de>

Thanks for using free software. I hope you'll enjoy it!

A Build Squeezer

A.1 Dependencies

A.1.1 premake

Importance:	required
Version:	5.0.0 (alpha13)
License:	BSD
Homepage:	premake.github.io

Installation

Place the binary somewhere in your `PATH`. Depending on your platform, you should run `premake` using the scripts `Builds/run_premake.sh` or `Builds/run_premake.bat`.

To change the premake file using the provided Jinja templates, you'll also have to install the necessary dependencies.

A.1.2 JUCE library

Importance:	required
Version:	5.3.2
License:	ISC and GPL v3 (among others)
Homepage:	www.juce.com

Installation

Extract the archive into the directory `libraries/juce`.

If you want to build the LV2 plug-in, please extract the archive `distrho_lv2-xxxxxxxx.tar.gz` into the same directory.

A.1.3 Virtual Studio Technology SDK

Importance:	optional
Version:	2.4 / 3.6.8
License:	proprietary / GPL v3
Homepage:	www.steinberg.net

Installation

Just extract the archive into the directory `libraries/vst`.

A.1.4 Python

Importance:	optional
Version:	3.5 (or higher)
License:	Python Software Foundation License
Homepage:	www.python.org

You'll only need Python if you want to change the premake file (see section A.1.1) using Jinja templates.

Installation (Windows)

You can download an installer from the website.

A.1.5 Jinja

Importance:	optional
Version:	2.8 (or higher)
License:	BSD
Homepage:	jinja.pocoo.org

You'll only need Jinja if you want to change the premake file using templates (see section A.1.1).

A.1.6 Artistic Style

Importance:	optional
Version:	2.05.1
License:	LGPL v3
Homepage:	astyle.sourceforge.net

This application formats the code so it looks more beautiful and consistent. Thus, you only have to install it if you plan to help me with coding Squeezer.

Installation

Place the binary somewhere in your `PATH`. Depending on your platform, you should run `astyle` using the scripts `Source/format_code.sh` or `Source/format_code.bat`.

A.2 GNU/Linux

A.2.1 Environment

To build Squeezer yourself, I recommend setting up a `chroot` environment. This is fast and easy to do on Debian-based systems and might save you a **lot** of trouble. At the time of writing, I'm using Linux Mint 19, but the procedure should be similar on your distribution of choice.

Start by installing the necessary packages:

32 and 64 bit

```
sudo apt-get install debootstrap schroot
```

Then install the `chroot` base system by executing the following statements:

32 bit

```
sudo debootstrap --variant=buildd \
  --arch i386 bionic \
  /srv/chroot/bionic_i386 \
  http://archive.ubuntu.com/ubuntu
```

64 bit

```
sudo debootstrap --variant=buildd \
  --arch amd64 bionic \
  /srv/chroot/bionic_amd64 \
  http://archive.ubuntu.com/ubuntu
```

Running `debootstrap` will take some time. Meanwhile, add the following lines to `/etc/schroot/schroot.conf` (make sure you remove all preceding white space so that each line begins in the first column):

32 and 64 bit

```
[bionic-i386]
description=Ubuntu bionic (i386)
directory=/srv/chroot/bionic_i386
profile=default
personality=linux32
type=directory
users=username

[bionic-amd64]
description=Ubuntu bionic (amd64)
directory=/srv/chroot/bionic_amd64
profile=default
personality=linux
type=directory
users=username
```

Please make the necessary changes to `username`. If you experience problems, you can try to change `bionic` to a release name such as `wheezy`.

When `debootstrap` is done, log in as superuser:

32 bit

```
sudo schroot -c bionic-i386
```

64 bit

```
sudo schroot -c bionic-amd64
```

You'll have to change the file `/etc/apt/sources.list` first (ignore the line break, it should be a single line):

32 and 64 bit

```
deb http://archive.ubuntu.com/ubuntu bionic
main restricted universe
```

Now install a few packages – `less` and `vim` are optional, but might come in handy:

32 and 64 bit

```
apt-get update
apt-get -y install bash-completion clang \
  libasound2-dev libjack-jackd2-dev \
  mesa-common-dev xorg-dev less vim
apt-get clean
```

If you like `bash` completion, you might also want to open the file `/etc/bash.bashrc` and unquote these lines:

32 and 64 bit

```
# enable bash completion in interactive shells
if [...]
   [a couple of lines...]
fi
```

Finally, log out and log in as normal user:

32 bit
```
schroot -c bionic-i386
```

64 bit
```
schroot -c bionic-amd64
```

In this `chroot` shell, install the dependencies (section A.1). Congratulations – you are now ready to build Squeezer!

A.2.2 Build

After preparing the dependencies, start your `chroot` environment

32 bit
```
schroot -c bionic-i386
```

64 bit
```
schroot -c bionic-amd64
```

change into the directory `build` and execute

32 and 64 bit
```
./run_premake.sh
make config=CFG TARGET
```

where `CFG` is one of `debug_x32`, `debug_x64`, `release_x32` and `release_x64`, and `TARGET` is the version you want to compile, such as `linux_standalone_stereo`.

In case you run into problems, you can try to switch compilers by opening the file `run_premake.sh` and using the premake options `--cc=clang` or `--cc=gcc`.

The compiled binaries will end up in the directory `bin`.

A.3 Microsoft Windows

A.3.1 Build

After preparing the dependencies, change into the directory `build` and execute

32 and 64 bit

```
./run_premake.bat
```

Then change into the directory `Builds/windows/vs20xx`, open the project file with the corresponding version of Visual C++ and build the project.

The compiled binaries will end up in the directory `bin`.

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