K-Meter

Free implementation of a K-System meter according to Bob Katz' specifications



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1 The loudness race

When comparing two similar pieces of music, the louder one is perceived as sounding better (although this is only true for short periods of time). Accordingly, the loudness of music productions has continuously grown during the last decades.

As maximum levels of records, tapes and digital media are limited, however, mastering engineers have started using sophisticated dynamic compression techniques to achieve higher loudness without distorting the music (as of 2010, distortion is increasingly being used in order to achieve even higher loudness).

Unfortunately, this decrease in dynamic range does not leave the music unharmed. Current compressed music blasts away your ears and makes you turn down the volume of your amplifier. Having lowered the volume, you'll find that the "better-sounding" compressed music suddenly sounds pretty dull and boring compared to uncompressed music. In contrast, music with high dynamic range makes you turn up the volume – heck, it even sounds better when broadcast on the radio!

2 The K-System

The K-System has been devised by mastering engineer Bob Katz in order to counteract the ongoing loudness race and to help adjusting the levels of different songs during mastering. K-System meters are average level meters that do **not** have 0 dB on top. Instead, 0 dB on K-System meters relate to a reference loudness. There are three K-System scales:

- K-20 (0 dB at -20 dBFS, recommended)
- K-14 (0 dB at -14 dBFS)
- K-12 (0 dB at -12 dBFS)

Using the K-System is easy. Just calibrate your monitor system so that pink noise (-20 dBFS RMS, 20 Hz to 20 kHz; see the K-Meter source code for a FLAC-compressed wave file) on one channel yields 83 dB SPL on a loudness meter set to *C-weighted, slow.* Then mark the monitor's gain position as "K-20".

When your mixes or masters seem to have just the right loudness, they should now yield 0 dB on a K-20 meter.

In case you want to use the K-14 meter, attenuate the monitor gain by 6 dB or repeat the above process so that pink

The K-System

noise yields 77 dB SPL. For K-12, attenuate the monitor gain by another 2 dB (pink noise should yield 75 dB SPL).

For more information about the K-System, please see Bob's website.

3 Installation

In order to use the pre-compiled binaries, simply extract the K-Meter files from the downloaded archive. For the VST plug-in, you'll then have to move the extracted files to your plug-in folder (~/.vst, C:\ProgramFiles\Steinberg\VstPlugins\ or the like).

3.1 Windows

If you move the pre-compiled binaries to another directory, please make sure to also move the file libfftw3f-3.dll to this directory. Otherwise, you will not be able to execute the binaries anymore.

4 Controls

4.1 Meter selection

You can select the different K-System meter scales (**K-20**, **K-14** and **K-12**) by clicking on these radio buttons.



In the rare case you want to use the meter in a mixer's channel strip, click the **Normal** button (0 dBFS on top). Please note, however, that the

Normal state will be neither saved, nor recalled in your DAW and the standalone version. This is by design – the K-System meter has been explicitly designed to **not** have 0 dBFS on top!

4.2 Infinite peak hold

Click on this button to toggle between infinite peak hold and "falling peaks". This setting applies to both K-System and peak meters.



4.3 Show peak meter

Click on this button to toggle display of the peak meters. The original K-System meter specification demands peak meters, but Bob Katz has asked me to hide them by default:



"Too many people will try to normalize the peak to full scale if they see a peak meter, and that's what we want to avoid. You can still make a K-System meter like the original, but if we meet again in 15 years I hope that peak metering will be outlawed."

4.4 Magnify meters

This button magnifies both K-System and peak meters to 0.1 dB steps. If switched on, the 0 dB mark is placed near the centre.



<u>Hint:</u> by selecting different meter scales, you can easily magnify the whole range between -25 dBFS and 0 dBFS.

4.5 Mono mode

Click this button to easily check the mono compatibility of your stereo mix or master. In **mono** mode, both K-System meters and peak meters will be linked.



In case you insert the plug-in into a mono channel strip, **mono** mode will be selected and cannot be toggled.

4.6 Reset button

Click on this button to reset all meters, peaks and counters. You can also get rid of graphical artifacts, because all meters will be redrawn as well.



4.7 About window

Clicking on this button will open the **about** window where you will be informed about version number, contributors, copyright and the GNU General Public License.



4.8 Display license

This button is located in the **about window** and does not only advertise that you are using free software licensed under the **GNU General Public License** – when clicked, it will also open the license's website in your web browser...



5 Meters

5.1 K-System meter

The K-System meter consists of an average level meter and an optional peak level meter. The recommended K-20 meter has 20 dB of headroom above 0 dB, while the K-14 and K-12 meters have 14 dB and 12 dB of headroom, respectively.

Each level meter is divided into segments of 1 dB, with the exception of the top 2 dB (segments of 0.5 dB) and the bottom end (segments of 10 dB). When magnified, level meters are divided into segments of 0.1 dB.

Recent maximum level is displayed by a white rectangle around the corresponding meter segment. Unless a higher level is encountered or "Infinite peak hold" is switched on, maximum levels are held for 10 seconds and then start falling with a fall time of 26 dB per 3 seconds.

Both stand-alone application and the plug-in only work at sampling rates between 44.1 kHz and 192 kHz and introduce a latency of 1024 samples. This latency is reported to

your plug-in host so it may compensate for the introduced delay.

5.2 Average meter

The average meter is an RMS meter with an averaging period of 1024 samples. It exhibits a flat frequency response between 20 Hz and 20 kHz (\pm 0.1 dB) and is band-limited using a windowed-sinc low-pass filter with a cutoff frequency of 21.0 kHz. On level changes, it takes 600 milliseconds for the meter to reach 99 % of the final reading.

5.3 Peak meter

The peak meter displays the unfiltered peak level and thus possesses a completely flat frequency response. It has a rise time of one sample and a fall time of 26 dB per 3 seconds.

5.4 Overload counter

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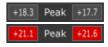


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5.5 Maximum peak display

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5.6 Phase correlation meter

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5.7 Stereo meter

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6 Final words

Although coding K-Meter has been a lot of fun, it has also been a lot of work. So if you like K-Meter, 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 theme – do whatever you like!

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

Martin Zuther <code-nospam@mzuther.de>

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

A How to build K-Meter

A.1 Preparing GNU/Linux

To build K-Meter 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 Kubuntu 10.10 (maverick), but the procedure should be similar on your distribution of choice. If you aim at generic 64-bit compilation, simply change i386 to amd64.

To install the necessary packages and install the chroot base system, execute the following statements (please change http://archive.ubuntu.com/ubuntu/ to a mirror close to you):

```
sudo apt-get install debootstrap schroot
sudo mkdir -p /srv/chroot/maverick_i386
sudo debootstrap --variant=buildd \
   --arch i386 maverick \
   /srv/chroot/maverick_i386 \
   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):

```
[maverick-i386]
description=Ubuntu 10.10 Maverick Meerkat (i386)
directory=/srv/chroot/maverick_i386
personality=linux
root-users=username
type=directory
users=username,another_user
```

Please make the necessary changes to username. You may also add additional users, like another_user. In case you are setting up a 32-bit chroot environment on a 64-bit system, you'll also have to change linux to linux32.

When debootstrap is done, log in as superuser:

```
schroot -c maverick-i386 -u root
```

to install a few packages:

```
apt-get update
apt-get install libasound2-dev mesa-common-dev \
   xorg-dev language-pack-de ubuntu-minimal
apt-get clean
```

Finally, log out and log in with your user name:

schroot -c maverick-i386 -u username

Congratulations – after you have installed the dependencies (see below), you are ready to build K-Meter!

A.2 Dependencies

A.2.1 premake4

Importance: required

Version: 4.3 License: BSD

Homepage: industriousone.com/premake

Installation

Place the binary somewhere in your PATH.

A.2.2 Fastest Fourier Transform in the West

Importance: required Version: 3.2.2 License: GPL v2

Homepage: www.fftw.org

Installation on GNU/Linux

Extract the archive into the directory libraries/fftw3, change into this directory and run:

```
./configure --enable-float
make
mkdir -p bin/i386/
mv .libs/* bin/i386/
```

Installation on Microsoft Windows

Extract the source code archive into the directory libraries/fftw3 and the archive containing the precompiled binaries into the directory libraries/fftw3/bin.

A.2.3 JUCE library

Importance: required

Version: 1.51 License: GPL v2

Homepage: www.rawmaterialsoftware.com/juce.php

Installation

Extract the archive into the directory libraries/juce.

A.2.4 Virtual Studio Technology SDK (VST)

Importance: optional

Version: 2.4

License: proprietary

Homepage: ygrabit.steinberg.de

Installation

Just extract the archive into the directory libraries/vstsdk2.4.

A.2.5 Artistic Style

Importance: optional

Version: 1.24 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 K-Meter.

Installation

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

A.3 Building on GNU/Linux

After preparing the dependencies, start your chroot environment, change into the directory build and execute

```
./run_premake.sh
make config=CFG TARGET
```

where CFG is one of debug32, release32, debug64 and release64, and TARGET is one of linux_standalone_stereo, linux_standalone_surround, linux_vst_stereo and linux_vst_surround.

The compiled binaries will end up in the directory bin.

A.4 Building on Microsoft Windows

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

```
./run_premake.bat
```

Then change into the directory build/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.

B GNU General Public License

Version 3, 29 June 2007

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