

STRYMON

OLA, BRIGADIER & EL CAPISTAN

PRICE
£279
EACH

A new bunch of stompers from the US of A claim to have conquered the digital/analogue divide. Dan Steinhardt eagerly investigates

Analog versus digital: for years it's been implied that we guitarists must pick a side and defend it until our last breathe. There's no end of great boutique pedal builders around these days, all plying their trade in time-honoured analogue tradition, while digital modelling has been mostly left to big companies with even bigger R&D budgets. Those two worlds have collided, however, under the name of Strymon, who are happy to tread the line between the analogue and digital camps. Their pedal range could only have been created by a group of people completely obsessed with luscious, organic tone, but also well aware of the limitations of analogue technology and the advantages digital processing can bring. We're looking at three of their latest offerings: the Ola dBucket Chorus & Vibrato, the Brigadier dBucket Delay and the El Capistan d'Tape Echo.



A powerful SHARC DSP chip is at the heart of these analogue-emulating pedals

THAT STRYMON HAS DESIGNED SUCH A POWERFUL BUNCH OF PEDALS TO WORK ON A STANDARD 9V SUPPLY IS INCREDIBLE

Construction & Features

Each of these pedals uses a powerful SHARC DSP processor, running algorithms specially crafted for each unit. Meanwhile, the input and output stages are analogue and use top quality components to make sure your tone is kept intact – your dry signal isn't converted to digital when the effect is engaged.

Each pedal is housed in a stunning anodised enclosure – electric blue for the Ola, emerald green for the Brigadier and gunmetal grey for the El Capistan. All three share the same physical layout, with five knobs and two toggle switches apiece.

The Ola sports standard speed and depth controls as can be found on most modulation devices, while

the mix control lets you blend the dry and effected signals, allowing you to generate anything from subtle modulation or a full-on warble. The tone control adjusts the EQ of the effected signal from warm and lush to a bright shimmer. Three effect types are available: standard, single-line chorus, a multiple-line chorus and a pitch vibrato. The second mini switch can be used in conjunction with the final 'ramp/env' control to either set the speed at which the effect's depth 'ramps up' when activated or to allow your playing dynamics to influence certain parameters when the envelope option is selected.

Both the Brigadier delay and the El Capistan tape echo share the usual delay pedal controls of delay time, repeats and mix, and both also have tone and modulation controls, though this is where the real difference are to be found. The Brigadier features a 'bucket loss' control, to dial in everything from

a high-fidelity analogue delay to a downright dirty one, with each repeat becoming more grainy and distorted than the last. Its modulation control presides over both speed and depth and should help to cop those timeless Memory Man tones.

The El Capistan's tape age control is much more subtle, and allows players to roll off the top end while introducing some loss of fidelity, just like real tape would over time. The wow & flutter control introduces irregularities in the simulated tape machine's speed, resulting in an unpredictable and very natural-sounding modulation tone that will be familiar to anyone who's used a tape simulator before.

Each pedal gets a pair of footswitches, with the right hand switch bypassing the effect in each case, while the left hand side is dedicated to tap tempo for both of the delay units. The Ola, on the other hand, gets a handy 'favourite'

switch, allowing you to recall a preset on the fly. A separate favourite switch can also be purchased for use with the Brigadier and El Capistan, at the expense of their expression pedal inputs. Otherwise, plugging an expression pedal into either delay gives you hands-free control of any parameter you choose. Each pedal has stereo outputs, with the Ola also sporting stereo inputs.

Both the Brigadier and El Capistan feature extra functions, accessed by holding down both footswitches. The Brigadier offers a filter-style tone control and a +/-3db boost, but the El Capistan allows access to a whopping five additional parameters, including the low end contour of the repeats, the bias of the modelled tape machine, the number of impurities on the tape's surface and a really handy spring reverb level control, as well as the +/-3db boost. Despite this incredibly rich feature set, each pedal is fairly intuitive to use, with perhaps a slightly steeper learning curve where the El Capistan is concerned.

Each pedal draws about 250mA and can be powered from a standard 9V DC adaptor, and they can be daisy chained without any issues. It might not sound it, but this is a really big deal – the fact that Strymon has designed such a powerful bunch of pedals to work on a standard 9V DC supply is nothing short of incredible.

Sounds – Ola

We found we could easily dial in a great sound from each of the Ola's three modes, with the multi mode standing out as the most fun, considering that we could cop similar (albeit wonderful) tones from the single and vibrato modes using other stompers. To create an incredible studio-quality chorus



STRYMON OLA, BRIGADIER & EL CAPISTAN

Price: £279 each
Built in: USA
Power: 9V DC adapter only (included)
Dimensions: 44(h) x 102(w) x 114(d) mm

OLA
Type: Analogue chorus & vibrato simulator

Features: Speed, depth, mix, tone & ramp speed/envelope threshold controls, chorus/multi-chorus/vibrato mode switch, normal/ramp/envelope mode switch, preset footswitch, stereo inputs & outputs

BRIGADIER
Type: Analogue delay simulator
Features: Delay time, bucket loss, repeats, modulation & mix controls, +/-3db boost & tone filter secondary functions, short/medium/long mode switch, quarter/dot/triplet tap division switch, tap tempo footswitch, switchable analogue buffer, mono input & stereo outputs, expression pedal/preset switch input

EL CAPISTAN ECHO
Type: Tape echo simulator
Features: Delay time, tape age, repeats, wow/flutter & mix controls, spring reverb level, low end contour, tape bias, tape crinkle & +/-3db boost secondary functions, fixed/multi/single tape head switch, 3-way mode switch, 20-second tape-style looper, tap tempo footswitch, switchable analogue buffer, mono input & stereo outputs, expression pedal/preset switch input

CONTACT DETAILS

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www.strymon.net

GB VERDICT

GOLD STARS

- ★ Incredible tones
- ★ Unbelievable power and flexibility
- ★ Solid build quality

BLACK MARKS

- None

IDEAL FOR...

Everyone. Even if you don't play guitar, we'd still advise you get at least one!

GB RATING



effect using a mere pedal is a real treat. Within minutes we're grateful for that favourite switch – just one of these tones simply isn't enough, and being able to switch between two completely different modulation effects is a godsend when playing live.

The sheer quality of tone on offer here is remarkable. Every time we turn a dial or flick a switch we're presented with a totally usable sound. Some are funkier than others, but every setting has a certain musical edge to it that is usually reserved for the most expensive digital, and indeed analogue, gear.

Sounds – Brigadier

Great analogue delay pedals have a special place in our hearts, from the Memory Man to the old Ibanez AD80 and everything in between. And the Brigadier is capable of sounding very, very close to every one of them. It does this by understanding the inner workings and function of old 'bucket brigade' chips and allowing you to control the performance of these virtual devices. The results are simply stellar.

Of all the pedals here this one is perhaps the most intuitive to use,

with standard delay controls and a modulation knob that adds a chorus effect to the repeats only. The bucket loss control basically enables you to dial in the quality of the repeats, and in combination with its secondary function as a tone control, you can dial in practically any analogue delay tone you want.

Sonically the Brigadier is right on the money. There is no hint of congestion as is present on some other digital delays – it sounds big, and can be dialled in very easily indeed. From very old and primitive to complex and sophisticated, the Brigadier does it all with no hint of sterility.

Sounds – El Capistan

There has been an awful lot of hype online about this pedal, but we are very aware of the amount of misinformation that is out there on the web. With the preconceptions cleansed from our ears we spark up the El Capistan to be greeted by nothing less than one of the best delay pedals we've ever heard, analogue or digital.

Some recent tape delay simulators have left us wondering if the designer had even heard a real one, but with this thing the only conclusion is that the designers are nothing short of a tape delay obsessives. The natural 'wow and flutter' modulation caused by the subtle changes in tape speed has been replicated perfectly, and sounds so close to the real thing it's eerie. The ability to also alter the age and condition of the tape to this degree is previously unheard of – certainly to anything like this standard – and we're still only scratching the surface.

Even without the El Capistan's secondary functions it would certainly rank as one of the best we've heard, but these extras give

the pedal a tweakability factor that borders on the ridiculous. The built-in reverb sounds just like the reverb on the old Roland RE-501 Space Echo (yes, we can be that specific) and the ability to adjust the low end contour and tape bias are really the icing on the cake. Which must make the tap tempo switch the candles on top!

Sat next to our trusty Hiwatt Custom Tape Echo, a superb sounding machine itself, we find the El Capistan can certainly hold its own. The difference in quality between the two is slight, and although the Hiwatt has the edge, the remarkable thing is that at this point we're actually splitting hairs between a 9V effects pedal and a real tape delay. Nothing else, in our experience, has even come close.

Conclusion

There's no hiding the fact that we were genuinely surprised by the outstanding quality of these pedals. And it's as much about the little things as anything, like running off a standard 9V supply, their compact size or being able to use an external expression pedal. They look fantastic too, but what's inside is even more beautiful.

The Ola gives us everything we could want in a modulation device, from a lush shimmer to a deep warble, while the Brigadier allows us to access all those great old analogue delay tones in a powerful and flexible package. However, the standout performer has to be El Capistan. The effort that must have gone into creating this pedal is simply staggering, and while we acknowledge that there is a certain something that only a real tape machine has, the El Capistan delivers where countless others have not. Simply put, it is now the one to beat. Full marks to Strymon, we can't wait to see what they come up with next. **GB**



Each pedal sports stereo outputs