

Guitar Effects for the Technically Challenged

by Dennis Winge

I've never been a big pedal geek but I have amassed quite an array of effects over the years, and I have been told I use them tastefully. So this is a rough guide to the most common guitar effects without getting too technical. As for specific recommendations on brands for each pedal, you'll have to go to the many guitar gear websites and forums online.

Even better: go to your local store and try these out. You can read until the cows come home but a picture is worth a thousand words, and similarly in 2 seconds you can experience the sound of each pedal for yourself.

Distortion – Want to dirty up your sound quick like any respectable rocker or blueser from Joe Satriani and Slash all the way to Clapton and Stevie Ray? You need this one first. They range all the way from very heavy for metal players to the lightest bit of 'crunch' for blues players. There are some differences, but generally 'overdrive,' and 'fuzz' pedals are all very similar to 'distortion' pedals.

Delay – Pretend you're playing on the edge of the Grand Canyon. Everything you play comes back to you a second or two later, but in this case with the pedal you get to change how much time until you hear it again, how many times you want to hear it back, and many other variables. Some guitarists like the Edge from U2 rely heavily on use of delay for their sound.

Chorus – How do you get 2 guitarists to play in tune? Shoot one of them. So the joke goes, but the chorus pedal simulates more than one guitarist playing the same thing and makes it sound bigger, but it also adds kind of a shimmer to the sound and makes it sound more lush. A nice chorus sound is often used by Eric Johnson when he is playing 'clean' (i.e. without distortion) for example.

Wah – You've all heard the intro to "Voodoo Chile Slight Return" from Hendrix right? Jimi was a master of the wah pedal that simulates the human voice and can make the notes 'speak' or even 'cry.'

Compression – It evens out your sound so the softer notes are louder and the loudest notes don't jump out so much. Great for crisping up a rhythm guitar part or adding sustain to a guitar solo.

Tremolo – Think 1950's or 60's kind of rapid loud-and-soft effect like on the intro to the Rolling Stones' "Gimme Shelter" or "Born on the Bayou" by Creedence. Many of the more modern bands use it too like Radiohead and R.E.M.

Vibrato – It's a back and forth oscillation like tremolo, but it's by pitch not by volume. Check out Robin Trower's "Bridge of Sighs" album for use of vibrato.

Flanger – This is like a 'whoosing' sound like an airplane passing overhead like on Van Halen's "And the Cradle Will Rock."

Phaser – This is a 'swirling' type of effect used on, for example, Radiohead's "Ok Computer" album.

Pitch Shifter/ Octave – An Octave pedal duplicates the sound up or down (usually the latter) an octave. Guitarists can simulate a bass. Pitch shifters can add intervals other than an octave and do all sorts of other modulations from the subtle to the crazy.

Reverb – I didn't mean to suggest that this one is less common by leaving this until the end. It's actually so common that most amps are built with it, so having to use a reverb pedal is less common unless you're getting into customizing the effect for yourself. Unlike delay which is more like an echo, reverb is simply the effect of your sound as it fills up a large or small room. Playing in a large hallway would give you lots of reverb.

Have fun and experiment with effects. When I was 11 I put the guitar away for two years (the only time I ever did so in my life after I started at age 8) and then I discovered the distortion pedal at age 13 and I haven't put it down since. So using effects can greatly enhance your enjoyment of the guitar!