

Nik plug-in Software Silver Efex Pro 2

Launched from Lightroom CC, 2016

Silver Efex Pro 2 has certain limitations as to what it can and can't do.

It cannot:

- Crop
- Change aspect ratio
- Re-size
- Correct converging verticals
- Correct tilting horizons
- Fix chromatic aberrations
- Remove blemishes, spots or unwanted objects or figures
- Move or add objects or figures

These adjustments have to be made, where necessary, in the host programme before launching SEP 2.

Considering the restrictions listed above it may be worth asking why bother with Nik plug-ins at all? The answer is that they are now free and therefore offer excellent value. Each programme in the Nik suite has things to offer and Silver Efex Pro 2 offers an interesting and useful way to convert colour images into B&W.

Perhaps what we should ask is why, when the production of high quality colour images is so easy with the existing digital processes we should want to bother with B&W images. After all, B&W came about due to the limitations of the materials available at that time. If Fox-Talbot had been able to produce the perfect colour image first time, B&W would not have existed. It would have had to be invented. But why invent it or use it?

Black and White

- Can be powerfully creative
- More easily conveys a message, sentiment, emotion
- Widens the shooting opportunities
- Can be used successfully under mid-day light and in the tropics
- Can be used in mixed light situations where a colour cast is inevitable
- Can be used under low light with high ISO.
- Noise can be taken for grain which is more acceptable in B&W

So there are a number of advantages in producing B&W images and the use of SEP 2 plug-in can enhance the quality of the resulting B&W image. SEP2 offers excellent control and a wide range of creative options.

SEP 2 can be launched from Photoshop and Lightroom.

Once an image has been selected the initial adjustments need to be made in the host programme. These will include adjusting the White balance, exposure and other settings in the Basic Section of the Lightroom Develop Module. It will be here that the image will be cropped, if necessary and offending or distracting objects or people

removed.

Let's have a better look at the image without the distracting panel lights (L>L) just to get a better appreciation of the balance of the image. Nothing particularly offensive stands out. Perhaps you may not like the wedge of bracken across the lower half of the image but maybe it can be used to accentuate the more inviting pastoral country beyond.

With the panels lit again I will now look at the image at 100%. This will give a better chance to spot anything that should be removed before moving to the SEP 2 plug in. Scroll up and down across the image from the left looking for dust spots, blemishes and offending objects. The only thing I can see is the line of telegraph poles across the centre. In my opinion they do not intrude and it is entirely personal choice whether you remove or leave these. I have to confess that on the far right of the image in the bracken there was a woolly hatted idiot with camera following me along the path but I removed him before your attention was diverted trying to recognize him.

Return to fit on screen, move to Develop and we now look at the Histogram. It is well spread and shows there is some slight clipping of the green channel in the shadows. I am not worried about this as I could not see anything obvious at 100%. To be sure I will click on the black slider and at the same time hold down the Alt key. This shows us the dark areas of bracken on the right hand side are just about clipping.

The Histogram is well spread and we have to keep in mind that Nik advise against using an image with high contrast. At the other end of the Histogram we can see we are almost at the clipping points of the highlights and by clicking on the white slider and holding down the Alt key we can see a speck which is probably a window in the village.

The white clouds in the top right hand corner are also bright and if we pass the cursor over them we can see readings of 98% and above in the figures below the Histogram. Some of the other bright cloud further in reads above 94% and we can be reasonably sure that on the final print we will be down to paper base in these areas. I could lower the overall exposure but to correct this with a global correction will badly affect other areas of the image I do not want to change. I will therefore risk putting the image into SEP2 as it is and deal with the problem there.

We now move to the Basic section of Develop. First I will set the White Balance. This is at the moment set to "As Shot" but to me has a somewhat cold look to it. We can see what happens when we choose "Auto" and this gives an immediate improvement in the warmth of the image. It is worth using the eyedropper by moving it over an area of lightish grey cloud and clicking on it. This gives a White Balance slightly cooler than "Auto" but certainly better than "As Shot". I will choose to go with "Auto" but this is only a personal preference.

We now have to set the Black and White points. This is done by double clicking on the appropriate sliders with the cursor whilst holding down the Shift key. This shifts Black to +1 and White to +1. We now need to recover some of the shadows, particularly in the right hand bracken so we move Shadows to +25. Finally we need to recover some of the detail in the lighter cloud and so we move the Highlights slider to -40.

Do not add Clarity as it will increase contrast and may well give difficulties with haloing in SEP2. However, it is advised to ensure the image has a good degree of saturation and to achieve this I can up the Saturation or in this case the Vibrance, due to the colour pallet of the image and so we move this slider to +20.

We now move to the Tone Curve, ensure it is in Linear form and in the default position of a straight line at 45⁰. This will help to reduce the contrast of the image. There is no need to adjust any of the colour values and all there is to do now is to add a mild level of sharpening. I feel that 25 is adequate for this image at this stage and I have set the masking at 45 so as to avoid over sharpening the clouds.

On final thing is to click Chromatic aberration and we are ready to launch the image into Silver Efex Pro 2.

We launch SEP 2 from Lightroom by going to Photo>Edit In>Silver Efex Pro 2. The dialog box offers;

Edit copy with Lightroom adjustments

Format TIFF

Colour space Prophoto RGB

Resolution 360

Edit.

SEP 2 is now launched.

The SEP2 screen is divided, like Gaul, into three parts. To the left we have the Browser Panel, in the centre is the Preview Window and to the right there is the Adjustments Panel.

The Browser panel offers some 38 presets provided by Nik, a further 10 gathered from elsewhere and several own saved presets. The top preset is Neutral and is the straight grey scale rendition of the colour image that remains, unseen, behind the screen. Click on the presets in turn to show the changes to the image on the Preview Window. It is not necessary to scroll through the entire Preset collection every time as Favourite Presets can be selected by clicking on the star under the relevant preset. Note how the sliders in the Adjustment Panel change as the Presets are scrolled through.

The Browser Panel can also be configured to show the History of the manipulation of the chosen image. As with Lightroom, each activity in the manipulation of the image is recorded. All activities are non-destructive. In conjunction with one of the compare windows, either side by side or split image, the latest or any selected state in the History panel can be compared with a previous state, even back to the colour original. This is accomplished by using the yellow pointer. Where a particular intermediary state is chosen for continuation, the original history after this point will be lost.

In the center we have the Preview Window. Above the Browser Panel and the Preview Window are a series of buttons. Moving from left to right these are as follows. If the Browser Panel is set to History then the first button on the left hand side is Presets, with a choice of Presets below it. However, if the Browser Panel is set to Presets then the History button will be found at the bottom of this panel.

The next button is the Browser Panel Show/Hide which can be activated once the appropriate Preset is chosen. This will expand the Preview Window. The next three buttons give a variety of Preview Window options. The first is for single screen. The next gives a split screen with a dividing line which can be moved by the cursor. The next button will give two images either side by side or one above the other. These options will show the current state of the image against either the neutral state, by default, or any other previous state as chosen in the History Panel. The final button on this side is Compare. Clicking on this will enable full screen comparison to be made between the active state and a previous state as selected by the yellow pointer.

We now move over to the buttons above the right hand end of the Preview Window. Continuing from the left we have a small magnifying glass, the word Zoom, a % and finally a disclosure triangle. The disclosure triangle enables a choice in magnification between 25% and 300%. Having selected an image size, the other buttons are used to activate this and to return the image to Fit on Screen when desired.

Whilst it is normal to work at Fit on Screen it is recommended that for detailed inspection of the image 25%, 50% or 100% are chosen for the most accurate view of the effect of an action. There remain two further buttons. The light bulb will allow the surround of the Preview Window to be selected between grey, black or white according to choice and the requirements of the selected image. The final button is to Show/Hide the Adjustments Panel.

To the right of the Preview Window is the Adjustments Panel which offers a comprehensive choice of manipulation controls. It will be noticed that when the Neutral Preset is activated in the Browser most of the sliders in the Adjustment Panel are set to zero. As we scroll over other Presets the adjustment sliders will be seen to move as required.

The Adjustments Panel is divided into a number of sub-panels. To the left of each heading there is a disclosure triangle followed by a show/hide effects preview checkbox whilst to the right of the sub-panel heading is a return arrow to reset all adjustments in the sub-panel.

The first sub-panel is Global Adjustments and contains Brightness, Contrast, Structure and Tonal Protection. The first three have disclosure triangles. Let us look at each of these in turn as we work our way down. The Brightness slider gives a global adjustment to all tones in the image and when moved to the extremes can lead to clipping of shadows or highlights. If the "Brightness" disclosure triangle is activated further sliders become available. These are Highlights, Mid-Tones, Shadows and Dynamic Brightness.

As might be expected the Highlights slider works only on the brightest part of the image with Mid-Tones and Shadows relating to the appropriate parts of the image as their name implies. Dynamic Brightness works on all image tones but is less extreme than Brightness itself and will not lead to clipping when fully open or closed.

In the same way, the Contrast slider adds or subtracts contrast globally. When the disclosure triangle is activated three further controls, Activate Blacks, Activate Whites and Soft Contrast are found. Activate Blacks will enhance dark tones whilst Activate Whites will enhance light tones. Soft Contrast works globally but in a very gentle

way. When the slider is moved to the right the tones are driven apart whilst if the slider is moved to the left the tones are brought closer together.

Structure is a form of sharpening in that it can be used to increase or decrease contrast between adjacent tones. As with Brightness the Structure global slider will affect the whole image but when the disclosure triangle is activated three further sliders for Highlights, Mid-Tones and Shadows become available. Moving the sliders to the right increases the contrast whilst moving to the left decreases the contrast.

The sliders work very much like a large radius, high pass sharpening filter. However, each of the Structure sliders can be used to give negative structure which will result in a softened focus ring but without blur. Fine Structure confines the effect to small details and is similar to adding or subtracting clarity.

The final part of the Global Adjustments sub panel is Tonality Protection. Here the sliders can be used to remove clipped highlights or shadows.

The next sub-panel is Selective Adjustments. It is here that Control Points can be used to manipulate selected areas of the image. Clicking on the Control Point activator will allow a point to be moved to a part of the image to be manipulated. Once a Control Point has been placed on the image the area of influence can be adjusted as required. It is then possible to increase or decrease Brightness, Contrast and Structure. A further disclosure triangle will be seen under Structure and this will reveal Activate Whites, Activate Blacks, Fine Structure and Selective Colour.

As a Control Point is placed an entry will appear in the Selective Adjustments sub-panel and will be illuminated in Orange. It is possible to visualize the area of influence of a Control Point by clicking on the small check box to the right of the illuminated (active) control point. This mask view will change the display of the area of influence to white with black areas unaffected.

Where it is critical that certain objects or areas of an image are not subject to the area of influence of a control point, further control points may be placed on the area to be protected. Each of these will protect the part of the image selected by restricting the sphere of influence of the active control point.

Should there be a number of areas which require the same treatment this can be achieved by clicking on the control point and holding down the ALT key whilst moving the control point to the new area. Alternatively, several control points may be placed as required and then joined by moving the cursor over each to join them. It will be seen that the adjustment sliders for each of the control points move in unison even though the cursor is only operating one of them.

Finally, control points can be used in conjunction with the Zone Mapping System at the bottom of the Adjustments Panel. This may be particularly useful where a sky tapers in tone from one side to the other due to the use of a polarizing filter. In this instance the tone of sky required is selected using the zone mapping and when this is indicated by hatching the tone is locked using the button at the base of the tone zone indicator. A control point is placed and sized over the area of sky to be changed and the brightness slider on the control point is moved to brighten or darken the sky as appropriate. When it reaches the correct tone the zone map hatching will

cover the area of sky influenced by the control point

The next sub-panel is headed "Colour Filters". This can be looked at as a return to the use of coloured filters used on film cameras and works on the principle of the colour wheel. For example, a yellow filter will be used to lighten the yellows and greens of an image and at the same time darken blues in the sky. Using the same principle, a green filter can be used to adjust pink skin tones.

There are 5 colour filters plus grey. The latter will return the image to its previous state. Below the colour filters are two sliders. One can be used to change the hue of the colour filter whilst the other will adjust the strength of the filter applied.

The next sub-panel is Film Type. There are 18 presets created to show how the image would have looked had it been captured on one of the film types. The film ISOs range from 32 to 3200 and the film types have the appropriate grain to match. It is possible to add additional grain and to choose the size and shape of the grain used.

Below the film type and grain there is a sensitivity area where each of the colours of the coloured image beneath the SEP 2 may be adjusted to personal taste. Finally, there is a levels and curves window which is used in the same way as in other image manipulation software.

The last sub-panel is Finishing Adjustments. Here we find 23 Toning presets plus neutral, 7 Vignettes presets, 4 presets for Burnt Edges and 14 presets for Image Borders.

In the Toning presets one can choose whole image single shade toning or toning split between Silver Hues (dark areas) and Paper Hues (light areas). With the whole image toning there is a strength slide. For split toning there is a silver hue slider and a toning slider to regulate the amount. There are the same controls for paper hues and amount and there is also a balance slider so the tone meeting point can be selected.

The Vignette presets are offered with 3 strengths of lens falloff, 2 for white frame and 2 for black frame. There are also controls for amount and a choice of circle through to rectangle and size. Finally it is possible to place the centre of the vignette other than in the middle of the image which can be extremely useful.

Under Burnt Edges there are 4 presets which apply the burnt edge effect to all 4 edges. In addition it is possible to add the effect to each edge individually and for this there is also the choice of strength, size and transition.

Under Image Borders there is a choice of 14 presets. There is a choice of white borders, a number of which have black inners of varying widths and roughness simulating film negative edges. These borders can be varied by size and spread and the black inner border can be varied from clean to rough. There is also the facility to vary the border.

It is important to remember that these borders do not add additional canvass to the image but enter into the image itself and care must be taken not to obscure an important element of the image which may be towards the edge. It must also be remembered that where toning is used on the image this will also affect the otherwise

white border.

The final sub-panel in the Adjustments Panel is the Loupe and Histogram window. When loupe is highlighted a 100% view of the image under the cursor in the Preview Window will be shown in the loupe window. A lock pin is provided at the top right hand corner of the Loupe/ Histogram window.

When Histogram is highlighted a Zone Mapping System numbered from 0 to 10 appears. This works on a similar basis to the Ansel Adams zone system for printing images from film. In this Zone Mapping, 0 is pure black and 10 is paper white. As the cursor is scrolled over the Histogram, hatching appears on the image to denote the particular tones. At the base of each column there is a button which enables the particular zone to be locked on the image. This is particularly useful as it can be used with zone 0 and/or 10 when adjusting clipped shadows or highlights in an image.

The x axis of the Histogram indicates the distribution of tones within an image whilst on the y axis, the height represents the number of pixels corresponding to each tone value.

It will be seen from the foregoing that Silver Efex Pro 2 offers a vast range of presets to choose from. There are the 40 odd offered in the Browser panel which can be amended by the use of colour filters, or not as seen fit. Then there are the 18 film types, the 23 toning presets not to mention the doubling of that number for split toning. Add to that the Vignettes, Burnt Edges and the Borders and it is difficult to believe it necessary to start from scratch by working on the Neutral preset, the straight grey scale conversion of the coloured image.

It is doubtful that the Neutral conversion will ever be of use, except as the starting point for further image manipulation and so it is worth spending time scrolling through the Browser Presets, film types etc. to arrive at a starting point for further manipulation much closer to the final image.

It would be both interesting and informative to develop this black and white image in two different ways. The first will be using a preset and going on from there. The second would be to try to achieve a similar result starting with film types.

In the Browser Panel we choose a collection entitled "Classic" and from this I have selected a preset called 014. Grad ND EV-2. Having selected the preset we now close the Browser Panel to enlarge the Preview Window.

The next action is to add the Yellow Filter from the Colour Filter sub-panel. This will darken the sky and enliven the areas of grassland.

We now move to the Global Adjustments sub-panel and using the sliders change the Dynamic Brightness to +30% and the Soft Contrast to -30%.

We now go to the Histogram and select both 0 and 10 to check if there are any Shadows and/or Highlights being clipped. There is a small area of cloud on 9 but no blown highlights but there are several areas where shadows are being clipped. We can now click off the button for 10 but now scroll over the Histogram to get an idea of the tonal values, particularly of the bright grass, the sky and the woodland on the left

hand side.

The first correction must be to the very dark area representing blue sky in the top right hand corner. We will take a control point from the Selective Adjustments sub-panel and place it over the dark corner. The size of the circle gives an indication the area of influence should be adjusted to the size of the dark area. In the Histogram click on tone 3 as this is similar to the tone of many of the darker clouds. The Brightness slider on the Control Point can now be adjusted to the point where this area of sky is hatched to show it has been lightened to Tone 3.

We now move to the Finishing Adjustments sub-panel. The image is not suitable for the Vignette effects provided but it is necessary to give it a darkened base. We therefore go to Burnt Edges and select Burn Bottom Edge. Moving the sliders to: Strength 20%, Size 45% and Transition to 30% we will achieve the firmer base required.

Similarly, the left hand edge also needs to be darkened to move the point of interest further into the image. Choose Burn Left Hand Edge and set the sliders to Strength 10%, Size 10% and Transition 20%.

There is now a need to adjust several smallish areas on this left hand side. About a third of the way down, there are some bright treetops. Before we add a Control Point to the trees we will add one to the darker trees immediately below so as to prevent them from being darkened. Now add a Control Point to the bright trees, adjust the circle of influence and reduce the Brightness to -11%. Similarly, there is an area of bright land below the dark trees. Place a new Control Point on this area, adjust the circle and reduce the Brightness to -30.

There are now some Control Point adjustments to be made to the bottom corners. Using an appropriately sized circle of influence, the Brightness of the left hand corner can be reduced to -14% and with a slightly larger circle the right hand corner Brightness can be reduced to -19%.

The top left hand corner now needs to be adjusted. Click on the Histogram to engage the tone 2 hatching and with an appropriately sized circle of influence, raise the Brightness by +19% to achieve Tone 2 in this area. Finally, hold down ALT and move the Control Point to raise the dark wood on the skyline to Tone 2.

We now need to go to 100% and scroll over the image for defects and halos. There is a halo running for most of the length of the skyline which means the image must be transferred to Photoshop to remove this before printing. There are no other faults or blemishes.

Returning to Fit on Screen we can now click onto the compare button to see the Final Image against the original Neutral grey scale Image. Assuming all is satisfactory, the next step is to click on Save to send the image back into Lightroom for a further scrutiny at 100% before sending on to Photoshop to remove the halo.

However, we will not do this, as we will now try to produce a similar image by going down the Film Type route. So that we may compare the results of the two methods within SEP2, we will not break the History at this point.

We first open the Browser Panel and select the Neutral preset. In the Film Type sub-panel of the Adjustments Panel we can scroll through the film types on offer in an attempt to find one likely to give us the best possibly start.

It would seem that Kodak 100 TMX Pro offers the most suitable starting point but if we now go to the Sensitivity sub panel we see the sliders for each of the colours. It may be that by moving one or more we can tweek the image closer to what we want. The slider settings untouched are:

Red 33%

Yellow 27%

Green 10%

Cyan 28%

Blue 35%

Violet 6%

Adjusting each of the sliders it would seem that the image can be improved by lifting the Yellow to 70% and the Blue also to 70%.

We now open the Global Adjustments sub-panel and set the Dynamic Brightness to -30%, the Amplify Blacks to 70%, the Soft Contrast to -80% and the Tonality Protection sliders for both Shadows and Highlights to 100%.

We now move to the Selective Adjustments sub-panel and place a Control Point over the dark area in the top right hand corner and raise the Brightness to +59%. A second Control Point is placed on the bright treetops on the left hand side of the image and the Brightness is adjusted to - 37%. Similarly a Control Point is placed on the bright land below the dark trees and the Brightness is adjusted to -49%. We now place Control Points in both the bottom left hand and bottom right hand corners with Brightness reduced to -27% and -34% respectively.

We now move to Burnt Edges in the Finishing Adjustments sub-panel. For the bottom edge we select Strength 20%, Size 45% and Transition 30%. The left hand edge also requires treatment and for this we choose Strength 10%, Size 10% and Transition 20%.

We now move to 100% to look for halos. These are apparent and will need treatment in Photoshop later. There are also blocked shadows in the bracken and to rectify this we change Amplify Black to 50% and Dynamic Brightness to -10% in the Global Adjustments sub-panel.

The image is still somewhat flat and staying in the Global Adjustments sub-panel we increase Global Brightness to +15% and the Shadow brightness to +40%.

We can now compare the image with the Neutral Preset we started with and then by using the Yellow pointer in the History Panel we can compare this version with the image produced using Classic Preset 014 ND Grad EV-2.

It is clear that 014 ND Grad EV -2 is superior in this instance and there is little point in keeping the film type version so we clear the History back to the Yellow pointer. This does not mean that this will always be the case but the selection of the probable best starting preset will, more often than not, be a firm basis on which to work.

We now choose “Save” to send the image back to Lightroom.

References

<http://www.niksoftware.com/nikcollection/usa/silverefepro.html>

<http://www.luminescentphoto.com/webstore/index.html>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kJMj-vyIgLg&feature=em-hot-vrecs>