

Nik Software

Silver Efex Pro

By A. Cemal Ekin

Photoshop or Photoshop Lightroom has served my needs for converting my photographs to B&W for quite some time now. Everyone who has tried it knows that there are many different ways of getting there. I have developed my own ways of doing this even before Photoshop introduced the B&W conversion tool largely inspired by that of Lightroom, and have made a couple of presentations on how to approach monochrome conversion at the Photographic Society of Rhode Island. The bottom line: I am very comfortable with this process and generally do not need extra plugins to help me along the way.

A few weeks ago I started experimenting with a plugin that is new to me, Nik Software Silver Efex Pro (SEP). I must admit, my expectations were not too high in terms of the end result being better than what I could do on my own; after all, I have had several exhibits featuring my B&W photographs even published a limited edition folio of monochrome photographs. Now, the second part of the admission: I was not entirely correct in my assumption. After working with SEP for a while I have come to appreciate the creative potential it offers to any photographer who wants control on the B&W conversion process. As I will indicate when appropriate, there are a few annoyances to me in using the SEP but nothing that cannot be sidestepped with little effort.

The Product

Silver Efex Pro is a plugin that installs to be accessible either from Photoshop or Photoshop Lightroom. When launched, it opens in its own interface as if a separate application; indeed it is a separate application with its EXE file to be used from Lightroom. Although it can be started by simply double-clicking the exe file, there is no way of bringing an image into it as it lacks the typical menu bar. Although it is possible to drag a TIFF format file on the EXE file to load it to SEP, this is unnecessary, and very cumbersome compared to its natural workflow of images being pushed to the software and brought back in a round-trip fashion. I am mentioning it only to complete the picture of the product. There is one important difference that is worth mentioning between the Photoshop and Lightroom versions. When launched from Photoshop SEP can work as a smart filter, allowing repeated tweaks on the image; and Nik Selective Tool interface is available to work in a layered environment.

The Interface

The SEP interface is rather similar to that of Lightroom, separated into three panels with expanding option blocks. On the left is the “Style Browser” which presents a series of preset adjustments. Nik recommends starting there, and it makes a lot of sense. In the middle is the preview of the image, and on the right is the panel that houses all the adjustments (and there are plenty of them)

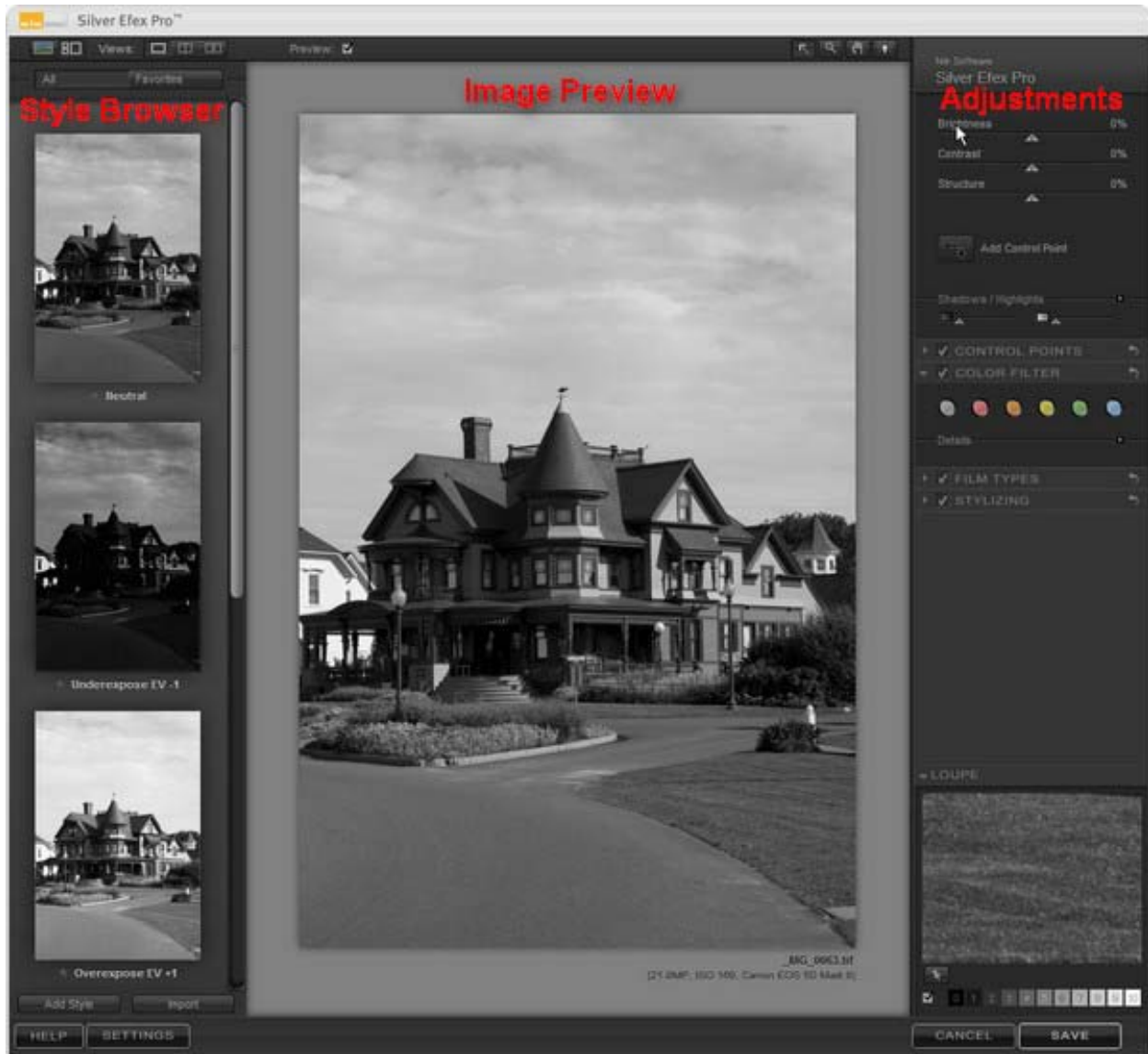


Figure 1 Silver Efex Pro interface is generally intuitive

The application interface can be sized to fit your display but there is no maximize button, nor a double-click on the title bar will do that for you. It will only resize from the lower right hand corner by dragging; a bit of a nuisance but a minor one.

The Style Browser

The creative exploration of different looks is so easy to use it will be a shame not to see the effect of each preset. Having this quick a review of approaches ranging from exposure adjustments, to push or pull processing, from sepia toning to antique finishes quickly spoils the user. Now, mind you, all of these can be replicated with the abundant adjustments on the right and new style presets can be added to the list; great convenience for getting very close to your final destination. For the record, the initial presets are: Neutral, Underexpose EV -1, Overexpose EV +1, High Structure, Pull

Process N-1, Push Process N+1, Push Process N+2, Push Process N+3, High Contrast Red (Orange, Yellow, Green) Filter, Full Spectrum, Full Spectrum Inverse, Dark Sepia, Soft Sepia, Ambrotype, Cyanotype, Tintype, Infrared Film Normal, Infrared Film Soft, Soft Skin, Wet Rocks, Darken Contrast Vignette, Antique Plate I, Antique Plate II, Antique Solarization, Holga, Pinhole. Whew! I have one complaint here about the interface. The scroll bar does not respond to the scroll wheel of my mouse (Logitech) and the behavior of the scroll bar is neither smooth nor what I am accustomed to in its jumpiness.

The Preview Window

In the center is the large image preview area. The image can be zoomed in by picking up the zoom tool, a magnifying glass icon above the preview area. A click brings the image to 100% zoom, another to 300%. The Loupe window on the lower right becomes a navigator area when the image is zoomed in. I expected that holding the Alt key would change the zoom in to zoom out, sure enough the icon changed to a magnifying glass with a minus in the center instead of a plus. But, alas, click as hard as you might the image would not zoom out that way. When the Select tool is picked up (an arrow next to the zoom tool), double clicking on the image will zoom in 100% and another double-click will zoom out to fit the image to the window. The hand tool does what one may expect, move the image in the view port area. It also serves as a toggle between the original color image and the converted monochrome version. Very handy.

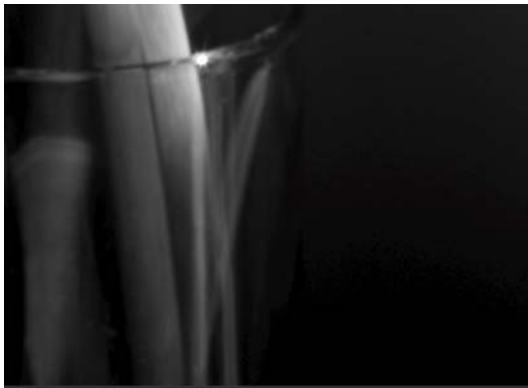


Figure 2 SEP Screen Capture



Figure 3 Lightroom Screen Capture

The display of the image is quite accurate but there are some caveats. When I converted an image with very deep shadows, the amount of noise and posterization started showing up that did not exist in my original conversions. I was concerned, and I believe rightly so. This is the caveat I mentioned above. Although the posterization was quite visible in SEP display it was considerably less back in Lightroom. The screen captures from SEP and Lightroom respectively are on the left. You probably cannot tell the posterization on the screen, but trust me it is very visible. My recommendation is to bring it back to Lightroom or Photoshop and look at it to see if it is real posterization or some problem with the SEP display of the converted image.

The Adjustments Panel

On the right side of the interface is the real heart of this software. A block of sliders control Brightness, Contrast, and Structure which is what Lightroom calls Clarity. The last adjustment controls the

mid tone contrast and “flexes” the muscles of the image so that they take shape so to speak. Below that group is one of the trademark controls of Nik Software, U-Point control button. That is followed by Shadows/Highlights sliders. If a U-Point control is added, the block below will show them stacked, where any one of them can be chosen and adjusted anytime; more on this later. The section for color filters is below the Control Points block. These filters work like color filters placed in front of the lens when photographing with B&W film and their hue and strength can be adjusted to simulate any shade of filter you can imagine.

Another unique and well-done feature of SEP is the simulation of film grain should you wish to do so. I used some of these films in the past and the general behavior of the film seems to be well mimicked. Additionally, a film’s grain structure, sensitivity, and its response curve can be adjusted to suit personal tastes. All the adjustments behave as expected, and some familiarity with film-based photography is a definite plus here. Many photographers who started with the digital technology may not be familiar with the characteristics of B&W film. For those I will suggest to stick with the film types offered, there are 18 different film types from different manufacturer, at different ISO ratings represented.

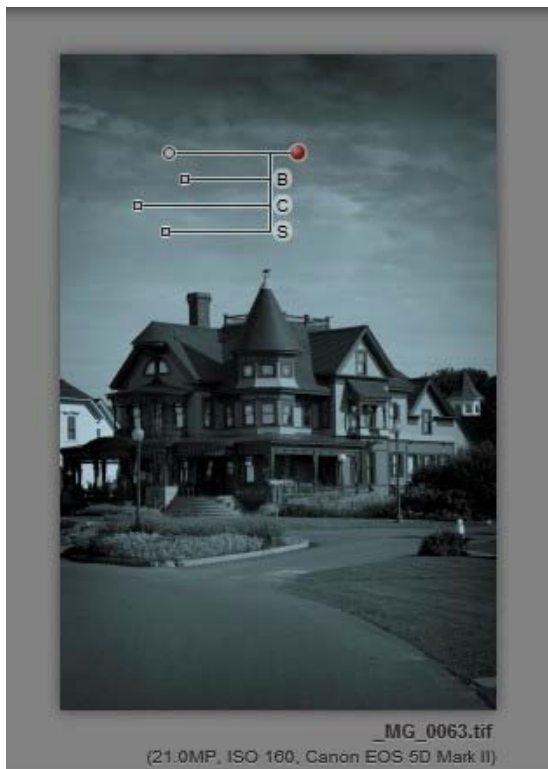


Figure 4 U-Point in Action

around while visually observing the results. The image in Figure 3 shows one control point with its adjustment sliders showing. I dropped the control point on a section of the blue sky to darken it to give the image a more dramatic look. It is possible to add many of these at different parts of the

The Loupe window provides an enlarged view of the area around the cursor. As I mentioned earlier, this window turns into a navigator window when the preview is zoomed in. Below this window is the full 10-zone scale that highlights the areas in the hovered zone by placing a red crosshatch on it. This is very handy for the students of the Zone System as I once was. I believe it could be a great learning/teaching tool of B&W photography.

U-Point Technology

This feature gives SEP a highly useful tool. It works like a blend of several tools. It is a selection tool based on color, it is a masking tool by the size of the radius, and it is a brightness and contrast adjustment tool. But wait, there’s more! It is a mid tone contrast and sharpening tool. It is the proverbial Ginsu knife of tonal adjustments. In practice, it works ver well. The initial selection point or other parameters are not critical as they all can be adjusted, and the U-Point be moved

photograph to control tonality and structure, to use the Nik terminology. This tool can be addictive!

In action

It is time now to talk about the results. A very brief summary of this will be “*Impressive!*” The variety of artistic results can be achieved with a serious depth of exploration with a very simple method to implement it. I can create all the results using Photoshop or Lightroom, no doubt. What I cannot do is to explore all these possibilities with such ease and depth. This gives me much greater artistic control and allows me to focus on the image rather than the tool.

I took a photograph from my collection that I took on Martha’s Vineyard last summer, Peter Norton’s house. The color image below has no adjustments applied to it in Lightroom. I simply selected it and sent it to SEP for editing.



Figure 5 Original Photograph



Figure 6 Default Neutral Conversion in SEP

Right off the start, the default conversion is very close to the “Grayscale” conversion in Lightroom. The sky has slightly better definition in SEP but overall tonalities in both versions are about the same. This is where the similarities end. The style browser has a rich set of options. To be fair, Lightroom also comes with preset and more presets can be added for this kind of exploration. That said, the results from similar presets are dramatically different. Below I present two selenium toned renderings of this photograph for your consideration. I know, there is an artistic judgement on which toning looks better, why, and so on. Let’s see them side by side.



Figure 7 Lighroom Preset for Selenium Toning

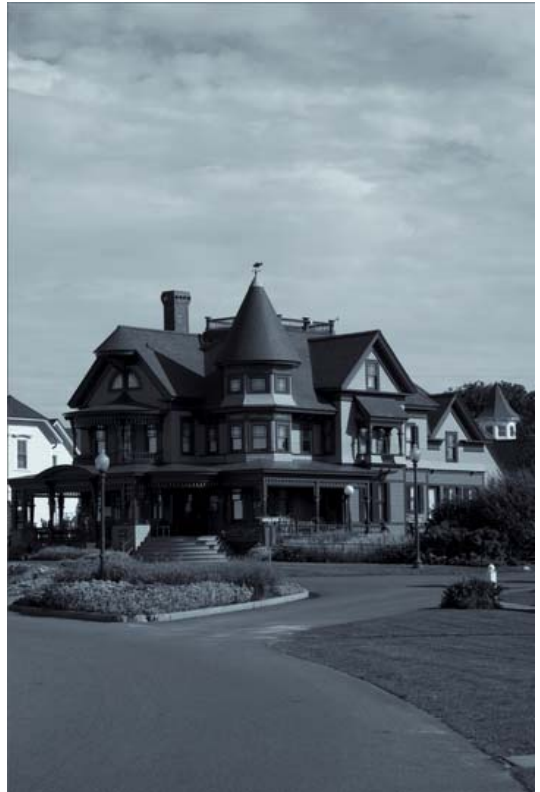


Figure 8 SEP Style for Selenium Toning



Figure 9 Control Point on Blue Sky



Figure 10 SEP with 3 Control Points

Although it can be configured better, the Lightroom preset for this purpose simply blows most of the sky out instead of making the tones richer as selenium toning is expected to do. I personally would rather start with the image on the right and tweak it if necessary. In figures 8 and 9 I have put the U-Point to task, in the first one there is only one on the sky to darken the blue consistent with the use of a yellow or orange filter on B&W film. A filter like that would have slightly lightened the green grass and the red roof tiles. In figure 9, I added two more control points and quickly adjusted the tonality of the areas.

Again, by using the HSL sliders much of this can be done given that there are no blue areas in the foreground or greens on the building and so on since these sliders in Lightroom are global adjustments. The area of influence of these adjustments in SEP can easily be controlled by changing the radius of the control point, and all of the control points “talk” with each other to make sure that their combined effect is a smooth and fully blended.

After a little vignetting to darken the corners, the final image is ready for presentation:



Documentation

The software comes with a trifold printed quick start guide and a PDF document with 40 pages of instruction. The PDF manual is easy to read and covers the material one has to learn. Also, Nik Software Web site offers many learning tools ranging from video tutorials (about 70), to different kinds of Webinars. All in all, learning this software should be fairly easy; partly due to the generally well designed interface and in part to the availability of the learning support.

Silver Efex Pro retails for \$199.95. It is worth the expense if you are interested in B&W photography. Members of the Photographic Society of Rhode Island receive a 15% discount. See an officer for the special discount code for PSRI members.

Minor interface quirks aside, I will recommend this product for your serious consideration.

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