HOW TO MAKE YOUR PICTURES 'SING' - ADDING DEPTH TO THE BLACKS

If your pictures, particularly monochrome prints, appear a little flat and greyish, this very simple technique will give them a boost. Using a Levels adjustment layer, check the histogram. This is a graph of the tones of your image, and in most images it is usually in the form of a pyramid, appearing a bit like a silhouette of a mountain. The shadow tones are on the left, the highlights on the right, and the greater part of the image - the 'peak and slopes of the mountain - indicate the mid tones. It is usually assumed and recommended that the tones in the histogram graph should just touch each edge, which is fine in theory, as you should then have a full range of tones. That means, however, that the black tone on the extreme left edge will indicate the only, possibly tiny, part of the image that has a full black, and conversely, the extreme right edge will be the only maximum highlight. If the tones at either edge end in an upright line, that means that either the highlights or the shadows will be 'clipped' i.e. without detail. With highlights, it is advisable that this is corrected, as detail-less highlights, especially if there is a large area of them, will often ruin a picture. Another way of checking if there is clipping, in the Levels layer, is to press the Alt key at the same time as moving the small triangles under either side of the histogram edges. The screen will go either white or black and as the sliders are moved into the histogram, either areas of pure white or black will be seen. This is where the tones are starting to clip.

In the case of highlights, it is best to stop the slider when evidence of clipping is just starting to appear, but clipped blacks are not nearly as disastrous and this can be exploited to improve the depth and contrast of an image. If the histogram on the left edge is brought just to the point of clipping and not beyond, only a tiny part of the image will be maximum black and all of the tones to the right of that will be shades of grey (not necessarily 50 though!). The result can often be a rather disappointing flattish image that lacks zing and punch and you might wonder what has gone wrong -and it is simply that you need stronger blacks.

 As It is the blacks that enrich an image, I will usually strengthen them and I do that by moving the left hand triangle *into* the histogram so that the areas of maximum black are increased and the image gains contrast and depth. Yes, your deepest blacks will now be clipped! But as long as these are not large areas, the small loss of detail is unlikely to be a problem and if in any particular part of the image more detail is required, it is easy to bring enough of this back by 'dodging' with the Overlay blend technique (see my other article).

It is, of course, a matter of aesthetic judgement as to how far the blacks are clipped, but after you have used the technique couple of times, you will soon be aware of how far you need to go. The technique can make such a difference to an image, especially monochrome, and it is now an essential part of my work flow.

And to give a final tweak, open a Curves layer and near the top of the window, where it says 'Presets' scroll down from 'Default' to Linear Contrast, and you will see a small 'jump' in the tones to give a final boost!

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