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cm/reviews

The latest computer music gear tested and rated!



90_ IK MULTIMEDIA AMPLITUBE 3

We tune up, plug in and rock out with the new version of IK's classic guitar amp simulation software



92_ ACOUSTICA MIXCRAFT 5

Have Acoustica perfected their 'craft with the fifth version of this fuss-free DAW?



94_ AVID ELEVEN RACK

An amp sim and Pro Tools interface combined, this is one nice rack

This month

- 90__ IK Multimedia AmpliTube 3
- 92__ Acoustica Mixcraft 5
- 94__ Avid Eleven Rack
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Our promise

We bring you honest, unbiased appraisals of the latest computer music products. Our experts apply the same stringent testing methods to all gear, no matter how much hype or expectation surrounds it.

What the ratings mean

- 1-4_ A seriously flawed product that should be avoided
- 5_ This product's problems outweigh its merits
- 6_ A decent product that's only held back by a few flaws
- 7_ Solid. Well worth considering
- 8_ Very good. A well-conceived and executed product.
- 9_ Excellent. First-rate and among the best you can buy
- 10_ Exceptional. It just doesn't get any better than this!



Awarded to products that challenge existing ideas and do something entirely new



A product has to really impress us with its functionality and features to win this one



If the product exceeds expectations for its price, it will receive this gong



In the opinion of our editor, the best product reviewed in the magazine this month

TOOLBAR
A collection of buttons for frequently-used functions

VIDEO TRACK
Drop video straight into your project - the audio appears on a separate audio track

MUSICAL TYPING
Use your QWERTY keys to input notes! PitchBend, modulation and velocity are here, too



TRANSPORT
No surprises here - play, record and navigate your song

MIXER
New for v5, this can be unlocked and resized (as can the other tabs)

TIME DISPLAY
Song position, tempo, key and time signature. There's a new recording count-in function, too

AUTOMATION LANE
Drag the nodes with the mouse to create volume fades, filter sweeps and more

Acoustica Mixcraft 5 £69 PC



It's been taking steps towards full DAW status for some time now, and it looks like Mixcraft could be about to truly blossom...

System requirements

PC 1GHz CPU, 2GB RAM, Windows XP/Vista/7

> We first encountered Mixcraft in 2005 (**cm**85, 6/10), when it was a gangly teenager of an audio sequencing package that didn't even have basic features like snap. By the time we caught up with it at version 4 in 2008 (**cm**125, 8/10), it seemed much more self-assured, delivering MIDI and virtual instrument support and generally starting to feel like a proper DAW. Now we have Mixcraft 5, which, when you take a look at the new features list, looks set to be the release at which the software fully matures.

'Face value

We won't waste too much time dealing with the interface: it's a straight-down-the-line affair and you can probably tell what everything is and does just by looking at the screenshot. It's worth noting, though, that the Details tab at the bottom - which gives you access to Mixcraft's editing windows and loop library - can now be undocked. As a result, full-screen MIDI editing is now possible, which is a real boon. You can even drag the whole tab onto a second monitor.

Speaking of the MIDI editor, there's a newly added option to switch to a basic notation view,

in which notes can be added and moved around. One clever touch is that piano roll-style bars appear behind each note, representing their length. You can then drag the edges of the bar itself to easily adjust the start position or length, which is a lot easier than fumbling with the usual crotchet/quaver/minim tools, especially for those not fully au fait with notation.

For those musically inspired moments when you don't have access to a MIDI keyboard, the Musical Typing Keyboard will come in handy. It does exactly what it says, turning your computer's QWERTY keys into musical ones.

There's also a new Mixer option to consider in the Details tab - rather than using buttons and sliders below each track name, you can now mix on a virtual mixing console. Each channel offers standard mixer functionality, and includes a useful three-band EQ.

Also in the mixer are the new Master and Send tracks. The former facilitates global effects and volume adjustments, while the latter are auxiliary busses that enable you to share effects between multiple tracks (such as reverb - the classic send effect).

“It’s a pleasure to find AAS’s ever playable Lounge Lizard Session in Mixcraft 5’s revised line-up”

Further evidence that Acoustica are attempting to turn Mixcraft into a more serious music production tool is provided by the new automation features. Each track now has an automation lane that enables you to adjust effect and instrument parameters over time by clicking and dragging.

It’s all in the details

Smaller details also serve to improve the user experience. Clips can now be linked, making it easy to move or copy specific sections of a track, and the entire contents of a track (the audio, MIDI, effects and automation) can be bounced to a new audio track, should you need to free up some CPU cycles. Speaking of which, you can now monitor CPU usage with a dedicated meter, though with support for multi-processor machines and SSE2 optimisations, you’re less likely to run out of horsepower than before.

Returning to the visible additions, there’s now a video track - AVI and WMV files are supported as standard, and others may be importable depending on the DirectX decoders you have installed. Editing options are pretty limited - you can move clips around, adjust their start and end points and split them - but it’s fine for adding a soundtrack to a home movie (a video’s original audio can be unlinked and deleted) and overlapping two videos creates an automatic crossfade.

No DAW update would be complete without a selection of new plug-ins, and it’s a pleasure to find AAS’s ever playable Lounge Lizard Session in Mixcraft 5’s revised line-up of instruments. You can add to this Gunnar Ekoranas’ Messiah, a more than serviceable Prophet 5 clone, and the Alien303 Bass Synthesizer, a ‘bassline’ synth that’s more versatile than its name might have you believe. The effects roster has been bolstered by the vintage-style Pultronic Tube EQ (in case you can’t tell, it’s a Pultec emulation) and Shred Amp Simulator, the latter of which boasts five amp heads, 17 cabs and six effects.

The DAW with more

You can peruse the full list of updates in the (slightly hard to navigate) Mixcraft 5 PDF



Mixcraft’s new Notation View Editor is simple yet effective, which is just how we like it



Mixcraft’s range of plug-ins come from a range of third-party developers and is pretty diverse

Mixcraft vs GarageBand... fight!

It’s impossible to use Mixcraft 5 without being reminded of Apple’s GarageBand. Although comparisons between the two programs are somewhat meaningless - they are, respectively, PC- and Mac-only - it’s interesting to consider their key differences.

Mixcraft 5 has taken a lead over GarageBand with the addition of a dedicated mixer and Send tracks. It’s also worth noting that, while GarageBand only offers a selection of built-in Apple instruments and effects, Mixcraft’s suite of third party plug-ins gives more variety. Its dockable Details tab also makes editing a little easier.

GarageBand fans could counter that

their software supports Artist Lessons - video tutorials featuring famous musicians. However, their true worth is always going to be limited by your interest in the artist. On a more practical level, GarageBand has a useful multi-take recording feature, and feels a bit slicker overall.

Arguably the key difference, though, is that GarageBand users who outgrow their application can move on to the pro-level Logic Express or Studio DAWs, taking their skills (and project files) with them. That said, if Acoustica keeps improving Mixcraft at the current rate, its users may not feel like they need to go anywhere else.

manual on the **cm** DVD, and also check out a tune we created in the software. We have to admit to being surprised at just how much Acoustica have added to Mixcraft 5, and they’ve clearly spent plenty of time testing and ironing out bugs (previous versions exhibited annoying glitches when looping - a problem that has been resolved, thankfully).

It seems that no element of the program has been left untouched, which is particularly impressive when you consider that this isn’t a DAW that has a massive development team behind it. What’s more, the vast majority of the new features are extremely useful: you get the feeling that Acoustica really believe in Mixcraft, and want to push it as their flagship app for the foreseeable future.

Most importantly, features haven’t been needlessly added at the expense of usability - Mixcraft remains an accessible, affordable and stable application that enables you to make music quickly. Cockos’s Reaper may be more capable, but if you’re a PC user who wants to make things as easy as possible, Mixcraft is definitely the way to go. **cm**

Contact Et Cetera, 01706 285650
Web www.acoustica.com

Alternatively

Cockos Incorporated Reaper
cm144 >> 9/10 >> \$60
Similarly affordable, this lean, mean DAW is more ‘techy’ than Mixcraft

Steinberg Sequel 2
cm131 >> 7/10 >> €99
Accessible, but no plug-in support and hasn’t been updated for a while

Verdict

For Extremely easy to use
Automation and send tracks
Useful new plug-ins
Nicely implemented notation editor
Attention to detail throughout

Against Video options are limited
Not the most advanced app
No ‘big brother’ application

A lot of solid and sensible tweaks have made Mixcraft one to seriously consider, and it represents great value for money

9/10