



Acoustica Mixcraft 4 £50 PC



Apple's GarageBand brought music-making to the masses, but can Acoustica's app work the same magic on the PC?

System requirements

PC 1GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, Windows 95 or later

Test system

PC 3.2GHz CPU, 1GB RAM, Windows XP

"Mixcraft 4 has clearly been influenced by GarageBand in terms of visual appearance and functionality"

> PC owners have had a pretty raw deal of late when it comes to entry-level music software. Since the arrival of GarageBand on the Mac, the PC's established eJay and Magix Music Studio franchises have begun to look increasingly stale. Thankfully, Acoustica have a little something up their sleeves in the shape of Mixcraft 4, an audio/MIDI sequencer that bears more than a passing resemblance to Apple's easy-to-use music production software.

Learning the 'Craft

Mixcraft 4 has clearly been influenced by GarageBand in terms of both visual appearance and functionality. Everything in the program is displayed in a single screen, the majority of which is taken up with the Sound Workspace. This is where the software's audio and virtual instrument/MIDI tracks are located, which work pretty much as you'd expect, with plug-ins in VST and DirectX

format being supported.

MIDI and virtual instrument support is the single biggest new feature in Mixcraft 4. You can record and play back MIDI data, and there's an all-new piano roll editor. It's got the standard features - quantise, snap-to-grid, MIDI CC lanes - and it's a doddle to use. One drawback, however, is that it you can't control VST parameters directly from it, so this would be a nice addition for an update.

Virtual instrument tracks can be routed to play VSTi format plug-ins, including a selection provided with the software itself. These include MinimogueVA and Impulse (two freeware virtual analogue synths), VB3 Organ (a cut-down version of the commercial VB3 instrument from MrRay creator's Soundfonts.it), a full complement of General MIDI sounds, and a couple of big sampled grand pianos.

Obviously, as MinimogueVA and Impulse can be downloaded for free from the net, their presence

doesn't add any monetary value to the package as such, although having them ready and waiting when you load the program up is nice, and the relatively advanced preset sound system means you can load up multilayered, keyzoned instrument patches complete with VST effects in a manner similar to Cubase's track presets. Very clever!

VB3 Organ is exclusive to Mixcraft 4, but it's hardly going to set the world alight with its midding B3 emulation. The General MIDI sounds (aka Acoustica Instruments), however, are surprisingly good, particularly considering they're bundled with such a reasonably-priced program. These kinds of sounds are always useful, especially for those who are more interested in making 'proper' music, as opposed to synth-centric electronic pieces.

Craft slices

As well as the smattering of instruments, you also get a selection of bundled VST effects, which includes the freeware Kjaerhus Classic series, a couple of Voxengo's freeware plug-ins (a rebadged Boogex amp sim and SPAN spectral analyser), and a selection of Acoustica's own effects, such as Chorus, Compressor and Distortion.

Again, those who are already au fait with the world of free software might not see the value in these effects, but they're utilised well in some of the preset instrument effect chains, and are eminently usable in their own right. Indeed, these particular devices are permanent fixtures in the plug-in folders of several **cm** staff members, and we can't knock Acoustica for their approach, as presumably this has allowed them to invest more development resources in the core application that is Mixcraft.

Plug-ins aside, the package also ships with hundreds of loops and samples categorised by style, tempo and key, making it easy to quickly knock together tracks. eJay-style. Mixcraft 4 is capable of importing both Acidized WAVs and Apple Loops, and its creators suggest using it as a tool for creating your own bootlegs and mashups - see *Bangers mashed* for more details.

As with Mixcraft 3, audio tracks can be set to record from your audio interface's inputs, and multiple tracks can be armed simultaneously, facilitating the recording of drum kits, full bands and the like. You can apply effects to your recordings too, naturally, as well as placing them on the master channel (eg, the Kjaerhus Classic Limiter), to create a solid-sounding mixdown that's ready for CD.

Other cool features include the ability to trigger multiple layers of instruments from a single track, and, as we mentioned, save those mega-patches in a single preset (useful when trying to coax larger-than-life sounds out of soft synths), track freezing, automatic crossfading, and a one-click system that automatically burns your current project to an audio CD.

Taking it easy

So bells and whistles aside, what's Mixcraft 4 actually like to use? Well, it's refreshingly straightforward, much like its Apple inspiration. The interface is logically designed and clear-cut while still retaining a good level of functionality. Even so, absolute novices may still be scratching their heads on their first go, and the supplied help file would be much more useful if it were a printable PDF with better illustrations.

A more serious concern, though, is that, like Mixcraft 3, looping playback of a song section



Bangers mashed

Like programs such as Acid Pro and Ableton Live, Mixcraft enables you to beatmatch larger audio files so that they can be mixed together. When these longer files are dropped into the project, Mixcraft automatically detects their tempo, and asks if you want to alter the project tempo to match the file or vice versa. zplane.development's élastique efficient algorithm - the same one used in Ableton Live and Traktion 3 - is on hand to stretch the audio to fit, and it sounds great, as you'd expect.

The downside is that Mixcraft's beat detection leaves a lot to be desired. In our tests, with a steady 4/4 house track, it worked perfectly, but with more

complicated tunes, the routine was less successful. This wouldn't be too much of a problem if the program enabled you to edit the detected beats, a la Live, but Mixcraft's analysis is set in stone. Tracks where the tempo drifts are tricky to work with, and the manual even suggests splitting the audio into multiple sections, automating the track tempo to keep everything at the same speed, then mixing the results down to a new wave file - hardly practical.

While Mixcraft 4 offers great timestretching functions, unless you're mixing 4/4 music of a fixed tempo, we'd suggest looking elsewhere if beatmatching is your priority.

results in a glitch whereby it plays a tiny amount (it seems to vary) of the audio after the loop-end point before the 'play head' returns to the beginning of the loop, meaning that a 4/4 loop can sound more like 17/16 in extreme cases! This can be quite jarring, and the fact that the glitch is still present is quite infuriating, as Acoustica reckoned it would be fixed for v4.

Despite a few irritations, Mixcraft 4 is still a great application and possibly represents the best investment yet for PC-based computer music novices. A particularly satisfying aspect of the software is the fact that you can use it at whatever level you feel comfortable with, from an eJay-style drag 'n' drop fest through to a full-on sequencer, with massive stacked MIDI patches and multitracked parts.

Mixcraft's incredibly reasonable price point and solid features make it one of the most value-packed DAWs we've seen to date, and we don't hesitate to recommend it to those looking to get started with computer music or, indeed, anyone seeking a more straightforward experience than that offered by the majority of music applications. **cm**

Contact ask@etcetera.co.uk
 Web www.acoustica.com
 Info Download version, \$65

Alternatively

Magix Music Studio 12 Deluxe
cm109 >> 8/10 >> £50

Based on Samplitude, this basic sequencer is rammed with features.

Sony ACID Music Studio 7
N/A >> N/A >> £45

Great loop-based sequencing, now with virtual instrument tracks too.

Verdict

For Great value

Easy to use

Acidized WAV and Apple Loops support

Handy GM sounds included

Instrument stacking in presets

Against Loop mode glitches

Beatmatching not great

Easy on the wallet yet with much potential power thanks to important additions like MIDI and VSTi support, Mixcraft 4 is a significant step up from v3

8/10