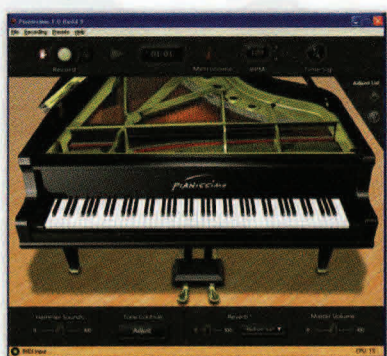


# Products



## Pianissimo and Mixcraft

Acoustica, [www.acoustica.com](http://www.acoustica.com)

Educational pricing available

### Tony Cliff

Acoustica are a company specialising in easy-to-use and affordable software for music and audio recording, and have strong links with educational establishments with attractive lab-licence prices. I will focus on two of their products here: Pianissimo, a virtual grand piano which operates as a VSTi plug-in or stand-alone application; and Mixcraft, which is an intuitive yet powerful multi-track recording program.

#### PIANISSIMO

There are a number of acoustic-piano virtual instruments available today – Pianissimo is priced very competitively, with Acoustica offering educational lab licences starting at \$49. Pianissimo, currently only available for the PC, is a very simple program to install and operate. Naturally you will need to connect a MIDI keyboard to your computer, which ideally should be an 88-note weighted-action keyboard to achieve maximum benefits.

The interface is simple and attractive, comprising a large image of a grand piano with the lid raised, and when you play your MIDI keyboard the corresponding keys on the computer image also play. As soon as I tried Pianissimo I enjoyed the richness and vibrant piano tone, from the bright, ringing treble to a deep, sonorous bass. One of the elements that particularly impressed me is the excellent touch-responsiveness that Pianissimo offers, an area in which other similar products often fall down. This is such an important element in achieving a really musical performance or recording.

The stand-alone mode also offers a convenient recording system, where you can record a piano piece with or without a metronome click and save it as a MIDI file. There is also the option to mix-down to other formats such as MP3 or WAV, which is a very useful option to make quick recordings for students. On the interface you can raise and lower the piano lid, which also alters the sound. There are simple tone controls to adjust the velocity curve (to match your particular keyboard), sympathetic resonance, chorus and EQ.

You can also adjust the degree of hammer sound produced and this, together with sympathetic resonance, contributes greatly to the pleasing realism of the resultant tone. Pianissimo responds to sustain and soft pedal but there is no sostenuto option available. There are a number of presets offering variations on the overall sound, but I liked the default solo grand piano best. In addition, you can choose from various reverberation settings and adjust the level of each. It is also straightforward to load Pianissimo as a VSTi instrument within a DAW such as Cubase, SONAR, Reaper or indeed Mixcraft.

Pianissimo is a delight to use and also appears to be light on CPU usage. It represents an absolute bargain as far as price and quality are concerned.

#### MIXCRAFT

This is a user-friendly multi-track recording system, equipped with a generous selection of on-board instruments and loops as well as effects. While it is designed to be quick and easy to use, it is surprisingly powerful and fully compatible with VSTi instruments and effects. Mixcraft is also attractively priced at \$64.95 for the download edition and Acoustica offers a range of educational lab pricings for the product.

Mixcraft has an attractive and uncluttered interface made up of instrumental or audio tracks. Output levels and panning are lined up on the left of the screen, while the lower section incorporates a media browser for instruments or editing window, depending on the context. There is a generous selection of instruments, including: a general MIDI synthesiser; extra banks of sampled sounds; a polyphonic, subtractive analogue synthesiser called Impulse; MinimogueVA, which recreates the famous MiniMoog synthesiser; and VB3 Organ, an emulation of the famous Hammond B3. This means that students have a wide range of really good-quality sounds

within Mixcraft without requiring anything else. Added to this is a wide selection of audio loop clips. They are all clearly categorised in styles and tempo settings so they are easy to check out and navigate.

Recording audio or using MIDI is straightforward with Mixcraft, and there is a straightforward piano-roll-style MIDI editing window available, complete with all the expected quantising features. There are also excellent loop and audio editing facilities, including cross-fading and automating the volume or pan. Mixcraft is equipped with 18 high-quality effects including reverb, chorus, delay, distortion and EQ. The entire program is well documented with help files and extremely easy to understand. Once your song is complete you can quickly mix-down to a WAV or MP3 file, or even burn direct to a CD from within Mixcraft.

While Mixcraft is simple to use it is deceptively sophisticated. The whole program is inspiring and ideal as an introduction to recording in schools. The program is a real bargain at this price and I highly recommend it.

**Tony Cliff** is a busy freelance composer and performer based in Falmouth and currently has more than 50 published compositions. Before moving to Cornwall, Tony was head of jazz and popular music at the University of Salford and he has written numerous articles and reviews for *Music Teacher* and other magazines.

#### PIANISSIMO

**Overall:** ★★★★★

**Best features:** tone and player responsiveness

**Ease of use:** very straightforward to operate

**Value for money:** excellent

**Most useful for:** all types of recording and performing

#### MIXCRAFT

**Overall:** ★★★★★

**Best features:** approachable yet powerful recording program

**Ease of use:** extremely easy

**Value for money:** remarkable

**Most useful for:** general song recording audio and MIDI