STEINBERG WAVELAB 7

It's all about the workflow...

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As a self-proclaimed (and family awarded) audio software geek, I was all propellors a spinnin' when murmurs of the forthcoming release of Wavelab 7 started circulating on our beloved interweb. I must confess the excitement was mainly inspired by pure self-interest on my part. Let me explain.

Since moving back across to the Mac platform in 2004, following the trail of Logic Pro's Apple-centric development, the only software forcing me to maintain a studio PC was Wavelab, and that was frankly becoming a bit tedious. Indeed, my main gripe about Wavelab 6 (when I reviewed it way back in Issue 48) was that it still hadn't been ported to the Mac platform. So you see, with this new release of Wavelab – a program I've been putting CD masters together with for 10 years – I could finally make the PC redundant (with the exception of the odd game or 'PC-only' software review). Oh the joy... and extra space in my studio!

Over the past few years I've tried several other CD mastering programs and stereo editors for the Mac, and bar Apple's own WaveBurner (that comes bundled with Logic Studio) none have come close to Wavelab for ease of use, file type compatibility or speed of workflow. So, as you can imagine, it was with much anticipation that I inserted the DVD and began the install process on my dual-core 2.4GHz MacBook Pro (of course I had to plug in the new and slightly annoying flashing, red plastic Syncrosoft USB-eLicenser dongle when the install eventually prompted me).

7 FEET DEEP

While I jumped into the process without much regard for the minimum requirements, it's worth noting that the lowest spec recommended for Wavelab 7 is pretty much the same for a Mac as it is a PC. By that I mean, both require the latest OS – i.e. Windows 7 or Mac Snow Leopard – and both demand a minimum 2GB of RAM, 200MB of hard drive space, a 2GHz (or better) processor, a CD/DVD drive and a display that can handle a resolution of 1024 x 768 pixels. ASIO- or MME-compatible soundcards are recommended on the PC, while CoreAudio is a prerequisite on the Mac. (In this day and age you'd be hard pressed to find a professional soundcard that didn't offer all these driver options.)

Regarding compatibility, there's one minor gripe I'd like to get out of the way before we dive in, if I may. From the point of view of the remaining Power PC users in the Mac camp still using Leopard (OS 10.5) and a whole slew of XP users reluctant to adopt Windows 7 under the old adage of 'if it ain't broke...' it's unfortunate the new version of Wavelab has been put out of reach. It shuts a large cross-section of users right out of the market.

SHARPER

The first thing I noticed upon opening Wavelab 7 is that the graphics look sharper. Better yet, the Graphical User Interface is now instantly more navigable thanks to the all-new Switcher window. As many users of previous versions of the program would be well aware, working in

Wavelab could sometimes become a messy affair, with open panes scattering to all four corners of the screen before you could say 'where's my waveform?'. The Switcher window offers a vastly superior and cleaner means of switching between Audio File, Audio Montage, Batch Processing, Podcast and Control windows. It's a real time saver, allowing you to switch between workspaces – or open a new or pre-existing file – with ease and speed from the 'always on top' Switcher window, making workflow super fast. So much so that after my first 30 seconds with v7 I found myself geekishly murmuring 'oh yeah!', shortly after which I began to lament all those countless lost hours spent searching through myriad open windows in previous incarnations of the program.

Also saving oodles of precious workflow time is Wavelab 7's new system for putting open windows under tabs – much like a web browser organises open web pages. My only gripe about this implementation is the black font used on a dark grey background. White (or cream) would have been better here I reckon. While the new tabbed and dockable windows are a most welcome addition, they do take a while to get used to. Occasionally I would find windows disappearing, and it was only after a few hours working with the new layout that my training wheels finally fell off and I was away. Of course, Steinberg has made the workspace fully configurable so you can easily adjust the program to your posture and leave it that way, or have several workspace configurations for different tasks. One slightly annoying feature I discovered in the Montage window was that the markers seem very close to the tabs, and you can find yourself inadvertently moving these when you're trying to select tabs. This could be easily remedied perhaps by the implementation of a small strip between them.

MASTER FASTER
Version 7 of Wavelab sees a major revamp of the master section. While all the favourite tools like smart bypass, UV22 dithering, routing to outboard and a comprehensive rendering window all feature prominently, new additions like buttons for 'Monitoring Point', 'Plug-in Lock', 'Plug-in Visibility' and an 'Auto Transparency' option in the settings menu illustrate just how well the Wavelab team understands the program's practical application. 'Monitoring point', for instance, allows you to route from any plug-in output in the master section to the monitoring. This is pretty handy stuff that avoids you having to turn all the plug-ins off post the point in the chain from which you want to monitor your audio signal. Similarly, there's now the ability to bypass the master section altogether and route directly to the soundcard output. Plug-in Lock stops that particular plug-in being bypassed when you hit solo on other plug-ins – another very

handy feature. Having said that, I did have a few problems with it not actually engaging the colour in the solo button and not turning the unlocked plug-ins back on when the solo was disengaged. I expect Steinberg will address this obvious bug in v7's first update. The Master section can now be set to 'Auto Transparency' mode, whereby any hovering over waveforms in the workspace prompts the master section to reduce its opacity to approximately 75% – enough to still see the waveforms underneath while viewing metering and plug-in status – very nice. It's also good to see the 'K-system' implemented in the VU Meter section but I must say I find it annoying that it's not displayed as a one-click affair from that window. Instead, you have to open the Functions tab, then the Settings tab, then select the desired setting and finally hit 'Apply' – very tiresome. Important features like complete monitor section bypass and monitor section preset per audio file are also squirrelled away at bottom right of the screen and should really be displayed in a more prominent position, perhaps alongside the Spectrum, Waveform and Loudness tabs.

Lastly, you can now turn off the GUIs of individual plug-ins directly from the master section, which means no more surfing around the page turning stuff off – another great time saver!

VST3-CAPABLE
The team at Steinberg has also made Wavelab 7 VST3-capable, and in the process made many of the Cubase 5 plug-ins available in the program. Plug-ins like Multiband Compressor, Studio Chorus and Roomworks Reverb – to name a few – are now generously provided as standard fair. The real carrot for potential upgraders or new purchasers, however, is the partnership Steinberg and Sonnox have forged that offers Wavelab 7 owners high-end audio restoration plug-ins like De-Clicker, De-Buzzer and De-Noiser. I have to say I was pretty blown away by how good these plug-ins were. On a vinyl restoration job for my mum (c'mon, everyone's been there haven't they?) De-Clicker made short work of an album that had more crackle than the Rice Bubbles factory. So too the De-Buzzer was pretty effective at removing some irritating amp hum while the De-Noiser was also a great tool to have on board. I'd say, in terms of sound quality, De-Noiser probably sits somewhere between Waves Z-noise (which is fantastic) and iZotope's RX Advanced de-noise facility (which sets the benchmark).

If you're a Mac user and you don't have a decent stereo editor/CD burning program – which is pretty much all of us – Wavelab 7 will give you what you want and then some. Meanwhile, for Windows 7 users the new version is a significant leap from v6 and I can totally recommend the upgrade. ∎

> " Steinberg has made the workspace fully configurable so you can easily adjust the program to your posture and leave it that way "

NEED TO KNOW

Price
$699.
Upgrade from v6: $149.

Contact
Yamaha Australia
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Pros
Numerous workflow enhancements.
Monitoring Point options.
DDP image files now read.
VST3 plug-ins available.
Free Sonnox plug-ins.

Cons
No AU plug-in support or reading of FLAC files.
Can't save to long file paths.
ProTools 'left' & 'right' files must be opened separately.

Summary
Although it's not revolutionary, Wavelab 7 offers PC (and now Mac) users a comprehensive stereo editor that marks an important development in the history of the program.