Cakewalk Sonar 3.0

Cal Orr revels in the new sights and sounds of this digital behemoth.

Looking more like your favourite sushi bar menu than the formidable software multi-track that it is, the newly-packaged Sonar 3.0 Producer Edition has arrived almost exactly one year after Sonar 2.0 XL hit the streets. Sporting a flashy Japanese-style logo, the new look extends to the program itself and I can assure current v2 users that you will be more than pleased with the visual adjustments that Cakewalk has made in the new-look v3. Like every new version of Sonar XL (and now Producer Edition) Cakewalk has negotiated with third-party developers to give its users additional plug-in effects and DXi instruments, this time from very reputable plug-in manufacturers such as Ultra-Funk Sonitus, Lexicon and Speedsoft/Maz-Sound. So without

further ado...

From the Soap Box

Let it be known that Sonar has completely left the Windows 98/ME operating systems behind, so now your choice of OS is XP or 2000 (as always, Twelve-Tone Systems Ltd – Cakewalk's parent company – does not code its products for the Mac platform). During the install of v3.0 I was asked to upgrade my DirectX version to 9.0b – which was perfectly fine by me. Asides from this, the install was as smooth as silk, but as always, I decided to check the web for any updates and, sure enough, a patch for an update to 3.1 was available upon registration of the product. When I finally hit the opening windows I

was very pleased to see that Cakewalk had given the old drab grey look the proverbial boot and replaced it with a very cool and sexy dusty blue which is much easier on the eye. I have a hunch that every sequencer on earth has now adopted this easy-on-the-eye blue-ish look – and why not when most of us spend several hours a day inside our DAWs. I just hope everyone likes blue…
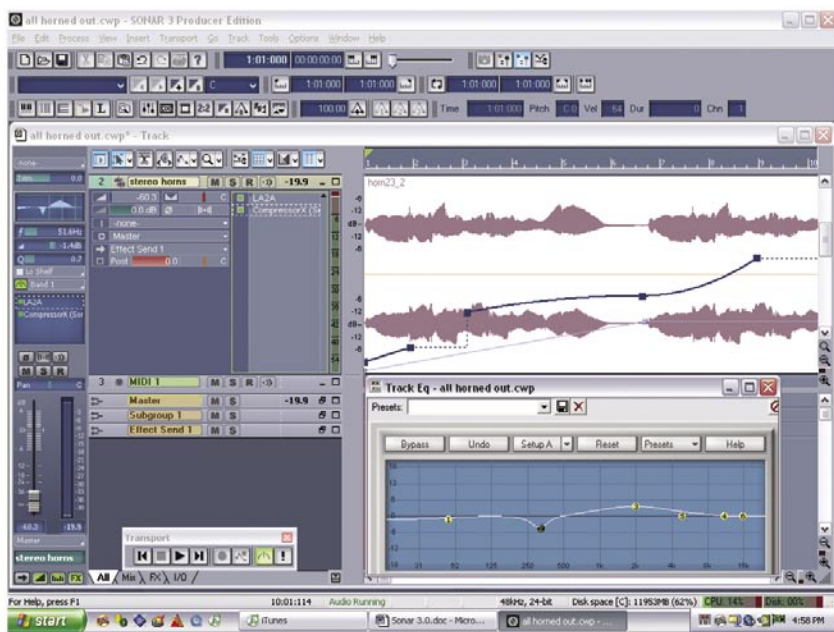
Sonar has also followed other major sequencer manufacturers by providing the user with a per-track fader/channel strip that inhabits the Track Pane window. Sonar's incarnation is called the Track/Bus Inspector and this really does make life a lot easier than having to switch to the console view (Sonar's Track Mixer) all the time. Each channel in the console Track/Bus Inspector now has its own dedicated EQ section that shows the corresponding curve applied in the bundled Ultrafunk Sonitus EQ [see picture]. This viewable curve is a touch of class that is now standard in Nuendo and Logic and, I have to say, that the algorithms in the EQ are also first class. You've got to hand it to Cakewalk, in Sonar 2.0 XL they supplied users with the acclaimed Timeworks EQ and CompressorX and now with v3.0 we have the Sonitus suite of plug-ins. Both of these are in my top five DirectX EQs and it seems that the Sonitus EQ may be here to stay as it is integrated into the Sonar Producer Edition's shell. A nice touch would have been to be able to see the curve of the Timeworks EQ in this window as well, but hey, I think that might be staring into the wishing well a bit much.

Import Business

One thing I have always liked about Cakewalk's line of products is the way they handle the importing of files. Much like ProTools, you can quite simply select as many tracks as you wish to import and Sonar will put them in the Track Pool, import them into the Track Pane and neatly label them for you. This might seem like child's play to a ProTools user but for a Logic user on the PC this process has to be done file-by-file and you have to name each track in the parameter section, all of which is nothing short of cumbersome. Another nice feature built into the program is the ability to change phase on a track with one button (again quite clunky in Logic 5.5 on the PC [or ProTools – AS]). The paranoid professional engineer will be glad to know that Sonar now draws the audio waveforms as you are recording. This seems like a minor feature to mention

but as Cakewalk states, it does create a sense of "confidence recording". Input monitoring is now improved in Sonar 3.0PE with the new Input Echo button provided on all tracks. This allows the user to listen to audio effects inserted on tracks in real time provided your soundcard can achieve a reasonable latency value. Of course now with WDM and ASIO driver compatibility as standard, this shouldn't be a problem.

Initially Cakewalk thumbed its nose at Steinberg's VSTi technology claiming that its own DXi standard was superior. However, a year is a long time in software terms, and so it has come to pass that Sonar has acquired a permanent license from FXpansion for their VST-to-DirectX wrapper technology. The wrapper enables the use of VST soft synths and plug-ins inside of Sonar. Although built into Sonar, the wrapper is run initially during installation, but must be run again after subsequent installs of other VST instruments and plug-ins before they can be recognised and used. This license is testament to Cakewalk's desire to assimilate and is more than likely an attempt to snare a few of the abandoned PC Logic users before they flee to an Apple dealership to buy a Mac. This is an excellent move and opens up new and existing users of Sonar to the seemingly bottomless pit of developers coding plugs and VSTi's for the PC platform.

present, such as pre-delay, room size, damping, decay spread and diffusion as well as some other worthwhile inclusions such as regeneration and bass boost/cut with variable frequency. Six reverb types are on offer, they are: Hall, Chamber, Room, Plate, Ambience and Custom (the Custom setting is preset at stadium-sized dimensions). Of course, all of the reverb types are just starting points for your own requirements and you can easily save your

Plug-in Sweet

While on the topic of plug-ins, I really must give you the low-down on what is bundled with the Producer Edition of Sonar. Firstly the Ultrafunk Sonitus suite of plug-ins is included in its full-version form. This suite costs in excess $200 when purchased separately and, as I mentioned earlier, they really are of a high quality. As well as the aforementioned EQ, there are another eight plugs: a compressor, stereo delay, gate, modulator, multi-band compressor, phase, reverb, surround panner and wah-wah. All of these plugs performed seamlessly and, in particular, I found myself turning to the EQ and dynamics plug-ins frequently in the course of a mix. The Sonitus reverb, with all of its tweakable parameters, is a good bread and butter 'verb, but I think you will probably turn to the on-board Lexicon Pantheon reverb more often because it has those smooth trademark Lexicon tails and a really nice presence and depth to it. The stereo delay, modulator and wah-wah effects were also very welcome alternatives to my other plug-ins, particularly in the CPU resources department, notwithstanding their excellent sonic capabilities. All of the Sonitus:FX plug-ins and the Lexicon Pantheon Reverb run at 192k sample rate. I've been considering purchasing the Sonitus suite, but now, thanks to its inclusion in Sonar's Producer Edition, I won't have to.

Although you may find the Lexicon interface somewhat simple and boring to look at, don't judge the book by its cover. All of the necessary parameters are

desired degree of wetness to a preset using the drop down save menu. I think it is safe to advise users to think of Pantheon as being closer to a Lexicon MPX100 than a 960L, nevertheless I still have a healthy respect for the MPX100.

For sample enthusiasts, Cakewalk has also included The V-sampler from Maz Sound. Included with the soft sampler are two CDs of sampled sounds – one of various types of samples from different developers, and the other, an acoustic concert grand piano from Maz Sound. The sounds are quite useable and the highlight is the piano. The sampler itself was a bit confusing in operation and Maz Sound have some stiff competition from the likes of Emagic's EXS 24 and Native Instruments Kontakt et al in the ease-of-use stakes.

I found the inherent greyness of all of the plug-ins a little confusing when I had more than a couple open at once and perhaps Cakewalk could have organised some different coloured skins to help the process of identification. [See picture above.] That said, I did enjoy being able to have more than one plug-in window open at a time (again, something my beloved Logic on the PC won't allow you to do) and it was nice to be able to resize plug-in windows. Another small problem I encountered was the inability to insert a DirectX effect prior to a UAD-1 powered plug-in. I am not sure if TC Powercore users will encounter similar problems but I kept getting 'Wrong Sample Rate' error messages and the occasional program

crash. After consulting Universal Audio and Cakewalk I found the only workaround was to process the DirectX plug-ins first: i.e. apply them to the track, or refrain from that sequence of plug-ins – which is hardly a workaround in my book.

Bussing & Automation

Cakewalk has completely re-written Sonar 3's bussing architecture. Now, thankfully, there is only one type of bus that is entirely user configurable, allowing the use of buses as either sub-mixes or aux/FX returns. Furthermore, the bussing architecture is now dynamic, which means you can add or delete them at will. This flexibility extends to being able to send buses to other buses. To coincide with all of these expanded routing options Cakewalk has sensibly added an anti-feedback mechanism as well as Volume, Pan, and Mute buttons on every bus and physical hardware output… phew! (Solo is also available on all buses but not on physical outputs.)

I am pleased to announce that Cakewalk has managed to make vast improvements to its automation system. Now any parameter of any plug can be automated as well as each track's volume, pan, send and mute controls; just right-click on the desired track and go to the envelope's menu. Each envelope can be given its

own colour and once 'nodes' have been applied in the Track Pane you can change the characteristics of the envelopes by right-clicking on them. Four curve characteristics are on offer: Jump, Linear, Fast and Slow, which is quite sufficient to get the job done. Alternatively, you can plot as many nodes as you wish and make your own curves. Once I was deep into the automation process I must admit I really craved a pencil and rubber tool. I also wanted the nodes to be smaller because they would sometimes cover each other. However, knowing Cakewalk, this will probably be addressed in a future update.

It's also worth mentioning that Cakewalk has extended its support of Midi controllers and that Sonar itself is child's play when it comes to routing knobs and sliders to any function you want. It really is as simple as selecting the parameter you want to control, turning a knob or moving a fader on your hardware controller and hitting the learn button.

Finally, but by no means 'leastly', Sonar 3.0 seems to sound more open and transparent with a more extended bandwidth than previous versions.

With lots of new features and a new look, Sonar is proving to be a great option for the PC user and also among the most affordable.

If you are looking for a DAW of awesome proportions and you've got a short list, Sonar 3.0 Producer Edition well and truly deserves to be on it.

Other New Features of Note:

Midi Groove Clipping: Sonar 3 allows you to select a Midi region and with two clicks of the mouse turn it into a Midi loop. This has the same functionality as audio Groove Clipping which allows you to turn any piece of audio into an Acidized loop.

HyperThreading/multiprocessor optimisation: Sonar's audio engine distributes mixing tasks across multiple CPUs when using multiprocessor PCs.

Support for any sample rate: with presets for most common sample rates, you can now set Sonar's project sample rate to any sample rate supported by your hardware. For sample rates not supported by presets simply type in any value supported by your audio device, eg. 88.2k, 176.4k, 192k, 384k, etc.

A final note: version 3.1.1 is the latest version and it is recommended that all users update to the latest version at time of installation.