cm mini reviews

A rapid-fire round-up of sample libraries, ROMplers and more

Garritan
Jazz & Big Band 3 £99

Web www.timespace.com
Contact Time+Space, 01837 55200
Format PC/Mac, VST/AU/standalone

Version 3 of Garritan's jazz ensemble package (which we'll refer to as JABB3 for brevity) sees them shifting to their own Aria engine. Aria's 16-part multitimbral playback interface is tailored for composition and arranging. Global features include integrated reverb (12 types), 11 tuning scales, adjustable polyphony (up to 128 voices) and normal/draft quality setting. Plus there's the 16-channel mixer with pan, level and reverb send. At instrument level, options include three-band EQ, stereo stage (position and depth) adjustment and auto legato, and most instruments respond to modwheel for level, and sustain pedal for either manual legato (wind and brass) or traditional sustain (keyboards). You'll also find level settings for up to 11 additional instrument-specific parameters. These include portamento time, breathiness, and flutter/growl (brass and winds), level for fundamentals (drums, toms and bass) and finger noise (bass). All can be accessed using MIDI CCs, as can further, instrument-specific articulations such as shakes, fall-offs, doits and kisses.

The 50 or so original instruments have been joined by seven organs, two slap basses, harmonica and banjo, with extended ranges to existing instruments taking the disc footprint to around 2.75GB. Rounding things off are 34 ensemble presets.

JABB3 delivers a lot from its compact sample set. With individual rather than ensemble instruments, the idea is that you use JABB3 as a preparation tool for arrangements. And with up to five different versions of each, you can easily add colour as well as part variation.

When you factor in the many articulations, JABB3 is more than simply an arrangement tool. In isolation, some of the sounds fare better than others, and in terms of realism, it doesn't compete with premium libraries. However, in ensemble combinations, it can sound good, and it's great to have such a range of instruments in one easy, affordable package.

9/10

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iceGear
Xenon Groove Synthesizer £3.49

Web iphone.icegear.net/xenon
Contact company@icegear.net
Format iPhone, iPod Touch (not 1G), iOS 3.13

Xenon is a software studio with just enough features for you to be able to create complex electronic arrangements on your iDevice. There are three different synthesisers, a drum machine, a five-track song sequencer, mixer and a single effect: a delay processor.

iceGear's Argon synthesiser has received a lot of praise for its sound quality, and their expertise has been carried over into Xenon's trio of synthesisers. This is most apparent in the ASX-1, a virtual analogue monosynth with a pair of oscillators, multimode filter and built-in pattern sequencer. You get independent ADSRs and LFOs for amp, filter cutoff and oscillator pitch (the latter LFO can be modulated by its own ADSR).

Xenon's second synthesiser, PSX-4, is a PCM offering. It's architecturally similar to the ASX-1, but here the lone oscillator is able to draw upon any of the 112 sampled instruments. There's plenty of bread 'n' butter to be found in that collection, but we do wish we could bring in our own samples.

The HSX-4 polyphonic hybrid synth is our pick of the bunch, featuring a pair of oscillators that can tap into VA, FM, formant and PCM synthesis. The independent LFOs and ADSRs found in the ASX-1 synth rear their heads once again, as does the pattern sequencer.

Rhythmic duties are handled by the six-track PRX-6 drum machine. Any of 185 samples can be loaded into the six pads and sequenced via the pattern sequencer. You have control over pan, level, pitch, attack, decay and velocity level.

Each instrument's patterns can be arranged in the Song Sequencer and mixed using the five-channel mixer. You can adjust track level, panning and FX sends. It's simple but effective stuff. Songs and patterns can also be exported as WAV files or copied to the clipboard.

Xenon provides an awful lot of power for a very fair price, and most importantly, it also sounds fantastic. It takes some poking around to figure out where every function is stashed away, but once you're familiar with it, it offers an efficient compositional environment. We would really like to see more import and export options (MIDI files? Sample import? Resampling?), but at £3.49, we're not going to complain too loudly.

8/10

Magix
Digital DJ £40

Web www.magix.com
Contact via website
Format Mac/PC

Magix have wisely hooked up with Deckadance creators Image-Line to offer what is essentially a cut-down version of that app. Digital DJ is divided into three sections – the waveform and transport section, the effects section and the browser. The program will beat-match your tracks automatically, and although it's not perfect, it has push and pull buttons to help you fix any timing issues.

The Peakscope window shows channel A and B's waveforms for you to match the beats visually, which works best on typical four-to-the-floor tracks. Each channel also has a three-band EQ and an X/Y pad for manipulating effects. The latter is a little odd in that you need to right-click to reset it back to the 'zero' position – we'd have preferred at least the option to have it reset when you release the mouse button. iTunes support in the browser is a great addition and makes digging through tracks a much more familiar affair.

There's a plethora of DJ software at this price point, but despite our minor quibbles, Digital DJ is one of the best around, being quite feature-packed and based on a proper DJ app. MIDI controller support seals the deal.

9/10

Toontrack
Music City USA SDX
£119

Web www.timespace.com
Contact Time+Space, 01837 55200
Format Superior Drummer SDX

This latest SDX expansion was recorded at Sound Kitchen in Nashville. You get five kick types, five snares, two sets of toms, 14" Sabian AA hi-hats, seven crash/splash cymbals, two rides and a china. The rattle of the snare wires of the primary snare – a 5"-deep Ludwig Black Beauty – is just right for propelling those country train beats, while the poppin' Rogers Powertone wooden 5x14" has a more militaristic sound.

As well as sticks, there are options for brushes, wire brushes and hands, and while not every drum/cymbal supports all of these implements, there's enough choice that you won't feel stifled. Mic-wise, beyond the usual close-miked suspects, there's a close stereo ambience, which can really expand the sound; less obtrusive stereo ceiling mics; and a mono mid-distance room mic, which thickens the midrange (and gives a vintage breakbeat vibe when soloed).

Overall, this is another excellent effort from Toontrack that's suitable for country, rock, funk and more besides.

9/10
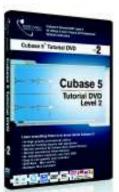
ASK Video
Cubase 5 Tutorial DVD Level 2 £36

Web www.timespace.com
Contact Time+Space, 01837 55200
Format PC/Mac

Here we have three hours of video-based instruction on Steinberg's Cubase 5, building on the basics covered in Level 1. The package is divided into 44 lessons, each lasting several minutes, and there are Cubase project files to accompany each.

The DVD has its own proprietary player software, and the QuickTime video files can't be accessed directly. This isn't a big deal in itself, but the player requires you to register online, and we even had to download an update before it'd work. While this wasn't a Herculean task, users who buy the DVD to watch on the go might be inconvenienced. We also had issues with example projects not loading patches correctly and reporting missing files, though this didn't detract from their usability.

Niggles aside, this is a solid package with thorough, straightforward examination of the software, covering facets such as automation, mixing and VariAudio. If you're looking to enhance your Cubase 5 knowledge, this is a worthy purchase.

8/10

Soundware round-up

Producer Loops DOWNLOAD
Supalife Dubstep: Smooth Edition £25+

Web www.producerloops.com
Contact via website
Format ACID, WAV, Apple Loops, MIDI, Reason ReFill, REX

Supalife's latest effort takes the slightly odd approach of putting a 'smooth' twist on dubstep. While this might be hard for your mind's ear to conjure up, in short it ranges from classic wobbles and beats to a more commercial vocal-based approach, and even dips into R&B territory. The pack is made up of five construction kits, each broken down into their (dry and wet) stems for you to manipulate. The quality is fantastic with lots of depth and clarity in the beats, basslines and pads, and although everything is set to 140bpm, there's lots to work with.
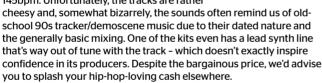
8/10

Fireloops DOWNLOAD
Electro Hop $10

Web www.fireloops.com
Contact via website
Format Apple Loops, REX, WAV

Claiming to bring you the electro-infused hip-hop-ish stylings of Black Eyed Peas, Timbaland and Lady Gaga, this pack offers 11 construction kits ranging in tempo from 75 to 145bpm. Unfortunately, the tracks are rather cheesy and, somewhat bizarrely, the sounds often remind us of old-school 90s tracker/demoscene music due to their dated nature and the generally basic mixing. One of the kits even has a lead synth line that's way out of tune with the track – which doesn't exactly inspire confidence in its producers. Despite the bargainous price, we'd advise you to splash your hip-hop-loving cash elsewhere.

5/10

Loopmasters DOWNLOAD
Alien Robot Vox £20

Web www.loopmasters.com
Contact via website
Format WAV, Acid, REX, Apple Loops, Stylus RMX

This pack focuses on vocoder loops à la Daft Punk, Mylo and Air, ranging from 90 to 126bpm. We were initially concerned that the results would be a little thin and '70s sci-fi', but au contraire: Alien Robot Vox is filled with fizzy, deep and full vocoded effects, sounds and phrases. What makes it so good is that these aren't just standard clichéd phrases that have been quickly run through a vocoder plug-in. Instead, every sound is crafted and effected to bring out the best of it. The results are at once both authentically retro and thoroughly modern – immediately usable yet filled with heaps of analogue grit and noise.

Split up into categories such as Rhythmic Melodies and Autotalk Androids, Alien Robot Vox covers all vocal effect bases, from subtle electronic soundscapes to vocal hooks that could fuel a breakdown or even a full track. Electro house tunes will probably be the biggest beneficiary of this pack, but there's enough here to cover everything from Kraftwerk minimal to Boys Noize techno.

9/10

Vengeance-Sound DOWNLOAD
Vengeance Studio Vocals Vol 1 £65

Web www.vengeance-sound.com
Contact via website
Format WAV

Vocal manipulation software such as Auto-Tune and Melodyne makes it possible to repurpose almost any vocal hook to fit your track. Vengeance have pounced on this concept and produced 20 acappella kits featuring six singers, all female, in a commercial dance style. You typically get song sections like verse, chorus, etc, with harmony parts, dry and effected versions and so on. There are some simple synth backings with accompanying MIDI files too.

Unless you work with vocals constantly, you probably won't see the value in £65 worth of 'em, but if you do and you can't find something suitable here, you should probably look into buying a microphone.

8/10

Sound Order
Production Tools 3 $87

Web www.bestservice.de
Contact mail@bestservice.de
Format Kontakt, WAV, MIDI

This is a comprehensive, well-designed pack for electro, tech and progressive house producers. The 30 construction kits contain not just loops and stems of a complete musical idea but also one-shots of the drum parts and multisampled Kontakt patches of all the instruments, along with MIDI files to recreate their parts. The quantity is matched by the quality: PT3 sounds crisp, deep, bright and professional. While it is a bit electro house-by-numbers, it's all quite authentic, and the fact that you get everything from stems down to patches and one-shots makes it all the more flexible, and suitable for producers of all levels.

8/10

Puremagnetik DOWNLOAD
Artifact $12

Web www.puremagnetik.com
Contact info@puremagnetik.com
Format Ableton Live 8, Kontakt 3.5, Logic 8

This pack uses digital artifacts and anomalies as sound sources, including aliasing, clock glitches, SysEx errors and mis-quantised samples. Arranged across six kits (up to 38 sounds in each) and accompanied by a number of MIDI clips (Apple Loops for Logic and Kontakt), this pack sits very much in glitch territory.

Sounds are edgy, sharp and short, and in Live format are easy to modify due to sound-by-sound macro implementation. Kontakt users get a custom interface, while Logic users are offered ready-made channel strips. Overall, this is a great add-on, providing plenty of digital edge and glitch at a crazy-low price.

8/10

Zenhiser DOWNLOAD
Total Tribal Drum Beats Volume 1 £9

Web www.zenhiser.com
Contact via website
Format WAV

Here you'll find 124 two-bar drum/percussion loops, all at 125bpm. There are 40 patterns in total, with each loop coming in three variations. Stylistically, the set is very focused, sitting at the groovy/funky end of the house spectrum – with a tribal feel, of course. The sound set could be broader – we heard the same ones cropping up throughout. However, the excellent programming and solid production saves the day, and a full kick-based loop and two no-kick options make the samples useful for main loop and supporting roles. It's a very specific pack, but at this price, that's fine.

8/10

Prime Loops DOWNLOAD
Ambient Fractals £17

Web www.primeloops.com
Contact info@primeloops.com
Format WAV, AIFF, Acid, Garageband, Ableton Live, FL Studio, Reason ReFill, Roland Fantom X

Created by Prime Loops' Dmitry Vasilyev, Ambient Fractals delivers a range of ambient effects and loops. The bulk is taken up by 276 effects spread across 15 categorised folders, from atmospheres and "blasters" to sirens and stabs. Sounds range from one-second hits to longer atmospheres of 20 or more seconds. Additionally, you get 20 tempo-labelled, 1-to-4-bar loops.

The 400MB of content provides quite a bit of variety and is sonically good, if not amazing. Ready-mapped sampler patches for the one-shots would be useful, and more than 20 FX loops would have been welcome.

7/10

Ueberschall
Jazz Colors €99

Web www.bestservice.de
Contact support@bestservice.de
Format Elastik Instrument Soundbank

Ueberschall Jazz Colors features 20 construction kits of live recorded jazz. Tempos and styles vary, and include cool jazz, bebop, latin and fusion. Each kit has patches for intro, outro and up to four main sections. Within these you'll find a full cue mix and loops for each instrument (bass, drums, keys and lead instruments). What's more, the drums are broken down into all elements (overkill maybe). The sound quality is great and happily all instruments were recorded as dry as possible. The kit loop format enables convincing track construction, forming a springboard for additional instrumentation.

9/10

Detunized DOWNLOAD
Binaries Volume 00 €7

Web www.detunized.com
Contact via website
Format Ableton Live 7 or later

Binaries Volume 00 features 480MB of sounds sourced from the four-operator FM chip found on 1990s Sound Blaster soundcards. Sampled using a genuine card and via the inherently noisy output to provide the whole experience, the 35 instrument racks include electric pianos, synth sounds, FM bass, clavinet, some FX and lots of bell-like sounds.

Realistic it ain't, but some of this is very usable, and we particularly liked the Classic Mono, the various Classic Synths, the edgy Wire Clavinot and the heavily effected Chip Music patches. Although editing options are a bit limited (macros access the useful stuff), purists will love the direct nature of these classic sounds.

9/10

Dubdrops DOWNLOAD
Dubstep and Grime Vocals £20

Web www.loopmasters.com
Contact via website
Format WAV, REX2, HALion, Kontakt, EXS, SFZ, Stylus RMX, NN-XT

The title says it all: 735 phrases and vocal lines laden with UK street-level slang, delivered by two vocalists. Arranged in alphabetical order, the hits and hooks are focused on spoken and often monosyllabic phrases. Some are rhythmical, with a tough MC vibe and attitude, but the majority are just phrases or sentences with no particular pace or rhythm, making them best suited for fills and spot FX. Some of the content is a little mundane, and at times the pack feels more like a soundboard for a stereotypical BBC4 'underground' London sitcom, but dig in and you'll probably find something to suit your needs, blud. **cm**

6/10