

Ableton Live 5

GEORGE SHILLING last looked at Ableton Live when it was at Version 2 and much has changed since then. Live 2.1 added essential ReWire support to enable integration with Pro Tools, Logic, etc., Version 3 brought MIDI Key Mapping to enable control of audio Clips, while 4 brought complete MIDI tracks, effects and instruments, with an easy to use piano-roll editor. Now Version 5 brings a whole host of goodies and tweaks.



THE ABLETON WEBSITE hosts a lively and good-natured forum. Live has developed a loyal following, and sensibly, Ableton has involved its users in the development process. A healthy public-beta testing process took place over a number of weeks in order to iron out the bugs in V5. And this seems to have born fruit — the program seems completely stable, and despite the multitude of features bolted on, still manages to remain friendly, inviting and easy to grasp.

Screen layout is similar to earlier versions, although green gaudiness has gone in favour of smart business-like black and grey, and a lot of information is squeezed onto the screen. There are still no floating windows apart from proprietary VST editors, and panels can still be toggled open or closed to create more space. On the right you are initially presented with a comprehensive series of lessons that can be worked through using this panel and loading corresponding files and sets in the main program — a great way to learn, and much more helpful than throwing in a PDF manual, although a very good one of those is, of course, thrown in... Help is never far away, as the panel in the bottom left corner is retained, explaining functions as the mouse is hovered if required.

Live's instruments comprise Impulse, a drum sampler, and Simpler, a sampler with some synthesiser controls — these don't compete with Reason or Logic as sound sources, but they can be fun for throwing ideas together, and Simpler has been improved with independent envelopes for several functions. A library

of presets for these is included, along with a new selection of 'Clips', the building blocks used for creating tracks or Live Sets, much along the lines of Apple Loops. User Clips can now be exported for use in other Sets.

The supplied presets and Clips tend towards 'plinky-plonky' (*Rather than plinkety-plonk? Ed*), but there are some pretty good acoustic drum loops, percussion and keyboard instruments, with new downloadable Live Pack sets appearing on the Ableton website during this review. These are probably not the main reason for buying Ableton Live. Rather, the method of music creation is the strength of this product; it is wonderful to drag audio from the file-browser into the current Set and have it instantly play along at the correct tempo. The much improved file-browser is used for loading plug-ins, instruments, samples, Clips and entire Sets, and now features a Search function that is immensely helpful when trawling through sample collections. Organisational tasks are now easier with provision for creating folders and dragging files into different folders.

A CPU-saving Freeze function enables transfer of projects for use on lesser computers. This works much like the corresponding Logic feature. Frozen clips can still be launched instantly, and overall tempo changes are still effective. Plug-In Delay Compensation has been seamlessly included, along with a manual track delay function, although oddly it is not possible to see the PDC settings. However, it coped admirably

with my UAD-1 card plug-ins. Audio Units are also supported in the Macintosh version, while VST MIDI is now supported enabling, for example, tempo-related delays.

Apart from third party effects, Live includes a whole host of its own that are accessed via a dedicated browser folder and include sub-folders of presets. The basic tools are perfectly usable, with a comprehensive selection including compressors, EQs, Delays, Reverb, and so on, plus fun things like Redux bit-reduction and Vinyl Distortion. New with this version are such goodies as the unique Beat Repeat which is great for mangling beats and vocals for delay and weird filtered stutter effects. Also new are the Flanger and the excellent Phaser, a tempo-syncable Auto-Pan with level modulation and variable LFO shape, plus the obligatory Saturator distortion effect that works well from slight warming to 'Rectifier' fuzz. There is also a folder of MIDI effects such as the clever Arpeggiator. The Device Groups feature allows a chain of instruments and effects to be collectively stored, much like Reason's Combinator concept.

Support has also been added for MP3 and other compressed formats. Bringing audio files into the Set causes Live to attempt analysis and place moveable Warp markers where it thinks the tempo landmarks might be, thus enabling the clever re-jigging to fit the current track. It is remarkably good, dragging the markers enables you to fit just about any phrase or loop with the track, and audio can even have a swing groove applied in various values.

There are handy right-click context menus and support has been added for Mackie Control-compatible mixer surfaces. Audio can now be scrubbed by dragging the mouse above the arrangement, and other arrangement improvements include the provision of markers.

Live 5 (Euro 499) has come on in leaps and bounds yet remains friendly and is easy to start using. Learning the proprietary icon symbols is probably the only thing that might slow down the new user, but these soon become familiar. Ableton has employed a number of musicians and DJs, and it shows in a product that is obviously partly guided by end-users. The 'pro' features cribbed from other DAWs make the package even more usable, and if you're a DAW driver with the patience to learn some new tricks, this is one of the easiest and most useful add-ons or alternatives to master. ■

PROS Best tempo-manipulation DAW; easy to learn; PDC; Freeze function.

CONS Included sound library slightly weak; no PDC view; Warping degrades the sound quality.

Contact

ABLETON, GERMANY:
Website: www.ableton.com