Propellerhead Reason 2.5

Claiming to include all you need to create music, the latest incarnation of this popular compositional tool adds tweaks and cross-program interaction. GEORGE SHILLING is finally made to see reason.

THE BOX DESCRIBES REASON AS 'Stand-Alone Music Station Software', and that's a pretty good description. Inside is a printed Getting Started manual, a license card and a neat three-disc Digipak. Included on the program disc are versions for Windows (all flavours from Windows 98 onwards), Mac OS9 and OSX. The Swedish company supplies a package as neat as anything from Volvo or Ikea, and the software looks similarly well designed.

Following simple program installation, you are prompted to transfer each of the other two discs — the Factory Sound Bank and Orkester, a great collection of orchestral samples. Additionally, a number of commercial discs are available with sounds, samples and presets for the various Reason elements stored in the proprietary 'Refill' format, such as the excellent LapJockey FlatPack. I also found a huge number of free sounds and demos on various websites, starting with Propellerhead's own site. The Getting Started book is installed with the program as a PDF, along with the rest of the excellent documentation, which includes a full and detailed Operation Manual.

The program is cleverly structured as a virtual rack of sound sources, mixers, pattern sequencers and effects, and at the bottom of the rack is a richly featured yet simple to use sequencer for moderately advanced programming and editing. Almost all parameters of all devices can be automated using the sequencer. Sound sources can be installed in the rack on a whim, with many multiple instances of similar virtual devices if needed. The secret of this program's success is in the attention to detail, with numerous nice touches.

The panel designs of the devices are colourful and intuitive. When creating devices, routing usually occurs automatically. One of the best aspects is the flexibility and ease of rerouting. Everyone loves the gimmick of pressing the Tab key, which makes the rack flip round for a rear view of all the virtual cables connecting the different components. These can be unplugged with the mouse, and dragged to the desired connection, while the cables are animated and look realistic.

There is a clever system of virtual CV and Gate connections, allowing different devices, signals and knobs to control other devices in unusual and creative ways. These also appear as jack sockets on the rear panels.

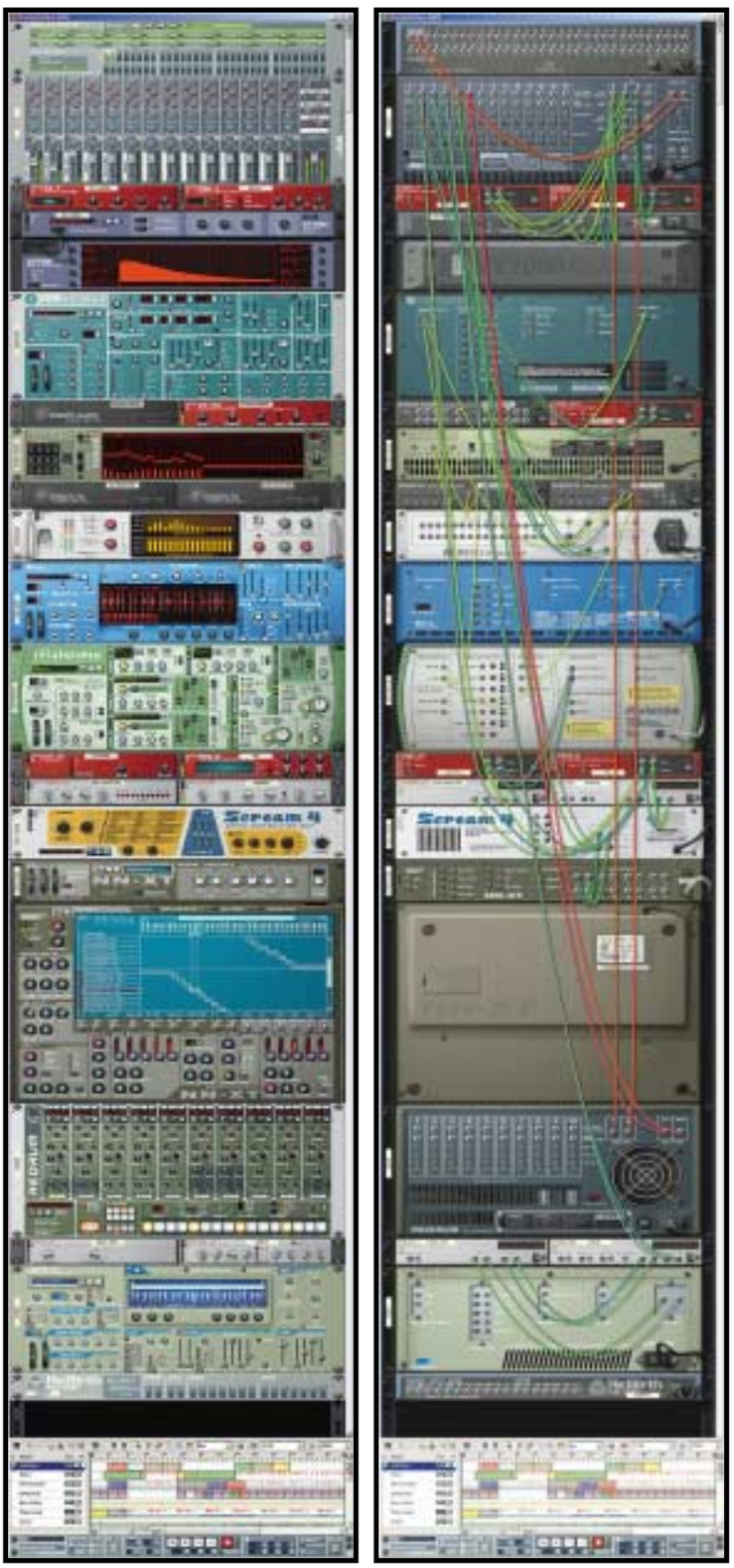
The sound sources comprise two different synth types, two different samplers, a loop player, which supports the REX format and integrates cleverly with the sequencer, and a drum computer. One thing Reason cannot do is record audio. However, you can import audio files in WAV or AIFF format into the samplers and drum computer, although I was disappointed that SDII is not supported. However, with massively increased support for the Rewire 2 protocol (which Propellerhead invented), most notably in Pro Tools version 6, it is a delight to run Reason with a DAW and benefit from the best aspects of each program.

Audio, MIDI and song position synchronisation is seamlessly communicated using Rewire, with the hardware interface device riveted into the top of every Reason rack easily configurable. Although the rack format can mean some wasted screen space, this does mean you can see some of your Rewired DAW to the side. And usefully, devices can each be compacted in size where they become shorter with perhaps just the selected patch or some small meters displayed.

Normally, the first device to create is the mixer, which features 14 stereo inputs for the virtual devices to connect to, with all the features you might expect on a small analogue mixer. There are faders with mute, solo and pan pot, 2-band EQ, and four stereo aux sends and returns. All are automatable with facilities on the back for level and pan CV ins for each channel and sockets for chaining multiple mixers.

The first synth is the virtual analogue SubTractor. This is a two-oscillator device with dual filters and is capable of a great variety of sounds. It is very friendly to use, with plenty of knobs to tweak, and a host of modulation control inputs and outputs on the rear. Some of the supplied presets can sound a little thin and digital compared to standalone virtual or hardware synths, but there are some atmospheric pads and surprisingly good percussion noises in the supplied banks. With a mono output, this unit in particular benefits from warming up with the supplied effects.

The Malström synth arrived with version 2.0. It uses 'Graintable' synthesis, based on Granular synthesis and Wavetable synthesis. It makes powerful and weird noises that can have a very characterful edge. However, it is not hard to tweak parameters even though there are some unusual



concepts because the controls are labelled mostly with familiar or self-explanatory parameters, and all is clearly explained in the Operation Manual.

The two sample playback devices are thoroughly featured units for editing and structuring sample patches. The NN-19 (presumably named after the Paul Hardcastle hit) is retained from version 1.0 for compatibility, and is joined by the NN-XT, which adds extra features such as velocity layering and multiple outputs. This device can also load SoundFonts presets. Both samplers can load REX files and both include filtering, LFO, enveloping and all the other features expected of a software sampler.

Dr.REX is a loop player that directly loads REX files. These are loops that have been split into separate samples and include a MIDI map of their timing that can be previewed in Dr.REX and bumped into the sequencer, enabling easy tempo variation without pitch change and glitching. The individual slices can be set with different pitches, pan positions, etc, and the device also includes filtering, envelopes and LFO. This is great fun to play with, although I was disappointed that the individual slice parameters apparently could not be automated.

Finally, the ReDrum drum computer loads up to 10 samples with various adjustable parameters, and along the bottom is a step sequencer that is programmed much like older Roland machines such as the TR909.

Creating a device automatically creates a sequencer track. With a MIDI keyboard connected, you can get working straight away. The sequencer is like a simplified version of Cubase, with all the usual tools at the top, and Arrange and Edit views much like the Logic Matrix Editor. If you have ever used any MIDI sequencer, you will have no problems with this one. However, I couldn't find an easy way of repeating or looping data in multiples, and a few more keyboard shortcuts for tool selection would be helpful. The sequencer section can easily be expanded to fill the entire rack height, and detached to fill the whole screen width.

As regards the effects devices, there are even more of these than sound sources, and some of them are astonishingly good considering the price of the package (UK£299 inc. VAT). The previous version included Digital Reverb, Delay, Distortion, Envelope Filter, Chorus/Flanger, Phaser, Compressor/Limiter and Two-Band Parametric EQ. This latest version adds a Unison chorus-type device, the more advanced RV7000 Reverb, which is along the lines of a mid-range TC or Lexicon, the Scream 4 Distortion unit, which superbly models 10 different tweakable types of 'sound destruction', and the remarkable BV512 Vocoder, operating with between four and 512 frequency bands and doubling as a souped-up graphic EQ. All parameters can be automated, and effects can be routed in many different ways using the cabling system.

A patchable pattern sequencer recreates old-fashioned analogue step-sequencing, with some similarity to the ReDrum programmer, and 2.5 also adds two other handy devices — the 'Spider' merger and splitter units — one for audio and one for CV signals. These usefully let you combine four signals into one or split one signal into four places. Other changes from 2.0 include improvements to the mixer.

Songs from Version 1 can still be loaded into the latest version as all original devices remain unchanged, and where, for example, the mixer EQ has been improved, there is a switch on the back to use the original algorithms.

Although Reason looks like a bunch of colourful toys, they work like professional tools. If you buy it as a sound source you will not be disappointed, the included sounds are excellent, and there are plenty of sources of additional sounds. Although the obvious use is for dance music, there is enough variation in the presets to make all kinds of music.

As a standalone program it makes a terrific writing tool, with all you need within easy reach. Reason is extremely well thought-out and implemented. It imparts an indefinable feel-good factor, stimulating a mood that anything is possible, whether you're a beginner or a seasoned pro. The included demo songs are inspiring and inspired. Reason lets you work fast, but can keep you entertained for ages. ■

PROS **Easy to learn; fun to use; high sound quality; good sounds supplied and plenty more easily acquired; Rewire-able to most DAWs; almost endless routing and processing possibilities**

CONS **Small low-contrast lettering makes some legending hard to read; more sequencer shortcuts needed; almost endless routing and processing possibilities!**

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