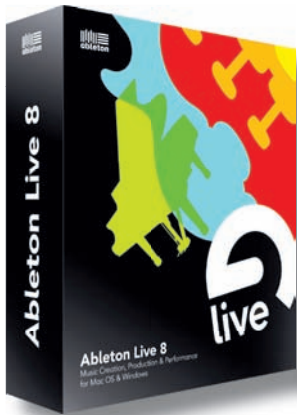




MusicTech Reviews



Ableton

LIVE 8

FOR PC & MAC

MusicTech
CHOICE

Ableton's flagship DAW has undergone another reincarnation and gained yet more features and tools. Hollin Jones digs in.

KEY FEATURES

- Multitrack recording up to 32-bit/192kHz
- Non-destructive editing with unlimited undo
- MIDI sequencing of software and hardware instruments
- Advanced warping and real-time time-stretching
- More than 1,600 expressive sounds
- Built-in audio and MIDI effects
- VST, AU and REX support
- Video import and warping
- ReWire slave or master
- Instrument and drum racks

LIVE 8

Manufacturer **Ableton**
 Price **£400. Ableton Suite 8 £600**
 Contact **twenty2 0845 299 4222**
 Web **www.ableton.com**
 Minimum system requirements
PC 1.5GHz processor, Windows XP, 1GB RAM
Mac G4 1.25GHz, Mac OSX 10.4.11, 1GB RAM

Ableton's Live is only eight years old, but it's already a well-established player on the DAW scene. Starting life as a live performance tool, it has evolved into a more fully featured music-production environment – albeit one that is still firmly rooted in the concept of performing and composing on-the-fly. With a distinctly different approach from most other leading DAWs, its popularity has grown far beyond its initial user base (of whom many were DJs) and it now attracts musicians working at all levels.

Live 8's system requirements are relatively modest, although, as always, you'll have a smoother ride if you have a fast computer and lots of RAM,

especially as Live focuses so much on time stretching. You can load VST plug-ins and instruments on both Mac and PC and, interestingly, it's the only major application that can load both AU and VST plug-ins natively on the Mac, which is a great bonus for Apple users.

Up and running

Installing the software itself is simple and there's a very slick online authorisation system that binds your copy to your computer. Installing the additional content isn't quite so swift, taking a while on our G5 system. This is partly because of its size – the Suite Edition, which includes all the instruments and content, clocks in at a weighty 48GB, so you'll probably want to put it on a secondary or external drive. Setting up the Preferences is straightforward and Live detected our audio and MIDI interfaces and activated multi-processing without fuss. All we had to do was configure the audio inputs and specify a location for the library.

Live's design and interface hasn't changed much over the years, maintaining a muted but uncluttered

feel, eschewing flashy graphics and retaining everything within a single main window. It might benefit from a little more visual interest, but it's certainly effective, if not exciting.

Those new to Live will find the non-linear workflow quite different from more conventional DAWs. There are two main views: Session and Arrange. In Session View you add tracks – audio, MIDI or effect return. Each audio or MIDI track has 20 slots, each of which can hold a clip. You can either drag and drop loops from the Browser section on the left or record-arm a track and play in data from a MIDI device or through your audio interface. Once recorded, the material held in a clip can be viewed and edited in the Clip View at the bottom. For MIDI clips this involves a Piano Roll Editor and a Pen tool to edit notes. For audio there's a Waveform View.

Live and well

One of Live's core features is that it treats audio like MIDI, making it very flexible. As such, the editing controls for both types of data are similar. Audio clips are automatically set to warp and you can set up loops, change tempo, pitch and gain via a few simple controls. The idea is that everything stays in sync with the project tempo and as such you can speed up or slow down projects without glitching. On the whole this works very well, although it isn't perhaps quite as easy to get to grips with for beginners as Ableton makes out. Granted, it's the best implementation of loop stretching

around, but you'll still end up doing a bit of fiddling with markers. One really handy feature is the ability to preview any loop from your hard drive at the correct tempo for a project. You can record arrangements by bringing clips in and out on-the-fly, then, in Arrange View, see and edit the results on a more conventional timeline.

Warp speed

Live 8 has a new warping engine – and it's considerably more intuitive than that in previous versions. Rather than stretching the timeline around an event, you now add warp markers and manually drag them around to make them fit to the grid. There are also new Transient handles, the ability to slice audio to MIDI, plus better handling of warping material based on its characteristics, such as rhythmic, textured and so on.

Also new in Live 8 is the Groove Engine, furthering the application's swing capabilities. Groove patterns can

Although it can load both VST and AU plug-ins, Live also ships with some excellent plug-ins of its own, accessible from the Browser section. These all work via drag-and-drop and have fairly stripped-down interfaces, making their operation straightforward.

Smooth Operator

In addition to the regular effects you also now get a vocoder, multi-band dynamics, overdrive, limiter and frequency shifter. Live 8 also includes the Essential Instruments collection – a great range of sample-based instruments covering pianos, basses and drums, as well as some synths. The Suite version ships with additional synths and samplers, notably Session Drums, Latin Percussion, Collision and an overhauled version of Operator, Ableton's powerful synth.

There are many smaller workflow enhancements to be found in Live 8, including crossfades in the Arrange View, a better MIDI Editor, Group tracks,

VERSION 8 IS CERTAINLY A WORTHY UPGRADE TO THE LIVE FAMILY, REFINING AND ADDING TO FEATURES IN KEY AREAS.

now be applied to any audio or MIDI clips in real time and there's a great selection of presets; alternatively, you can extract the groove from clips in a project. Any clip can be groove-quantized and there's non-destructive velocity and timing adjustment, plus the option to randomise timing for a less mechanical, more human feel. Live is based on looping, and there's a new Looper tool that enables you to record new overdubs without having to stop playback (like a tape loop machine).

optional zooming of the program's interface, plus an improved Browser Preview function.

Going Live

Version 8 is certainly a worthy upgrade to the Live family, building on existing strengths and refining and adding to features in key areas, particularly in respect to warping and quantizing. The Suite Edition has loads of content, and it's the only DAW to be cross-platform while offering compatibility with multiple

MEASURING UP

No other DAW has Live's unique approach to loop-based composition, but most feature time stretching, instruments and effects, as does Live. Cubase 5 (£499) runs on Mac and PC and has some interesting new plug-ins, such as LoopMash (for cutting up loops on-the-fly) as well as notation, VariAudio pitch correction and detailed wave editing. Apple's Logic Studio runs only on the Mac, but at £312 has a lot of bundled content, including MainStage, Soundtrack Pro, Studio Instruments and Effects. It is also an accomplished wave and MIDI editor. Propellerhead's Reason 4 (£329) is dual-platform and fairly lightweight in terms of its CPU usage, and although it has many great instruments, it doesn't record audio. It will, however, connect to Live via ReWire.

plug-in formats (on the Mac at any rate). The selection of effects and instruments is great and will keep you composing for ages. Live's approach is very different from most other DAWs and it focuses on spontaneity, composing with loops and building tracks almost like you would with a step sequencer (at least in Session View). As such it's probably most suited to the kinds of music that are loop-based, although, of course, you can record long passages of audio and MIDI as well.

Live can't handle waveform editing at the same level as other DAWs – in fact, it doesn't have a conventional wave editor – but it is far better at working with loops than the competition. Its drag-and-drop workflow is fun and easy to work with, plus it's rare for audio playback to be interrupted as you edit, which helps with creativity.

Being freed from the linear timeline working practice is refreshing and certainly inspires new ideas. And although it doesn't have some of the more advanced features and functionality found elsewhere, Live 8 is much more powerful than its interface might initially suggest. **MTM**

METHOD SPOT

Live is based around the idea of synchronisation, and audio that you import or record is automatically 'warped' so that it adjusts to follow tempo changes. With a little tweaking you can edit down recorded audio to a loop, add warp markers and then alter the timing, pitch or feel by dragging warp markers and applying groove quantize settings. Best of all, if you're navigating your hard drive to find loops, they can be previewed from Live at the project's tempo. It will play them in sync regardless of their original tempo, which saves a lot of time. Live 8 has a new, more intuitive warping engine, so keeping things in sync is now easier than ever.

SUMMARY

WHY BUY

- Inspiring and fun to use
- Intuitive approach to composition
- Drag-and-drop simplicity
- Great bundled instruments and effects
- New warping system is much improved
- Better groove engine and quantizing
- Huge amount of content with Suite version
- Multi-platform

WALK ON BY

- Lacks some more detailed wave-editing features
- Some may find the GUI slightly clinical

VERDICT

A unique and powerful approach to music composition and production. Some great new features build on an already accomplished DAW.



In Live 8's Session View you can add tracks: audio, MIDI or effect return. Each audio or MIDI track has 20 slots, each of which can hold a clip. Material held in a clip can be viewed and edited in the Clip View.