

# ABLETON Live 4

Ableton adds MIDI sequencing and a host of new features to its premier sequencing package as Live gets a significant update.

**Martin Delany** gets stuck in...



**LIVE 4**

Manufacturer **Ableton**

Price **£299**

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**METHOD SPOT  
Plugged in**

If you have a multi-channel software synth or sampler that you want to use alongside Live, you don't have to run multiple copies of it - you don't need a separate 'instance' of the plug-in for each track. Just drag and drop the plug-in to the first track - let's say MIDI 1 - and then use the in/out routing menus to send MIDI from subsequent MIDI tracks on different channels to MIDI 1 also.

**A**bleton Live appeared on the market at a time when computers - and laptops in particular - were becoming increasingly powerful and capable of serious audio-manipulation tasks. Impatient pioneers were already using whatever means necessary to get onstage with their laptops - including using sequencing applications such as Logic as jamming tools. Live stepped into the breach and quickly became the instrument of choice for laptop jammers. As more features were added and as more people became aware of its versatility, Live's appeal

**✓** The UC33 MIDI interface is recognised in Live's MIDI preferences.



**▲** A screen shot from the Live 4 demo, showing the main Arrange View interface.



reached beyond the jamming crowd, to DJs, performers and musicians of all types.

If there was ever a product that redefined boundaries, it was Live. Starting life with a feature set heavily biased towards performance and improvisation, Live has gradually evolved to incorporate elements more commonly found in 'traditional' DAWs. The only thing missing has been MIDI sequencing. Live has always been described as an audio sequencer, and this was what made it exciting: the ability to manipulate audio clips in real time, almost as if working with MIDI rather than AIFFs or .WAVs. Almost...

Live has now reached version 4 - its most significant update so far - and ironically the biggest buzz revolves around the inclusion of old-fashioned MIDI sequencing - which takes us right back to where we started. Characteristically, Ableton's take on MIDI sequencing is not entirely what you might expect. The good folk at Ableton have forced MIDI to fit around their way of doing things, so composition, sampling, recording, performance and mixing are intrinsically related. The question is: have the myriad improvements and additions to Live compromised or complemented its famed ease of use?

Version 4 seems intended to reach the planet's remaining Live agnostics, with new features that will satisfy long-term users and

seduce the reluctant. Here's the short version: MIDI sequencing, for loop-based and linear use; Ableton's first software instruments (a drum machine and a sampler); VSTi and AU (Mac) support; swing/groove quantisation for audio and MIDI; Reverse Clip mode; improved audio routing and simplified recording; plus much more. We'll have a detailed peek in a moment or two...

There's a downloadable demo on Ableton's website, which is save/render-disabled, but otherwise fully functional. You can pay to validate the demo and receive the necessary serial numbers via the web; the online validation process can be conducted from within Live itself or - via a more long-winded procedure - from a different computer. Alternatively, you can purchase a boxed version that includes extra sample content and a printed manual directly from Ableton or your local dealer.

**If it ain't broke...**

Ableton got the Live interface right from the outset and has wisely resisted messing with it. If you choose to display all of the various panels simultaneously, things can get a bit crowded but, of course, that's what the View menu and keyboard shortcuts are for. After a while it becomes second nature to move between the various panels and show/hide content when required. Hitting F11 puts Live into



full-screen mode, which goes a long way towards creating an immersive, atmospheric feel.

The Live interface revolves around two views: Session, the 'improvisation and performance' view; and Arrange, primarily used for linear composition. Whether in Session or Arrange, the View menu also enables you to show/hide a file/plugin browser, an overview, a mixer, ins and outs, a clip view, and a crossfader. There is also a master track (which cannot be deleted). The Session view works on a grid system, divided vertically by track and horizontally by scene – each square created by this grid can contain a sound file (a 'clip'). Only one clip per track can play at any time, whereas every clip in a horizontal scene can play simultaneously if desired.

Sound is imported into Live by dragging and dropping files from the file browser, through an audio interface or (as of Live 4) as MIDI parts (more on this later). The basic principles of sound acquisition and recording are the same whichever view you're in. Live supports .WAV, AIFF and SDII (Mac only) audio

## Now that Ableton has added MIDI facilities, how much more can the product take?

formats, and will record at up to 24-bit/192kHz resolution. MP3 and other compressed formats are not invited to the party.

The fun really starts once you've got your sound into Live. The Clip view is where you alter the properties of individual clips, including loop mode, launch quantisation, transposition, loop regions, and warp mode – where, in conjunction with the all-important warp markers, a clip can be time stretched and have its rhythmic content bent in subtle or reckless ways. Mixer and effect parameter automation can be applied to individual clips independently of the global settings for their host track.

In Session view, you can choose to trigger clips from the computer keyboard or from an external MIDI keyboard. Most of Live's other functions can also be configured to work this way, including the mixer controls, transport, and effects parameters. Audio effects can be added in real time from the browser to the chosen track without

### RELATED TECHNOLOGY MIDI hardware controllers

**Now that MIDI input is possible from your computer's keyboard, it could be argued that there's no need to use external MIDI hardware controllers. Not so. There's still nothing quite like the tactile feedback of a hardware key or fader. The search for the 'perfect' MIDI controller is a little like the search for the Holy Grail. At the moment we think Evolution's UC33 is one of the best around (as long as you don't need a 'piano' keyboard), with a generous array of knobs and faders, and USB buss power (invaluable for laptop use). The UC33 even includes a template for use with Live.**

interrupting playback. Live comes with a selection of effects including a filter, EQs, compressors, delays, and a reverb. Third-party VSTs and AUs are also accessible in this way.

Sooner or later you'll come up with something you want to record. In Global Record mode, Live records everything, including the triggering of clips and scenes, effect tweaks, pan and volume changes and so on, and this automation can be viewed and edited in the Arrange view; just hit the Tab key to get there. This is where the distinctions between the processes of improvisation and composition, and demoing and final mixes become blurred: a jam becomes a demo, which then becomes a finished song – all in the same file. The Arrange view works along the timeline principle common to all sequencers, but with characteristic Ableton clarity. Waveforms and automation can be viewed or hidden as required, and sounds can be looped, split, copied, and pasted. When your editing and mixing is done, render the finished mix to disk.

### MIDI for me

As we've already said, the big addition to Live 4 is the inclusion of MIDI sequencing functionality. However, rather than try to turn Live into a wannabe Logic or Sibelius, Ableton has moulded it to fit in with the company's distinctive way of working. Just as with audio, MIDI can be imported (MIDI files appear as folders in the file browser and individual tracks appear as separate files for import), recorded from an

external MIDI keyboard or the computer keyboard, or drawn in with the Pencil tool. They exist as a clip when in Session view, or as a linear object when in Arrange view. The computer keyboard-to-MIDI feature is a very practical addition aimed at laptop users – it's a great way of bashing out a riff when inspiration strikes on the train. As with other MIDI sequencers, quantisation can be applied while recording – or after the event – to either the whole take or just individual notes.


MIDI clips have a lot in common with audio clips. They appear in the Clip view and are subject to the same controls regarding looping, launch modes, Follow Actions and quantisation. MIDI controllers such as pitch bend can be automated within the clips. Notes and velocities can be edited in the MIDI editor found to the right of the Clip view. This might be a good time to mention that MIDI clips can be exported as MIDI files, although there's no way to simultaneously export multiple clips as a single MIDI file.

Live includes five MIDI effects, which should be inserted in your signal chain before software instruments. Chord is an effect that adds up to six user-defined notes to an incoming MIDI note. Pitch transposes all incoming notes by +/- 48 semitones and can filter out notes above or below a defined range. Random alters the pitch of incoming notes by a random value. Scale changes incoming notes to conform to a defined scale. Velocity applies a variety of treatments to incoming notes – those outside a defined range can be ignored entirely or forced to fit within the range. MIDI effects are somewhat 'old school', but we've always found them useful – especially on hardware sequencers – and the ones included with Live follow in that tradition.

Obviously, MIDI notes need a sound source. In Live 4, VSTi or AU instruments such as Absynth, Crystal, HALion, Groove Agent and Moog Modular can be dragged and dropped into an existing track (or to anywhere in the area adjoining the tracks to create a new one). A MIDI clip with no instrument assigned to it can send MIDI to other software or external hardware, and you can also apply Live's MIDI effects to the external gear.

Ableton has included two MIDI instruments: Impulse is a drum sampler with eight slots for

 The pull-down menu for Follow Actions, from the Clip view.

 The main Session view interface, as seen in the Live 4 demo.



► drag-and-drop sample import, and these slots appear in Live's MIDI editor as soon as an instance of Impulse is loaded. Although basic in appearance, Impulse has a lot of creative potential: samples can be panned, filtered, transposed and distorted. Impulse's audio output can be routed as usual, or individual outputs can be taken from each slot.

Simpler is a sample-based synthesizer, again requiring a sample to be dragged to it to get the ball rolling. This sample can be truncated, transposed, looped and run through synth-type processes such as filter and LFO.

If you need the kind of detailed professional sequencing features that a program such as Logic offers, then Live's MIDI sequencing capabilities aren't for you. But that's not to underestimate it at all – the addition of MIDI is an incredible enhancement to Live, and we already find it far more user friendly than the linear sequencer in Reason (don't ditch Reason yet, though, it still makes a great sound source for Live via ReWire).

### Scrolling scenes

If you take the new MIDI toys out of the equation, there's plenty of other new stuff in Live 4. Scenes can now advance automatically once the current selection is fired, so the next scene is highlighted and ready. This could be a handy labour-saving device, although we found it hard to break the habit of scrolling down manually. Signal routing has also been expanded to accommodate the MIDI tracks: for instance, you can send the MIDI output from several different tracks to one instance of a multi-timbral synth or sampler.

Mad scientists will love Follow Actions. These are behaviours that can be applied to groups of clips (those occupying the same track). Clips can be programmed to play for a certain amount of time then automatically perform another function (play next clip, play previous clip, stop, play first, play last) – all with a user-defined random parameter. Ableton's manual suggests that Follow Actions would be useful for sound installations, where a looping sequence can play indefinitely with slight variation. The output from your randomised track can be routed to another track's input for recording. We suggest that you experiment with large groups containing short clips and vary the trigger time from clip to clip.



Scenes themselves can now contain tempo information. Simply type in a BPM value and the set will jump to that tempo when the scene is fired. This feature could be useful onstage if you have several tunes contained within one Live set.

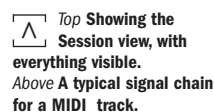
### Fluid relationships

The Capture And Insert Scene feature duplicates active clips to a new scene immediately below without interrupting play – ideal for capturing spur-of-the-moment combinations and isolating the 'good bits' from a particular scene. It's now also possible to drag and drop clips between the Session and Arrange views. This is useful if you use the

## Now more than ever, every studio should have a copy of Ableton Live.

Divide function in Arrange view to create new clips. It's an example of how fluid the relationship between Session and Arrange can be.

Live's new features, such as Follow Actions and MIDI effects, add further creative and organisational functions. These, combined with Live's MIDI/computer-keyboard mapping, pre-listen options, tap tempo, crossfaders and full-screen mode make it a natural choice for jamming and performance use. What's more, the inclusion of MIDI sequencing means less time spent switching between applications, and a merging of 'traditional' sequencer functions with Live's more esoteric

 **Top Showing the Session view, with everything visible. Above A typical signal chain for a MIDI track.**

approach, perhaps introducing the now-ancient concept of MIDI composition to a group of users who have previously worked only with loops and beats, and simultaneously introducing the joys of warp markers and loops to a group of users who are making music using more linear working methods.

Don't disregard Live because you don't make dance, techno or 'experimental' music. We don't have many criticisms but we do have a few requests: a waveform editor, QuickTime movie playback for soundtrack work, and maybe a few minor interface tweaks, such as clips that change colour after they are played. And we wonder: now that Ableton has added MIDI sequencing facilities, how much more can the product take? How much can be squeezed in before the interface buckles under the strain? Ableton has done a great job with this update; the company has succeeded in keeping the integrity of the design and it's stable, too. We hope that Ableton doesn't lose sight of these achievements in the future. **MTM**

### SUMMARY

#### MINIMUM SYSTEM REQUIREMENTS

- Mac G3, Mac OS9.2/Mac OS X 10.1.5 or later, 256MB RAM
- PC Windows 600MHz, Windows 98/2000/XP, 256MB RAM, Windows-compatible soundcard

#### KEY FEATURES

- Just as stable and performance-friendly as ever
- The addition of MIDI sequencing brings Live closer to a do-it-all tool
- The addition of AU support for Mac OS X

#### WHY BUY

- Live 4 offers a unique combination of recording, performance, and writing
- The future of computer-based music production
- Show/hide means that the interface can be kept uncluttered and navigated quickly
- Not restricted to loop-based music
- Excellent integrated tutorials and very clear manual

#### WALK ON BY

- Can be off-putting for beginners or those indoctrinated into a 'traditional' way of working
- Needs a built-in audio editor
- Grim black packaging

### VERDICT

Now more than ever, every studio should have a copy of Ableton Live.



### METHOD SPOT Powered up

**The difference between a 'power user' and the average Joe is that the power user has taken the trouble to learn the keyboard shortcuts. All windows in Live's interface can be hidden/revealed or navigated to via keyboard shortcuts, and whether onstage or in the studio, this will save huge amounts of mouse work.**