

MAGIX

Samplitude Professional 7.1

Two face lifts in little more than a year? Has Samplitude found the secret of eternal youth? **Pete Crisp** checks carefully for signs of wrinkles...



Samplitude Professional
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As the 'big guns' of studio software development wow us with the ever-closer union of audio and MIDI functionality, there's a danger that those programs which focus on only one or the other format may disappear off the radar. An example of this is, arguably, Samplitude – a software package that for some time has focused its attentions squarely on digital audio recording and editing.

Crammed with a host of well-regarded features, Samplitude has garnered a well-deserved reputation as a mastering tool, but has also faced considerable criticism over its lack of decent MIDI implementation. However, this could well be about to change: version 7 has arrived and with it comes some significant additions, plus the interesting possibility of renting – rather than buying – the software.

Turning pro

This latest incarnation of Samplitude comes in two guises: the cheaper Classic version, which misses out on a few of the features, and, as reviewed here, the Professional package, that also comes with Video Deluxe 2.0 for working with sound and pictures. Not content with the major overhaul that came in the form of version 7, the chaps at Magix have also managed to squeeze in a

subsequent 7.1 release. Don't these boys ever sleep?

While the Samplitude manual sets out some relatively low-level recommended specs for this PC-only package (Windows 98 or later using a Pentium II processor for basic, low-track-count audio editing), it should be noted that these climb substantially if you want to explore its full potential. In fact, the Samplitude website recommends a hefty 2GHz P4/Athlon running Windows XP between 256 and 512Mb RAM to cope with the wealth of features at your fingertips.

Having said that, you now get ASIO support and direct VST integration, the latter being taken care of by an integral 'wrapper' that enables this type of plug-in to appear seamlessly alongside DX counterparts. Using an internal 32-bit floating point resolution and offering support for sampling rates up to 192kHz, Samplitude's designers look very much like they have their fingers on the pulse.

VIP treatment

Both destructive and non-destructive audio editing are possible, and while some of the terminology associated with this seems certain to confuse a newcomer to digital recording, it's actually pretty straightforward. Opening a new project initially brings up a menu that lets you configure how many tracks you'll need, and once that's been decided the main work area – or 'VIP' in Samplitude speak – opens up before you.

A familiar layout of horizontal tracks appears, with track controls running down the left of the screen and a mass of toolbar buttons across the top and bottom of the screen. To simplify the workspace, a dropdown box offers various preset VIP screens that show only the tools you need for a certain job. For instance: the Editing option displays only the buttons for that particular process. Samplitude's use of keyboard shortcuts and quick access to up to four user-stored

mute/solo, record and zoom states also helps immensely when working on complex projects.

Recorded audio is displayed in the VIP as graphical waveforms – otherwise known as Objects – which can be freely manipulated without altering the underlying audio files stored on your hard disk. Objects have five handles that can be grabbed with the mouse and dragged to change start and end times, in and out fades and overall volume – which makes for fast and flexible working.

Double-clicking an Object opens up its Editor window, where just about any operation can be performed including the application of any of Samplitude's effects (among which is a section dedicated to the new time-stretching and pitch-shifting algorithms). This means that sections of audio on the same track can have completely different settings applied.

Don't forget that you're not actually modifying the original takes in any way: the Objects simply provide instructions as to how the audio should be played back. If you want to edit it 'destructively' you can use the Wave Editor.

RELATED TECHNOLOGY

Impulsive nature

Samplitude's Room Simulator uses impulse-response technology to recreate the reverb characteristics of various spaces. If you were to stand in a room and make a short, sharp sound – perhaps by clapping your hands – what you'd hear (in addition to the initial sound of the clap) is the sound produced by the natural decay of the room. The clap is your impulse, the resulting decay is the response. In simple terms it's the unique acoustic fingerprint of the room.

If you digitise that response, it's possible (providing you have the processing power), to apply the sound of any given space to your dry signal. In fact, there's nothing to stop you from creating your own impulse response – perhaps to emulate the sound of your bathroom in a vocal booth.

Flexibility is the keyword here: take your pick from any of the windows if you want to change parameters.



Fortunately, Samplitude provides several levels of undo should you accidentally – or not – do something that you later regret.

Mixing it

The Mixer section has been given quite a major facelift over earlier versions and looks all the more impressive for it. Individual channel strips offer access to volume and pan, four-band parametric EQ, aux busses, dynamics, distortion, and delay/reverb. It's here you can also insert plug-ins – VST or DX types if you have them, but you can also choose from the broad range of Samplitude's own plug-ins.

Channels can easily be designated as aux returns or group busses with all of the same functions that a regular channel offers, including the impressive Room Simulator. This is Samplitude's versatile impulse-response reverb plug-in and is now available as a real-time effect (previously, it could be used only 'off line'). Plenty of excellent presets are already loaded with the program, but for registered users it's also possible to download 40 patches based on TC Electronics' M3000 hardware unit.

At the end of the signal chain, the Stereo Master channel offers global application of effects, and the mastering resources provided here should be just what you need to add that final gloss to your work. It would be wrong to call these 'dedicated' effects because you have almost limitless control over the way they are positioned. This flexibility extends to making them available in any mixer channel and in Objects as well.

Multi-band dynamics, stereo enhancement, a de-hisser and the FFT filter sit alongside the effects already mentioned and all sound superb, even in their preset form. To the right of the channel strips a group of buttons gives you global control over many aspects of the mixer's operation. From here you can save snapshots of the mixer, up to eight of which are individually recallable with a single mouse click.

Outputting material can be done in a variety of ways, the most basic being direct to a stereo file – although even here the options are many. A wide range of formats is supported (apart from the basic .WAV file) including the most common streaming types: Windows Media, RealAudio and QuickTime,

plus MP3 and MPG. Mixes can easily be bounced down to a stereo file, and any edits you've made to track Objects will be applied along with effects settings. Alternatively, you can mix in real time.

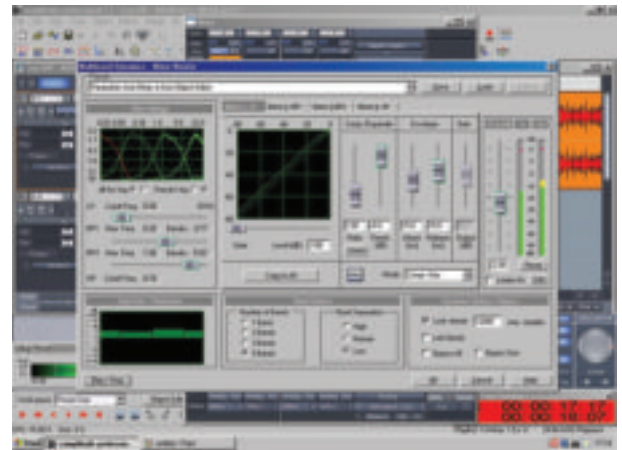
Samplitude offers CD burning to the Red Book standard and you can do this at any point in your project by simply adding markers at either end of tracks. There's even a function that'll drop them in automatically. If you want to back up your work in its multi-track state but find that it's too large to fit on a single CD, Samplitude will burn across multiple discs, embedding all of the relevant project information at the beginning of the first one.

MIDI matters

Although Samplitude still can't match the advanced MIDI capabilities of some other programs, it has certainly been given a hefty shove in that direction. There are no dedicated MIDI tracks as such, instead any track can be assigned as either audio or MIDI. Data appears in the track window as a rather unimpressive array of dots and lines, but this is sufficient to act as a guide, and with a double-click on a MIDI object you're taken into a basic piano-roll editor where you can see exactly what's going on. Here you'll find the common editing functions: notes can be dragged around the screen or resized and, if your timing has strayed, you can quickly quantize them.

MIDI Objects are also provided with an Editor screen – in much the same way as audio – although the features on offer are obviously very different. Attributes that can be altered here include fade, transpose, and velocity settings. Program and bank changing is rather limited, without the inclusion of templates for different hardware modules. Using a Roland XV3080, for example, it was possible to be up and running fairly quickly, but you wouldn't call the process entirely straightforward. In Samplitude's defence the company doesn't claim to be offering a sequencer to compete with the likes of Cubase or Sonar, and what is included now is a substantial improvement over earlier versions – and possibly an indication of things to come.

This is a major upgrade and, deservedly it has a multitude of new and advanced functions. Suffice to say that in terms of high-end audio editing, version 7.1 establishes



The multi-band dynamics window, just one of the excellent mastering tools.

Samplitude Professional as one of the most desirable packages currently available. It's not going to turn anyone into a top-flight producer overnight, but it includes all the tools necessary for you to create superb mixes and then polish them using the impressive range of effects. The lack of in-depth MIDI support will doubtless be a stumbling block for some, but weigh that against the audio capabilities and even diehard sequencing buffs will be stopped in their tracks. **MTM**

SUMMARY

MINIMUM SYSTEM REQUIREMENTS

- Basic audio editing: Pentium II, 128Mb RAM, Windows 98
- Full capabilities: P4/Athlon 2GHz, 256Mb RAM, Windows XP, 1024x768 screen resolution

KEY FEATURES

- ASIO support for compatible soundcards
- VST/VSTi automation now available
- Room Simulator featuring impulse responses
- Extensive mastering capabilities
- CD burning to Red Book standard

WHY BUY

- Stable, even under intense use
- Top-quality effects
- Multiple output formats
- Intuitive to use

WALK ON BY

- MIDI improved, but still not great
- Floating meter windows seem to show only playback, not input levels
- Hefty system requirements if you want all the options

VERDICT

A powerful piece of software that boasts a massive amount of potential for recording, editing and mastering digital audio.



METHOD SPOT Down to freezing

In an attempt to find a workaround to the problem of system overload when working on complex projects, Samplitude version 7.1 includes a Freeze function. In effect, this temporarily bounces a given track down to stereo and, in so doing, frees up those crucial CPU resources.