

TEST

SONY VAIO PCG-GRT916Z & SONIC STAGE MASTERING STUDIO

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VAIO PCG-GRT916Z & Sonic Stage Mastering Studio

Sony's high-end VAIO laptops now come bundled with audio-restoration software. **Bob Dormon** checks if they're up to scratch...



The four plug-ins supplied have a great deal of potential for audio enhancement. The amazing Waves Renaissance Bass will certainly beef up the bass where needed.

VAIO PCG-GRT916Z & SONICSTAGE MASTERING STUDIO

Manufacturer **Sony**

Price **£1,899**;
PCGAPRGT1 Docking
Bar: **£140**

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For those inhabiting the world of Windows, the Sony VAIO range of laptops has maintained a reputation for being among the most well-specified portables on the market. The latest GRT916Z features a 16.1-inch screen, 3.06GHz P4 processor, 512MB RAM, DVD burning and Wi-Fi connectivity – plus a lot more besides. The multimedia software bundle will keep you busy for a while too, and for audiophiles Sony includes two software packages of its own under the SonicStage moniker – but more on them later...

Weighing in at 4.1kg, this VAIO is a giant of a laptop. The tall screen has a 1,400 x 1,050 maximum resolution and accounts for the depth dimension of this portable, giving plenty of room for speakers, keyboard and wrist space in the facing area below it. To match up with the keyboard space bar, the

track pad is slightly off centre with large (left) and smaller (right) click buttons below. Silver +/- volume controls sit in the sloping edge of the base and further down, on the outside, a slider switches the wireless networking on and off. To the left, four LEDs reveal the status of power and hard disk activity.

On the left-hand side is the CD-RW/DVD±R optical drive that can be removed to accommodate a second battery (not supplied). There are two PC type III/Cardbus slots and also a Memory Stick Pro slot. The VAIO includes a Sony iLink connector – a four-pin FireWire 400 interface – and, as such, does not provide power to FireWire peripherals such as Apple's iPod.

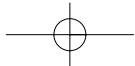
Screen idol

The right side of the VAIO has no slots, just a battery compartment and several ventilation grilles. Round

the back next to the DC input is a flap hiding a parallel printer port and a VGA monitor output. Exposed connectors on the other side of this panel include an A/V mini-jack output (line out and composite video) that can be used with a TV.

Either the VGA or the Video Out connector can be set up to create a dual display (with the desktop spread across two monitors) or a mirror (the same image on both screens). The GRT916Z uses an NVIDIA GeForce FX Go5600 with '3D performance' and 64MB VRAM. The other connectors featured are three USB 2 ports, 100/10-base-T Ethernet, modem, mini-jack mic input and mini-jack phones output.

The system comes with an 80GB ATA 100 hard drive that's been partitioned with 27.9GB given over to applications and the system software: Microsoft Windows XP Home Edition. For music and video



46.5GB is reserved on the other partition. In all, the formatted capacity of the '80GB' drive is around 74GB.

The VAIO gets to the main screen pretty quickly when it boots up and then fidgets for a while as it loads up menu bar icons. The Onyx-black 16.1-inch LCD is very crisp with excellent brightness and contrast. Sony boasts that it can be seen from a wide off-axis viewing angle. In truth, the viewing angle is okay, but nothing exceptional. The screen itself has a glossy sheen to it which may help with the projection of the image, but the reflections tend to interfere with off-axis viewing. The speakers are fine for a laptop but, as you would expect, lacking in bass and some way off 'hi-fi'.

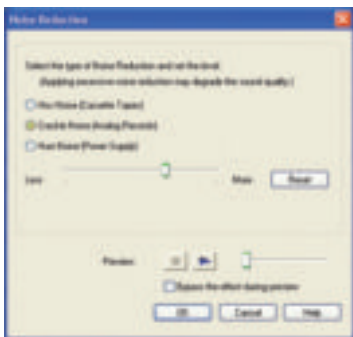
Master stroke

The SonicStage software provides the means to back up audio CDs and extract individual tracks from them. Audio can be accessed from the VAIO's music drive (A/V partition), Memory Stick cards and peripheral music players, too. EQ can be applied as well as a vocal cancelling effect which is actually rather good – karaoke, anyone?

SonicStage Mastering Studio is a completely different application and is specifically designed to restore and revitalise analogue recordings from vinyl or cassette, and it can enhance CD tracks, too. While the application features some



Track Markers can be edited in detail and previewed. This window also features a zoom control to show more or fewer of the track markers used overall in the timeline.



Mastering Studio's Noise Reduction controls are very basic, but experimenting with them can produce pleasing results.

simplified noise reduction processing, its more versatile signal processing is provided by four plug-ins.

For EQ, there's Sony Oxford Equaliser. This is a basic three-band version based on the algorithms used in Sony's acclaimed digital console. The three other plug-ins are from Waves. Adding the oomph is Renaissance Bass, which works very well on gutless mixes. The S1 Stereo Imager improves the left/right spread and balance of a soundscape. The mastering stalwart, L1 Ultramaximiser, helps bolster the impact of a mix with its transparent limiting functions. Together, these plug-ins can make quite a difference, but what about the host software?

SonicStage Mastering Studio adopts a step-by-step approach to a project. Its target audience are music lovers with cassettes and vinyl records that, in Sony-speak, require 'digitalisation'. While the idea of converting the odd track to a digital format is appealing, the time taken

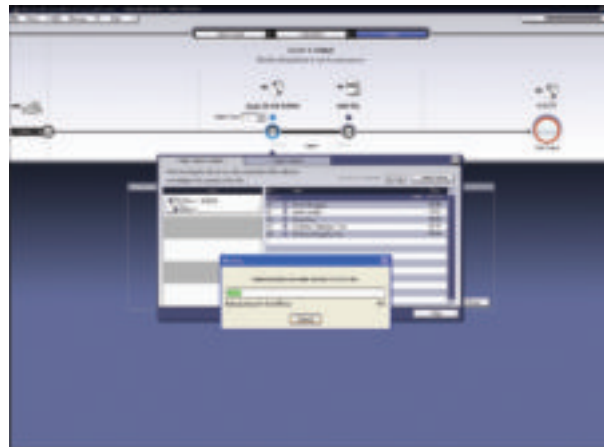
VAIO laptops have maintained a reputation for being among the most well-specified on the market.

to do just one album would have most people browsing the Amazon site and buying the CD instead. Mastering Studio does try to make things easier, but the VAIO doesn't. It has only a mic input, leaving Sony no option but to recommend the Edirol UA-5 USB audio interface for use with the software. In fact, any ASIO-compatible audio interface can be used, but this is an extra cost.

The first step with Mastering Studio is to determine the input device (either mic, line or ASIO). Selecting line can be very confusing as Windows appears to monitor mic input at the same time; the meters will move but there's insufficient gain. Switch to mic and the input overloads with line-level sources. Use ASIO and the input gain settings are determined from a device such as a UA-5. Mastering Studio's metering in the Input Level Adjustment tab reflects the source level. The other tab, Noise Reduction, has an automatic option for either Analogue Record or Cassette Tape.

On your marks

Step two concentrates on recording, but the metering on the left remains inactive until recording commences –



which is rather unhelpful. A window prompts the use of automatic track markers, which seems like a good idea for recording numerous tracks in one pass but, in fact, track markers can be a pain too because of the way Sony integrates them.

From Menu, the Options section enables customisation of the Auto Track Marker threshold. This sets

In the final stage, the song running order is shown prior to burning to CD or saving to disk.

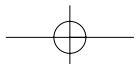
the sensitivity so that when the volume drops below a certain level for a specified time, Mastering Studio will assume that a new song has commenced and begin recording it on a separate track. Get this wrong and you end up with a very long track or lots of very short ones. What makes it even harder is that there's no metering to help set a threshold, just data entry.

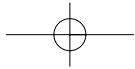
In short, track markers are a good idea but very badly implemented. Still, you can always add them manually – and edit them – with a right-click to delete or move. The latter brings up a window with a timeline that can be resized to suit the range of markers you're working with. Playback is possible too, enabling more precise positioning.

The main track sequence timeline does not show any waveforms for precise editing, but press the red Edit icon and six options appear: Song Info, Noise Reduction, Normalisation, Track Marking, Effect, and Fade In/Out. Song Info relates to MoodLogic track name database software which Sony endorses – but again, costs extra.

Noise Reduction enables Hiss, Crackle or Hum to be

METHOD SPOT
Moody views
 MoodLogic is Sony's recommended software for accessing a database of track names for your Mastering Studio recordings. Similar to Apple's iTunes (which uses CDDb), MoodLogic invites you to submit your own with descriptions of the tracks and earn points – as it's not a free database. For more information check out www.moodlogic.com





TEST

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Edirol's UA-5 is the recommended choice of external audio interface.

selected and varying amounts of treatment to be applied. Hiss was quite effective in moderation, and Crackle worked very well on very light clicks, but couldn't really hide worn vinyl noises or deep scratches. The Hum setting seemed ineffectual, suggesting that the filtering is set for the US mains frequency of 60Hz instead of the UK's 50Hz. Taking it to extremes turned everything into a filtered mumble.

The Track Marking edit function includes an option to Divide At Track Marks (so that tracks can become unlinked to utilise different plug-in effects settings). There's Auto Track Marking, too, if you want to try this after recording has taken place.

The name game

Effect will remain greyed out until it is turned on from the icon above the track timeline. When active, this

during the burn-to-CD phase. However, even though configurations are saved and linked to each track as desired, moving between the Tracks page and then returning to the Effects Settings window reveals that the newly defined effects settings' names disappear – though they do appear in the preset list.

The same happens with the individual effects. Save a preset and later return to the plug-in using the Properties options and the name will have disappeared. Furthermore, if you saved a custom preset and then modify it later you can't overwrite it; you have to use a new name.

That said, the plug-ins are very useful, although the Sony Oxford EQ is a bit of a fiddle. It relies entirely on its sliders for data entry as its graphic display is not the interactive 'click-and-drag' type. By contrast, click on a slider with Waves and it becomes highlighted, enabling fine adjustments with the up/down arrow keys. Double-click and then a figure can be typed in. The Effects Settings window has a preview transport section that plays an individual track or undivided tracks (as these will all get the same treatment). Back in the Arrange page, right-click on a

Sony's algorithm to convert 24-bit audio to 16-bit data suitable for CD. However, it's worth remembering that the L1 Ultramaximiser plug-in has a word-length reduction system too.

Is it VAIOble?

Considering that Sony touts this laptop as a multimedia solution, the lack of line input is surprising. Sony suggests users buy the GRT docking bar that adds line in/out and an optical out. However, this is £140 and the other recommended solution, the UA-5 (around £250), needs to be plugged in. It's also a USB 1.1 device and consequently its 24-bit/96kHz credentials are rather cumbersome, requiring switching between record and playback modes as its bandwidth is unable to simultaneously input and output audio at this resolution.

Out of the box, the Sony VAIO GRT916Z isn't cut out for music without the docking bar or an external audio interface. Yet it's a powerful beast and the SonicStage Mastering Studio does work, but its version 1.1 incarnation is still very crude. The question you've got to ask yourself is how much time do you have to carry out this kind of remastering to make this bundle worth the expense? **MTM**

This laptop is powerful and versatile but doesn't perform as a standalone solution for audio.

brings up the Settings Window which is, in essence, a plug-ins rack. To the left, the combinations of active plug-ins can be saved as an effects set-up. Hence, different configurations can be made for specific tracks.

Well, that's the theory. In practice, you can apply different effects set-ups to different tracks

track and choose Properties and the currently used effects are revealed – but alas, no mention of the setting's configuration name.

Fiddle factor

Actually playing tracks is one of the most frustrating aspects of Mastering Studio as there's no playback key command. In fact, the lack of key commands is the biggest weakness of the whole package, and it soon gets very tedious to use. A lot of navigation functions aren't documented either: for example, double-clicking above or below a track will move the playback cursor to that point, whereas double-clicking on the track returns the cursor to the beginning of the track and commences playback.

The final step verifies the track order that you've established and named in the Arrange window. The tracks can be written to either CD or disk as a series of .WAV files. The Output Settings tab reveals the Super Bit Mapping (SBM) option. This is

SUMMARY

KEY FEATURES

- Mobile Pentium 4 3.06GHz CPU
- 512MB RAM
- NVIDIA GeForce FX Go5600 with 64MB VRAM
- 80GB hard disk
- CD/DVD writer
- 16.1-inch screen
- Wireless networking
- USB 2 and FireWire 400
- Windows XP Home Edition

WHY BUY

- Powerful, portable computer
- Good range of interfacing options
- Comprehensive software bundle
- Large, clear screen
- Good storage facilities

WALK ON BY

- No line input
- Poor battery life (90 minutes)
- SonicStage software tedious to use
- No DC offset or click-removal effects
- Audio interface required for Mastering Studio
- Large and heavy external PSU

VERDICT

This laptop is powerful and versatile but doesn't perform as a standalone solution for audio as it requires expensive extras.



RELATED TECHNOLOGY

Soft touch

The GRT models are described as multimedia laptops with bundled software to suit. The Adobe Companion Pack features Photoshop Elements (image manipulation), Acrobat Elements (PDF file creation) and Premiere LE 6 (video editing). Sony includes its PictureGear Studio 2 suite for digital photography which, combined with the Adobe applications and Microsoft Works 7, should make creating CD artwork be easy enough.

Windows Movie Maker and Sony's own Click To DVD and DVgate Plus will sort out the gig footage. Drag'n'Drop CD+DVD deals with disc-burning tasks via three desktop icons. A right-click on one of these brings up a menu of burning options. InterVideo WinDVD 5 is included, featuring Setup options for analogue audio out to a Pro Logic device, plus an S/PDIF digital out option. Putting safety first, the Norton Internet Security 90-day trial pack is also installed.

