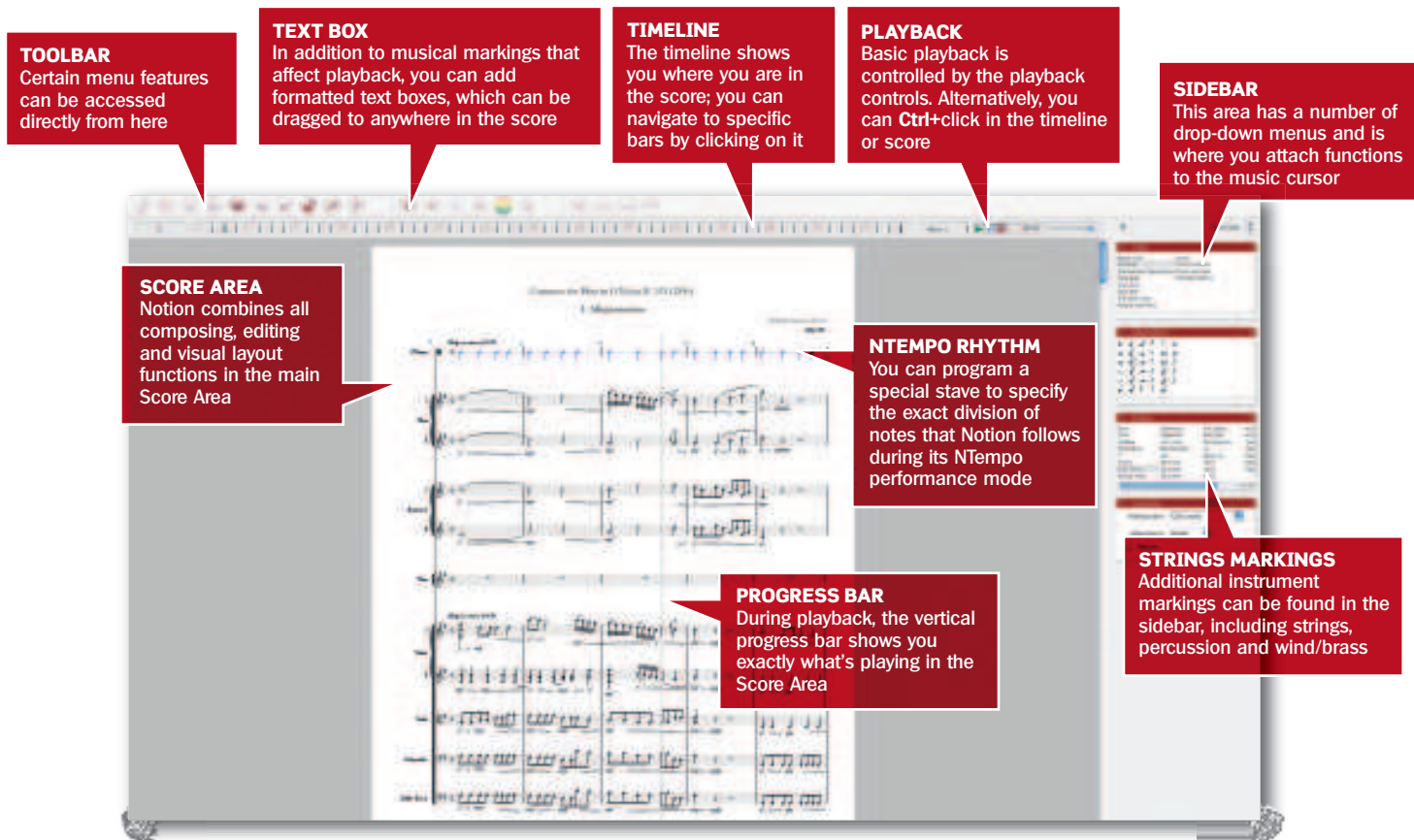


Mac PC What is it? Scoring and playback system with sample library **PRICE: £399**

CONTACT: Notion, 020 8899 60904 WWW.notionmusic.com



NOTION MUSIC

Notion 2.0

Notion's all-in-one design makes it perhaps the most approachable program for anyone writing musical scores, but can v2 compete with the recently updated Sibelius and Finale?

► SYSTEM REQUIREMENTS

PC: P4 CPU, 512MB RAM, 2GB hard drive space, Windows XP
Mac: Power PC, 512MB RAM, 2GB hard drive space, OS X 10.4.2

► TEST SYSTEM

Mac: Apple Mac Pro Dual 3GHz, 3GB RAM, OS X 10.4.9



AUDIO DEMOS
Our demo WAV contains an excerpt from Mozart's *Flute Concerto*, and a quick string composition that we knocked together ourselves

In these high-tech days of instant musical gratification, the concept of patiently writing out your musical thoughts in manuscript for someone else to play seems almost prehistoric. And yet if you want to communicate your musical ideas to a band of regular orchestral players, that's precisely what they'll expect you to do.

For some time now, the two leading software applications designed for this purpose have been Sibelius and Finale. But while these mainstays have become increasingly complex, a more focused program, Notion, has been introduced to the market. Now at version 2.0, this Mac

and PC program offers a completely self-contained route to building traditional scores from scratch, with the added bonus of hearing them played back via an included orchestral sample bank that was performed by the London Symphony Orchestra at Abbey Road Studios.

Lounge orchestra

In a nutshell, Notion 2.0 comprises a score-based sequencer, a sample playback engine and an integrated sample library. The sound library covers all the typical orchestral instruments, from strings and winds to brass and percussion, including

piano. However, extra sample sets are also available, covering more bespoke instrumental articulations and solo styles. In addition to fresh composition, Notion's other great feature is its ever-expanding online score library (using its proprietary NTN file format), making it a great 'accompaniment' tool. And, of course, all your work can be printed out, ready for the players to work from.

All pretty simple, but you'll notice that so far we've not mentioned MIDI, sample player formats, plug-ins or audio recording. This is because Notion's self-contained design neatly sidesteps most of these issues.

However, concessions to compatibility include MusicXML format support and MIDI file import. Real-time and step MIDI keyboard input is also present, although to be honest we found this aspect frustrating to use and more about note 'entering' than playing. Furthermore, MIDI file export isn't supported, which is an annoyance.

Showtime

Writing in Notion can be done in a number of ways (including step input using MIDI). However, the first thing to do is to set up a score, choosing your instrumentation, time signature, key signature, etc. Thankfully, a bunch of handy templates are included to get you started. Because Notion's score, instrumentation and playback are fully integrated from the outset, it's then simply a case of composing your parts using notes, rests, articulations, and so on.

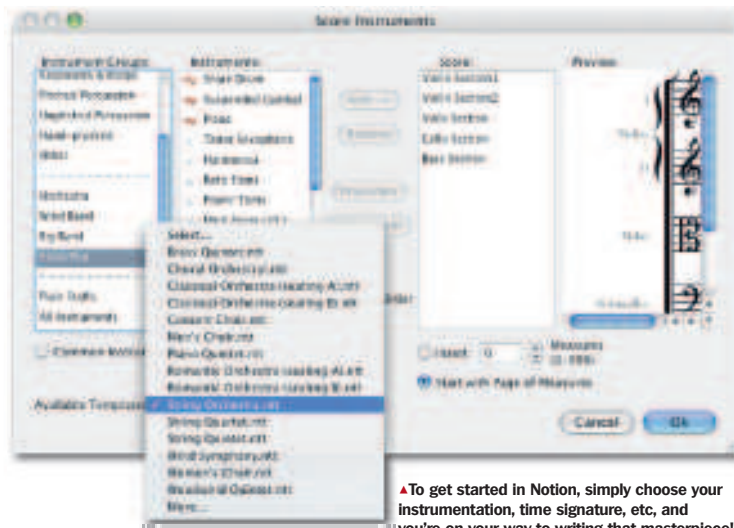
The way this works is that Notion has two cursor formats – a standard pointer and a music cursor – which you toggle between using the **Esc** key. With the music cursor enabled, you can pick up items from the drop-down sidebar menu to the right

to dynamics marks (*m p, f*, crescendo, and so on), articulations (such as staccato), slur, tie and beam tools, repeats and pedal markings. On top of that lot, you've also got the option to type in text, add lyrics, include chord symbols, and, of course, tempo markings. If this feels like rather a lot to get to grips with, remember that Notion can play what you write, and even includes a performance mode (see the *High performance* boxout below for more on this), so there's always audio feedback available if you want it.

Book the players

Notion steers clear of the traditional 'sequencer with plug-ins' approach, with the assumption that if you get your scoring right, you won't need to rebalance things. Even so, it does include a basic audio mixer, with level, pan, decay control, solo and mute for each instrument. But that's all you get on the mixing front and you certainly won't find any audio plug-in support.

Something else to be aware of is that Notion requires a certain degree of musical notation knowledge. This isn't a limitation as such, as it's only



▲To get started in Notion, simply choose your instrumentation, time signature, etc, and you're on your way to writing that masterpiece!

help immensely as you compose.

All in all, Notion is a niche product, much more focused than its competitors, Finale and Sibelius. It makes you think in a different way to an audio/MIDI sequencer, and has fewer distractions, which can be really refreshing. The included core sample library is good to get started with, but we suspect that anyone using the application extensively will want to invest in a few of the expansion packs, if only to get more realistic articulations or expand the repertoire of solo instruments.

What's more, we feel that Notion is a tool to be used alongside real players, rather than one to replace them (as a deluxe sample library might), with the NTempo feature in particular making it highly appropriate for this. Overall, Notion remains an excellent tool for the budding composer, and the developers have made some big improvements in this latest version. **cm**

"NOTION IS A TOOL TO BE USED ALONGSIDE REAL PLAYERS, RATHER THAN ONE TO REPLACE THEM"

and then position them in your score. Alternatively, there's an extensive printed list of key commands and a handy quick reference guide.

Given the potential complexity of a musical score, it's no surprise that the sidebar includes a lot of functions, ranging from simple notes and rests

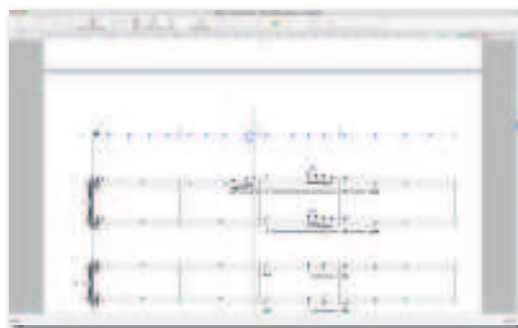
to be expected, but if you're a complete novice, the advice would have to be to get some theory training first. That said, Notion is cleverly designed to help you get things looking right, and certain automatic functions (auto-rest creation and bar-exceed indicators, for example)

High performance

In addition to standard playback, Notion includes a well-executed performance mode called NTempo. This enables you to control playback tempo using the keys on your keyboard. Obviously, this adds great functionality if you're planning to run Notion as a live accompaniment. However, you can also save a rendition of a performance as a WAV file, which would be useful if you can't take your computer to a show.

So, how does this all work in practice? First, you need to activate performance mode using the NTempo button next to the transport controls. Then it's a case of using the middle row of the computer keyboard to keep tempo, by tapping the music's time division (eg, quarter-notes for 4/4) as playback progresses. Once you're happy to continue at this pace, hit a key on the row above or below to switch to one of its 'autopilot' modes: EvenTempo or EvenPulse.

Sometimes, tapping just once per quarter-note may not be accurate enough, because if the tempo changes by a fair amount, the transition in Notion will sound lumpy as the system struggles to adjust to the new tempo. Luckily, they've also included a full NTempo stave option to alleviate this. You write a blue line of notes at the top of



▲NTempo is a really handy inclusion, but where's the support for MIDI control? Maybe we'll see it in the next version...

the score to give you programmable beat-by-beat control over how playback responds to your keypresses, indicating the rhythm that you're going to be tapping out.

The only drawback with this system is that it seems to only respond to a QWERTY keyboard – we couldn't see any way to trigger it via MIDI note data, which would be potentially even more useful.

▶ ALTERNATIVELY

Sibelius Software Sibelius 5

cm116 >> 10/10 >> £595
Just recently upgraded to v5, Sibelius now supports VST and AU plug-ins, including instruments, so you can use your existing sample libraries for playback

Finale 2008

N/A >> N/A >> £399
Possibly now the highest-spec scoring tool, Finale includes Kontakt Player 2 and Garritan sounds, and, new for this version, audio track recording and import

VERDICT

FOR
+ Handy, all-in-one composition solution
+ Expandable sound library
+ Online score library shop
+ MIDI entry in step time
+ NTempo is great for performance

AGAINST
– Core sound set may be too limited for some
– Underwhelming real-time MIDI input
– No MIDI export

Notion still isn't perfect, but it's really flourished into something of a unique product. For a self-contained, notation-based music program with performance capabilities, it could be all you need

RATING

