

# Ableton Live 8

£400

PC MAC



The music software phenomenon reaches its eighth full version, but does it maintain the high standard we've come to expect?

## System requirements

**PC** 1.5GHz, 512MB RAM, Windows XP/Vista

**Mac** G4, 512MB RAM, OS X 10.3.9

## Test system

**Mac** MacBook 2GHz Intel Core 2 Duo, 2GB RAM, OS X 10.5.6

**Mac** Mac Pro Dual 2.8GHz Quad-core Intel Xeon, 4GB RAM, OS X 10.5.6

> Live users are a funny bunch. Around the turn of the year, it's common knowledge that an update is imminent, yet the announcement leaves Live addicts like stunned kids on Christmas morning with a sackful of everything hankered for over the preceding months.

The forums explode, our social lives implode and everybody rabbits on about the feature list, whether in excitement over clever new functions, or to pass comment on long-standing omissions that have finally been addressed (or not, as the case may be). Well, Live 8's here now.

Cosmetically, it's more or less unchanged, which is reassuring, as it implies that Ableton trust us to be happy enough with Live's conceptual functional differences. So, the most radical overhaul is the new warping engine, which is guaranteed to divide opinion. It's uncontroversial enough at first glance, offering the new Complex Pro warp mode, which gives improved control over the Complex mode that's so popular with DJs and remixers. Similarly, there's greater flexibility with the Beats mode that DJs have warmed to, though it can still make complete tracks sound rubbish! But there

are more fundamental changes afoot, too...

Whereas previously you would create a warp marker at a certain point on the timeline and drag it along to the relevant point in the audio, you now create a marker on the waveform itself, and drag *that* to fit the timeline. These warp markers default to transient points, and once you have a marker, you can then nudge the audio along that marker, too.

There are various advantages to this system, not least of which is that what you see is what you get. Furthermore, when dealing with markers that are very close to each other, you no longer come up against a limited timing resolution, as could happen with previous Live versions. And if you're warping multiple audio channels and flicking between them, it means you get an immediate visual reference as to how things are lining up, which wasn't easy when the timeline itself was being stretched.

It's a positive change, and once people adjust (which should take a week or two) they'll forget that it was ever any different, despite all the uproar on the forums during beta testing. However, DJs *do* have reason to complain, as

**“You create a marker on the waveform itself, and drag *that* to fit the timeline”**

when it comes to warping electronic material on a steady beat, you're dealing with more mouse clicks and sub-menus, as Live tends to put in loads of transient markers you just don't need...

One suggestion we have is to offer a 'DJ mode', in which the default setting is to warp straight, placing just one transient marker right at the start. You can do something similar from within the Preferences, but there should be a front-panel solution. Oh, and no, Live still often incorrectly identifies the first beat of the song. Come on, Ableton - you've had four years of auto-warp to sort this out!

### On the map

The next huge leap forward comes with the long-requested Groove Engine. Whereas previous versions of Live only offered basic quantising and swing, we now have full-on groove quantisation based around a vast library of groove maps, including everything from the seminal MPC grooves beloved to this day by dance and hip-hop producers, and the quantise mappings of the legendary hip-hop machine that is E-MU's SP1200, right on through to a huge range of real drummers' feels. And these work on audio, too, though it sometimes takes more tweaking to get perfect results. Nevertheless, the whole thing is a glorious addition and brings Live up to par in an area in which it lagged behind apps like Reason, Cubase and Logic that already offered such functionality.

As for mapping and controlling parameters of third-party VST/AU plug-ins, this is easier now,

### Going instrumental

**Although you don't get them as standard with Live 8 (unless you buy the Suite), the updates to the Live instruments are part and parcel of the version update.**

**For a start, Operator has a load of new filter types (for a total of 14) and, even more excitingly, the facility to draw in your own waveform, which will no doubt delight intrepid sonic explorers. On the sampled instrument side of things, there's now Latin Percussion to complement Drum Machine and Session Drums.**

**Most fascinating of all, though, is Collision. Brought to us by AAS - the same third-party partners who created Analog, Electric and Tension - this synth uses physical modelling to recreate the sound of percussive instruments, such as xylophones and glockenspiels. You also get the resonator section of Collision as an independent effects plug-in, named Corpus. This can be used to generate modelled resonance patterns on any sound you like. It's unconventional, yes, but very cool when you get it right with an off-the-wall source.**

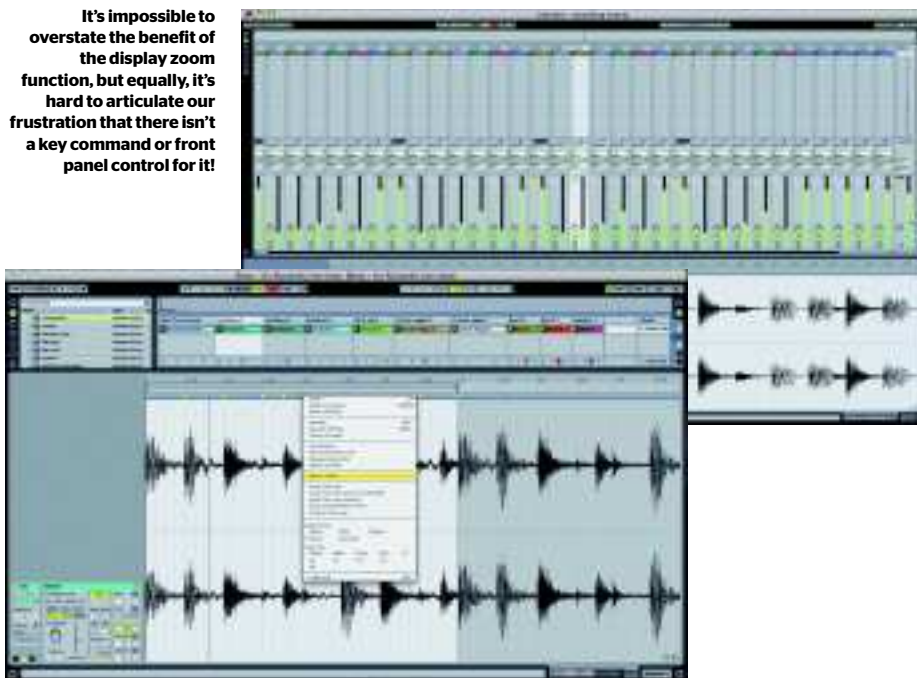
**And that's about it for Suite additions, apart from the ever-growing sound and preset library. In truth, we don't think the library is quite good enough to be your *only* sound source, but it's still pretty good, albeit not as radically**

**changed from version 7 as pre-release marketing suggested. And whether it's the range and quality of sounds (Zero-G and Cycling '74 count themselves amongst the contributors), or the carefully crafted presets, with all of the main controls pre-mapped via macros, nobody could deny Ableton's comprehensive approach.**



Suite 8 adds a multitude of synth, modelling and sampled instruments to Ableton's collection

**It's impossible to overstate the benefit of the display zoom function, but equally, it's hard to articulate our frustration that there isn't a key command or front panel control for it!**



Warping, Live 8-style - now, what you see is what you hear

as you can choose which controls should be shown in the pop-out Live editor window. And at last, Live enables you to access more than just the first 128 parameters of a plug-in, which was a major restriction of previous versions.

Live's MIDI features have been enhanced, too. First, there's the step-input sequencing mode, which offers hours of fun (though for proper old-school step-sequencing, we'll have to wait until Max For Live ships, complete with vintage-style step-sequencing patch that works with Akai's forthcoming APC-40). And this is backed up by nifty new MIDI editing features, like sensible key commands - an essential workflow streamliner for any serious user (although it still highlights the lack of a fully editable and universal key command system).

Next, the long-requested collapsible Group tracks - if you're familiar with Live's Drum Racks, you'll understand how these operate. They're busses for combining the outputs of multiple tracks, onto which you can insert effects.

The remainder of the improvements are mostly workflow-related, such as the ability to zoom in and out, enabling you to get closer to the action, or fit a lot more tracks and other info in the window. This is an awesome feature, let down by one baffling flaw: you can only set the

zoom level in the Preferences window.

A far better implemented feature is the waveform preview in the Browser tab, which makes locating audio files much easier. But Ableton have missed another trick by not including a similar feature at the base of every channel in the Session view, for visualising the structure of the tracks that are playing.

More new features include fade in/out and crossfading for clips, and control over multiple parameters with one mouse movement (eg, adjusting several track levels at once).

### It's good to share

Ableton are also to be congratulated for making the process of online track-sharing a lot less painful with the Share Live Set function. The bad news is that the whole system is still in the beta stage, although you can apply to test it. We've had a go and can report that it's a good start, although clearly still work in progress at present.

Selecting this option uploads your project to a server, including all associated audio files. Every time you do this, it's supposed to check for any new files and only upload those, though when we tried it, it created a whole new project. If there are any third-party plug-ins or non-universal content (Operator channels, for example), it will prompt you to freeze them - there's no one-click solution, it seems.

The whole thing operates in the background, while you continue working on your project, but it'll be interesting to see how the servers cope once Live 8 has been out for a while and the whole sharing system goes live, so to speak.

Little tweaks and additions notwithstanding, and apart from the new plug-ins (see boxouts), that, ladies and gentlemen, is Live 8. It's the biggest overhaul in years.

Buying into the Live experience is still a touch daunting, due to the ever-bulging Ableton product line. The standard edition of Live has the exact same functionality as the version in the full-on Suite bundle, but lacks most of the extra instruments and vast audio library. If you produce music for media, or don't have many instruments already, then Suite offers a massive saving over buying the component elements separately, these being the Essential Instrument Collection, Sampler, Operator, Drum Machines, Session Drums, Analog, Electric, Tension, Latin Percussion, World Class Library and Collision.

If you use Live for DJing or producing albums, or if you tend to make music in one specific genre and already have decent software instruments, then we suggest giving Suite a miss. Instruments like Sampler, Operator and Drum Machines are great for almost any type of electronic music, but they're not vital, and you can always buy them separately later on.

We haven't even had time to talk properly about forthcoming Live 8-requiring products, like Max For Live (for designing your own devices) and Akai's APC-40 (the best Live



The ace up Multiband Dynamics' sleeve isn't its sound but the slick and intuitive interface

### Plug it in

**There are six new effects plug-ins in Live 8. Multiband Dynamics offers three bands of compression/expansion. The results, though not comparable to a top-end processor, are certainly ample for no-nonsense problem solving; but the interface is the real stand-out aspect, as it makes it very easy to visualise what's going on. It is also deceptively powerful, thanks to some unusual but useful modes.**

**If multiband dynamics manipulation seems like overkill, you can use the new Limiter instead, which is another brickwall solution for your main output that will be particularly useful for DJs and live performers. Live's audio engine does unpleasant things if you let your signals stray into the red, so**

**this will keep them under control.**

**The rest of the new plug-ins are creative tools, including Frequency Shifter, for some ring-modulated goodness; a distortion plug-in named Overdrive that won't replace your Big Muff but still has its uses; and the rather awesome and versatile Vocoder (which is a cross between a vocoder and a talk-box, in many ways).**

**But the coolest of the bunch has to be Loooper, which is a phrase sampler, the likes of which guitarists have been using for years, but with the added bonus of automatic loop calculation and retriggering. This is an absolutely amazing live tool, as well as a compositional aid, and is our favourite new Live plug-in by far.**

controller we've ever tried). While these are optional extras, they're bound to make Live an even more appealing platform.

### Mixdown

Live 8 isn't perfect: some of the new features haven't been implemented as well as they could've, and there are things we'd still like to see (multi-screen support, for example). We've also been experiencing more crashes and audio glitches than with previous versions when adding plug-ins (though not when performing with a pre-prepared set, which is the main thing). Hopefully, this will be resolved with an update.

Ultimately, none of this takes away from what is an awesome leap forward in terms of both features and workflow. File this under 'essential upgrade' and start saving those pennies. **cm**

**Contact** [contact@ableton.com](mailto:contact@ableton.com)  
**Web** [www.ableton.com](http://www.ableton.com)  
**Info** Ableton Suite 8, £600



A new optional Live instrument created by AAS, Collision is for all you physical-modelling nuts

### Alternatively

**cm137 >> 9/10 >> £499**

**Steinberg Cubase 5**

Now with enhanced audio warping, but little in the way of live performance features

**cm119 >> 10/10 >> £312**

**Apple Logic Studio**

Not many other sequencers are designed to be used live, but Logic ships with Mainstage, which is aimed at the performing musician

### Verdict

**For** Stunning Groove Engine

Enhanced workflow

Improved warping

Loooper is awesome

MIDI section comes of age

**Against** Warping more fiddly for DJs

Some features not perfect

More audio glitches and crashes

No multi-screen support

Sharing functionality still in beta

Its not without its faults, but this is by far the most powerful Live yet

**9/10**