



Notion Music

Notion 3 £169

PC MAC



Notation apps can be stuffy and starchy, but this one aims to broaden its appeal with an expanded library and lots of MIDI-friendly features

System requirements

PC 2.4GHz Pentium 4 CPU, 1GB RAM, Windows XP/Vista/Windows 7 (64-bit compatible), 16GB HD space

Mac G5 CPU, 1GB RAM, OS X 10.4, 16GB HD space

> Notion is a notation-based sequencer package aimed at composers and those writing in score format. Version 2 (8/10, **cm122**) reviewed well but came up short with its bundled library. The new version rectifies this and includes not only Notion 2's library (about 8GB of far-miked samples courtesy of the London Symphony Orchestra) but also an improved LSO sample set. With close-miked stereo samples and up to seven dynamic layers, this is more akin to a typical orchestral sample library, and they've bundled a version of IK Multimedia's CSR (Hall algorithm only) to cope with reverb duties. However, possibly more significant is the inclusion of the sample library from their Progression app, which features guitars, bass, drums, piano and electric piano.

Export opinion

So where does this leave the program itself? It transpires that the library refit is just one aspect of the upgrade. Starting with compatibility, N3 supports VST plug-ins, VST instruments (see the box out) and ReWire (both master and slave). In addition to WAV file export, there's now basic

WAV file import and enhanced MIDI functions, including MIDI out and a sequencer-style stave.

Audio routing is handled by a new mixer, which offers level/mute/solo, 'power pan' (you can pan the left and right channels individually), four VST inserts per channel, four auxiliary busses, direct hardware routing, and support for multiple-output VST instruments. As well as the aforementioned CSR reverb, there's also IK's AmpliTube X-Gear (basically AmpliTube 2 Duo and Ampeg SVX Uno in a unified shell). What you don't get, however, is any kind of EQ or dynamics processing.

On the graphical front, Notion has received a considerable facelift and now sports the guitar fretboard from Progression, a redesigned workspace and new all-in-one tool palette.

One important aspect of Notion is live use. Performance mode enables you to control playback using either your computer or MIDI keyboard, with velocity-controlled dynamics in the case of the latter. As before, this operates in both basic and more precise (NTempo) modes - see the manual on the DVD for more on this. Finally, an additional feature called LivePlay

“Notion 3’s library hits the mark, delivering more edge than v2’s”

gives you the option of playing an instrument live, accompanied by your score playback.

Modus operandi

Although Notion 3 now includes more DAW-like features, its methodology is still rooted in notation. This means that while composing, you’ll spend time switching between Edit Mode (for adding notes, markings and so on) and Score Setup Mode where you add or remove instruments. Also fundamental is the concept that Notion plays what’s written, interpreting most dynamic and articulation markings (see *Library matters* boxout for more).

Once you start composing, getting to grips with the entry palette is vital. This includes everything from notes, rests and key signatures to staves, chords and articulations. Each function is achieved by ‘arming’ your cursor from the palette and then dropping the item on your score. Usually this is fine, but we found the desire to work quickly got us hunting for key commands (you’ll find these listed in dialog boxes over each palette function).

If this sounds laborious, you can also input via a MIDI keyboard in both record and step mode. The new Sequencer Staff option lets you see things in familiar piano roll format. In practice, we found it a little fiddly to work with as the note graphics are quite small, and we ended up converting to standard notation for editing.

Delivering the goods

Notion 3’s library definitely hits the mark, delivering more edge than v2’s. But we found that the two complement each other well, with the old library delivering plenty of legato glue. We noticed greater differentiation between articulations with Notion 3’s sounds. Most dynamic and playing style markings (staccato, glissando, pizzicato, tremolo, crescendo, etc) are interpreted as expected. Some text markings (eg, ‘behind bridge’ for strings) are purely for player direction and don’t affect the sound; however, we were surprised that we could add a mute to a trombone playing fluttertongue style to get muted fluttertongue. Our only real gripe with the orchestral library is the lack of ensemble presets besides strings. The Progression ‘band’ library opens up Notion 3 to a wider audience. The sounds aren’t cutting-edge but are sonically excellent and there’s enough here to score for a band.

As its makers suggest, Notion 3 bridges the

gap between notation and audio apps. This means it does a bit of both but excels at neither - you won’t find quite the same level of graphic flexibility as Finale, for example. But to complain too much here would be missing the point, as Notion 3 is primarily a composition and performance tool for people who communicate using traditional score. Its goal of being quick, flexible and simple to understand is admirably achieved in this latest version. **cm**

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Info Upgrade, free (shipping costs only); Upgrade from Progression/Protégé, £70; Crossgrade from Sibelius/Finale, £70



Notion can translate its articulations to suit a variety of third-party libraries

Library matters

Notion 3 plays scores as written, including dynamics markings such as staccato and many text instructions like tremolo and pizzicato. For Notion’s own library, this works well enough, as the company have tailored it to behave as desired. However, the inclusion of VST support begs the question of how to deal with third-party instruments raised on a diet of MIDI keyswitching...

The answer is that Notion Music have started the process of writing presets to handle the well-known library packages. So far, supported products include EWQL Symphonic Orchestra, Garritan Personal Orchestra, Miroslav Philharmonik and Vienna

Symphonic Special Edition, with more planned for the future. Obviously, you’ll need to own these libraries to take advantage of this feature, but even if you don’t, the presets are tantalisingly listed in the Score Edit page. We had no trouble using the patches for GPO4.

For third-party sample libraries not yet included, you could simply load up a multi instrument and spread the articulations across multiple MIDI channels. You could then add extra staves for each individual MIDI channel of your instrument - we managed to get this technique going with Kontakt 4 pretty quickly.

Alternatively

Sibelius 6 Professional cm143 >> 10/10 >> £583
Ideal for producing printed scores, Magnetic Layout being a highlight

Finale 2010 cm142 >> 9/10 >> £400
Practically on a par with Sibelius when it comes to pro scoring

Verdict

For Vastly improved library
VST instrument and plug-in support
Better MIDI implementation
Presets for third-party libraries
ReWire master or slave

Against No mixer EQ or dynamics
Graphic score editing can feel limited

With v3, Notion’s notation-meets-audio approach has solidified, resulting in a far more rounded product

8/10



The swish new tool palette packs numerous options into a small space - here’s the chord menu