

Ableton Live 8 Suite | €699

Live 8's finally here. **Martin Delaney** pretends to be blasé but blows it by chewing open the Live Suite package with his teeth



WHAT IS IT?

The latest update to Ableton's incredibly popular and versatile performance/DJing/remixing/production tool.

CONTACT

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Web: ableton.com

HIGHLIGHTS

- 1 Unique and intuitive GUI
- 2 Versatile and full of features
- 3 New warping modes are a huge improvement

Like any good DAW, Ableton Live has evolved – new features, new instruments and new audio effects have appeared. There are times when a Live geek might wonder ‘what’s left to add to Live?’ but a look at the forums reveals a long list of ‘essential’ add-ons that users are still waiting for. Ableton have their own agenda, of course – so as well as the wondering we just did, we have to ask – is it possible for Ableton to satisfy the customers, please themselves, and still avoid the stench of ‘feature creep’?

Increments are fun
Superficially, Live hasn’t changed much – a tribute to how right Ableton got it

the first time. Beneath the hood, though, there’s a lot to investigate: new instruments, effects, workflow improvements and of course, the all-new warp engine.

There are three basic packages – Live LE, Live and Live Suite, each of which can be bought as a boxed version with discs or as a cheaper direct download, with less content. On the discs, as well as the Live app and instruments, you get a lot of extra material, including Essential Instrument Collection, Session Drums, Drum Machines and Latin Percussion (watch your drive space, there’s a lot of GB with these puppies – good thing there are lower quality install options).

I went through the install procedure on both Mac OS X and Windows XP and didn’t run into any problems. I was upgrading from the 7 Suite, and it was nice not to have to re-authorise each product separately. Obviously all of your Live 7 projects will be fully compatible with 8, but it doesn’t work the other way round. Move 7 to your trash, or if you’re the cautious type, stick it on a hard drive somewhere until you feel ready to get rid of it.

The 8 Suite includes the new Latin Percussion collection – 1GB of samples, sets, grooves, and clips, based around multi-sampled acoustic percussion instruments such as bells, congas, bongos and shakers. A lot of work has gone into this set, and the ready-mixed clips make a great source of material, as well as setting an example in how to put this kind of groove-based material together. The sets (containing the clips), and samples are installed in specific Library folders, making it easy to find anything from an individual sample through to an entire set. Latin Percussion won’t be to everybody’s taste, but it’s a great sounding and well-built addition to the Library.

Look around you
Moving away from the Library, Live’s Session and Arrangement Views look pretty much the same, but below the Browser, you’ll see the Groove Pool icon:





The new Collision instrument is great for mysterious pad sounds, as well as the something-hitting-something-else sounds you'd expect

Live 8 has a Context Menu command called 'Extract Groove(s)', which copies the 'groove' – the rhythmic feel – from any audio or MIDI clip. Once you execute the 'extract' command, the groove appears in the Pool, ready to be edited, and then dragged onto any other audio or MIDI clip. It's great that this works with both audio and MIDI

scene. Zoom Display is another new feature that relates to screen space. It's in Preferences – click and drag to scale your Live display up or down, from -50 to +200%. It's good for on-stage situations, and for working with higher-resolution screens, and small screens – I'm using Live at 120% on a netbook. Colour-coding's expanded

Devices of pleasure

Live 8 Suite introduces the Collision instrument, which primarily replicates sounds from mallet-type instruments, such as bells, vibes, and marimbas – there are some quality presets there, though it doesn't feel different enough from the existing Tension instrument.

Operator's been updated to include more filters, expanded routing, and wavetable synthesis – draw a waveform, and export it into the library to re-use in Operator, or one of Live's sample-based instruments: Simpler, Sampler, or Impulse. This is a great feature – you should plan to spend way too much time with it. Part of Collision has been carved off to create the Corpus

SPECS

System Requirements
PC: 1.5GHz Pentium 4 or Celeron compatible CPU or faster, 1GB RAM, XP or Vista, compatible sound card, DVD drive.

Mac: 1.25 GHz G4/G5 or faster, 1GB RAM, OS X 10.4.11, DVD drive.

Box contents: Live install discs, Essential Instrument Collection, Session Drums, Drum Machines, Latin Percussion. Also includes printed manual.

Disk space required: 4.6GB for download version of Suite, 48GB for boxed version of Suite.

The Preview Tab's a real timesaver, especially for DJs who are working with files that contain entire songs

material – that makes it very flexible. You'll get wildly varying results with the Pool, depending on the combinations of groove and source material.

Another new item appears below the Groove Pool window – the Preview Tab. The old 'headphone' preview icon resides here now, and next to it – if you click on an audio sample or MIDI file in the Browser – you'll see a graphic display of the waveform or MIDI notes. Click anywhere on that to begin playback from that point, in sync with the project tempo (unless you click the Raw button). The Preview Tab's a real timesaver, especially for DJs who are working with files that contain entire songs. This is the kind of new feature that isn't a headline grabber, but you'll use it and love it every day.

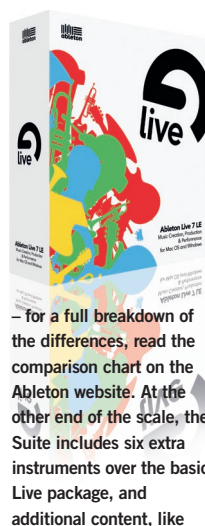
Group Tracks are a long-awaited addition that saves screen space, allows one mixer channel to control a number of tracks, and opens up some interesting possibilities for clip launching – the clip launch buttons are still active in the folded 'host' track, so you can fire a horizontal row of clips from there, kind of like a scene within a

beyond clips, to tracks, scenes, and macros – like Zoom Display this'll be seriously useful onstage; but don't overdo it, because it'll start to look, well... 'pretty'. Not in a good way.

Thin Crust, Regular or Deep Pan Live?

There are three core Live packages – Live LE (the LE version of 8 isn't out yet), which sells as a download/box for £107/£149 – the 'base' Live version itself (£315/£397) and Live Suite (£485/£617), which is what's being talked about here. Any of these, including LE, will give you pretty much the quality Live basic experience – it's the extras (and your budget) that'll swing it for you either way.

LE is limited in terms of audio track count, number of instruments per project, number scenes, and so on

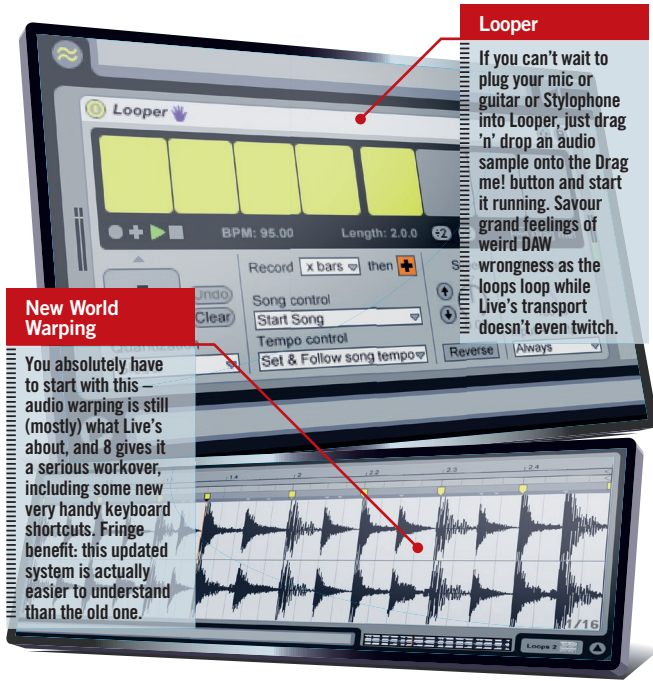


– for a full breakdown of the differences, read the comparison chart on the Ableton website. At the other end of the scale, the Suite includes six extra instruments over the basic Live package, and additional content, like

the Essential Instrument Collection, Latin Percussion, and Session Drums packages (this extra content depends on whether you choose the download or boxed version). There are also upgrades available from whichever version of Live you're currently using – log in to your user account on ableton.com to see what your options are. Read the main review about whether the Suite is worth the upgrade over the regular Live version, and don't forget, you can buy individual instruments, too.

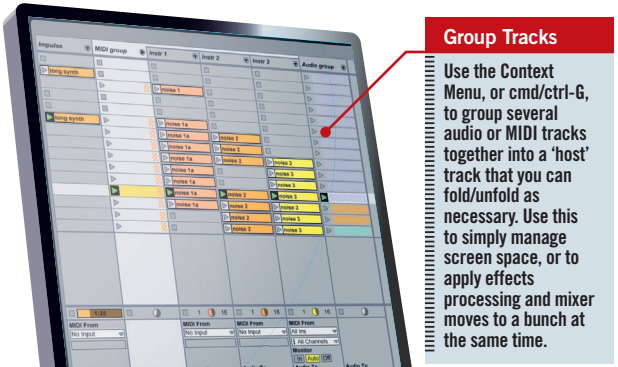
Your first hour with... **Live 8**

Download or unbox the software, run the installer, launch it, register it, check for updates immediately – then what? Which new Live features should you play with first?

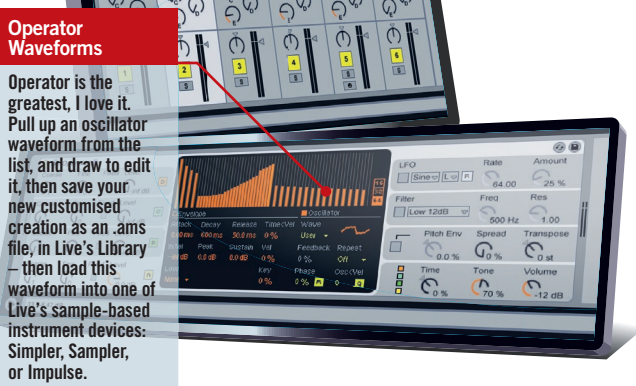


Looper
If you can't wait to plug your mic or guitar or Stylophone into Looper, just drag 'n' drop an audio sample onto the Drag me! button and start it running. Savour grand feelings of weird DAW wrongness as the loops loop while Live's transport doesn't even twitch.

New World Warping
You absolutely have to start with this – audio warping is still (mostly) what Live's about, and 8 gives it a serious workover, including some new very handy keyboard shortcuts. Fringe benefit: this updated system is actually easier to understand than the old one.



Group Tracks
Use the Context Menu, or cmd/ctrl-G, to group several audio or MIDI tracks together into a 'host' track that you can fold/unfold as necessary. Use this to simply manage screen space, or to apply effects processing and mixer moves to a bunch at the same time.



Operator Waveforms
Operator is the greatest, I love it. Pull up an oscillator waveform from the list, and draw to edit it, then save your new customised creation as an .ams file, in Live's Library – then load this waveform into one of Live's sample-based instrument devices: Sampler, or Impulse.

audio effect, which models a variety of 'resonant objects' – pipes, strings, tubes). It's great for percussion, and it'll probably be used more than Collision itself – by me, anyway. DJs and instrumentalists who've been trying to achieve the ultimate live looping setup have got Looper, which basically behaves like an old-school hardware sound-on-sound looping footpedals, and a lot of attention has been paid to ease of use, with a more-or-less one button operation for start/stop/record. It won't work for every looping scenario, but it'll be a big help.

For people who don't need live looping, Looper's still great because it means that looping samples can be embedded in chains within a rack. Bizarrely, Looper is independent of Live's main transport – so you can run Looper loops while Live's transport is stopped. Also for instrumentalists is Overdrive, Live's third overdrive/distortion effect, giving straightforward guitar FX pedal-style operation – the Frequency Shifter is more fun, though – use it to create pitch shifting effects or as a ring modulator – I really liked the sounds that are possible with this, and the dry/wet mix makes all the difference – another goodie.

The Limiter and Multiband Dynamics effects are geared towards production-type processing. I have to say, the presets don't do justice to these – I'd really like to see more examples in the box.

More warping than ever

I could pre-empt the rest of this review now: the updated Beats mode, the new Complex Pro mode, and more importantly, the changes to warping – all of this makes Live 8 an essential upgrade. When you load an audio

sample, Live identifies and displays transients, which become 'pseudo' warp markers as you mouse over them. Double-click or drag one to make it an official warp marker.

As you drag it, watch the waveform stretch on screen, giving a very clear representation of how the audio is going to behave. The Quantise command is going to become my favourite thing – one click to quantise an entire audio sample – very nice, thanks! There are also some great keyboard shortcuts that work with warping – I feel a warping tutorial coming on.

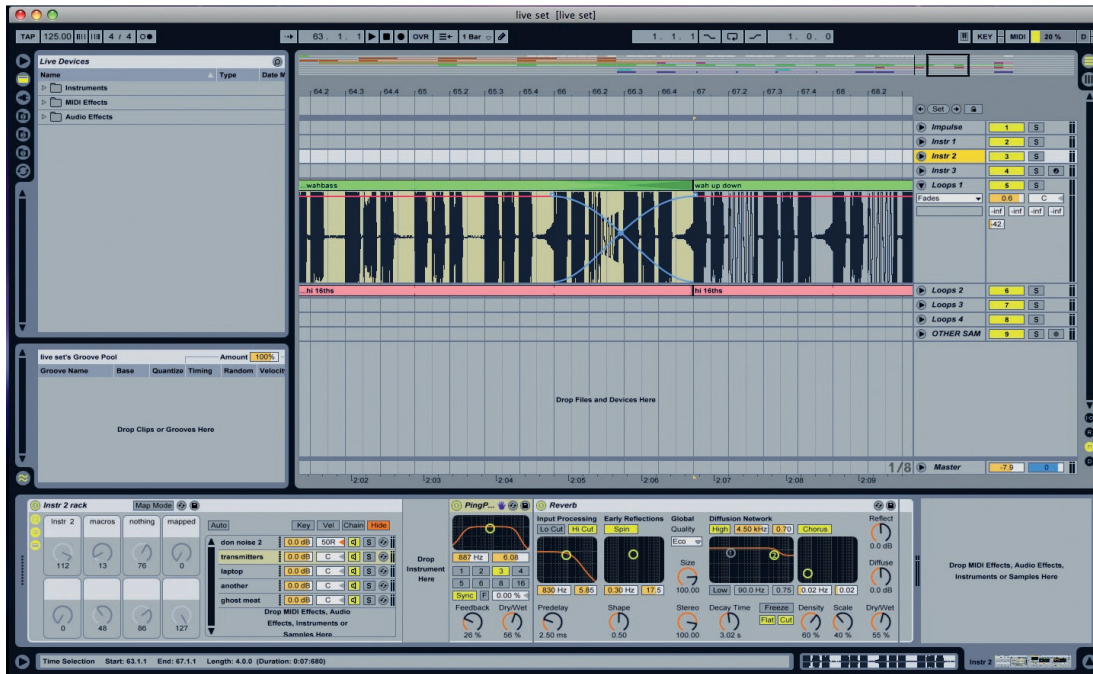
Like it?

Live is still reasonably newbie-friendly – the basics are still intact, with the layers of creative tools on top waiting for you when you're ready. Diehards won't get any nasty surprises – there's been debate online about the transition from warping in 7 to 8, but the 8 way is better and easier. None of the new 8 features will take as long for you to understand as Drum Racks might have, last time round.

There are negatives, sure. Live still leans towards performance and other spontaneous activities, more than old-school DAW tasks. If you migrate to Live from Cubase or Logic, you'll love it, but you'll also miss a lot of helpful features. Just as an aside – I'd love to know how many folks use the Essential Instrument Collection, and the other Library content. Don't know about you but I don't like to fill my drive with samples that I'll never use and this time around it really feels that Ableton have bloated the size and weight of Live in order to compete with it's 'rivals'. And in doing so they've made a bank of sounds that – to be honest – still isn't either as vanilla useable or mind-blowingly



Session View remains awesome as ever. Take a look at the Groove Pool and Browser Preview windows



Live's Arrangement View is mostly unchanged – but there are new features – check out the crossfades in this audio track.

impressive as it's more established, more conventional rivals. That'd be fine if the libraries came for free but in Suite form you're paying an almighty premium for something that – while

ground for commands – maybe it's time for another way of dealing with floating toolbars or popups – and Live's mastering presets are still lacking to the extent that you'd ever reach for them

mastering alternatives. That's enough whining. Let's remember that there's still no viable alternative to Live for performance, DJing, remixing, or general jamming around, and what you

This is a worth-it upgrade and the Suite is recommended because of the bundled Instruments

nice to have – may never get used.

Fortunately Live is still there beneath the extras. Let's not lose sight of the real strength of Live – it's unbeatable and world famous audio manipulation. Meanwhile the Context Menu is getting over-used as a dumping

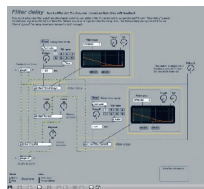
unless you had to. The Multiband Dynamics effect will make a big difference, but there aren't enough usable presets ready to go. Yeah, yeah, I know - roll your own, but what I also know is that I can ReWire to Logic, and quickly pull up some very effective

might lose in specific DAW functions you gain in workflow and fun. This is a totally worth-it upgrade, and the Suite is recommended because of the bundled Instruments. But I'd suggest the download over the boxed version, because not everybody's going to need the ironically-named Essential Instruments Collection. Wow. It's nice to be recommending the cheaper alternative for a change!

In its basic forms, Live 8 remains the state of the art for creative audio. If you haven't tried Live yet, then you haven't lived. **FM**

The Other New Live stuff

The launch at NAMM 2009 caused a huge amount of buzz, but a lot of that buzz was around the Akai APC40 controller, and Max for Live – they're potentially exciting products, but not part of the Live 8 package, Suite or otherwise – in an ideal world, Max for Live would be available as part of the Suite – that would be awesome. So don't be confused by accidental buzz-bleed – you can get



plenty excited about those things when the time comes. If you want to know what Max is about, you can get the free 30-day demo of the original, standalone, version, now at

cycling74.com. Max for Live will bring the limitless creative potential of Max into the Live interface – now you don't have to wait for Ableton to design your dream interface – you can do it yourself! The Share Live Set File menu item will become a fully-functioning set sharing service soon – as yet, there's no release date for either of these, so we could be waiting a while.

FutureMusic VERDICT

STABILITY [Progress bar: 10/10]

VALUE [Progress bar: 8/10]

EASE OF USE [Progress bar: 7/10]

VERSATILITY [Progress bar: 9/10]

RESULTS [Progress bar: 10/10]

A solid update, with an unmissable warping revamp, and stacks of other new features and tweaks.

ALTERNATIVES



Logic Studio
£319

Logic is the audio/MIDI behemoth that Live has to contend with, to break the DAW market. Logic Studio is incredibly affordable, and includes tons of extra content, but the MainStage element is the closest it comes to being a performance tool.

apple.com/logicstudio



Energy XT
59 Euros

Very 'portable' DAW – runs on OS X, XP/Vista, Linux and can run from a USB memory stick. It's also cheap, and takes a low CPU hit – this could be the netbook-based sequencer of your dreams.

energy-xt.com



Reason 4
449 Euros

Self-contained sequencer and synth/sample player for OS X or XP/Vista. The fiddly interface and vertical rack shape don't conform to widescreen displays – Reason probably works best as a synth module, ReWired to Live.

propellerheads.se



Numerology
£86

An affordable step sequencer, but one that goes way beyond the basics, and makes a hypnotic composition or jamming tool (OS X only). It also ReWires to Live, so you can have them both!

five12.com