

## > reviews / cakewalk sonar x1

### SMART TOOLS

These change function depending on where you're using them - smart!

### CONTROL BAR

If you don't like the tool layout found here, you can customise it to your needs

### SCREENSETS

Store and recall preferred screen configurations

### BROWSER

Sure, it's just a browser, but it makes getting audio, MIDI clips, plug-ins and patches into your projects a breeze

### INSPECTOR

Shows the selected channel as well as the one it's routed to - great for working with buses

### FX CHAINS

Save plug-in combinations for later recall



### TRACKS

Much the same as in previous versions, but note that the FX bin is reflected in the Inspector to the left

### MULTIDOCK

Various views can be docked here, and you can move the thing around as needed

# Cakewalk Sonar X1 £379

PC



The all-American DAW has been given a much-needed streamlining, but have Cakewalk thrown the baby out with the bathwater?

### System requirements

PC Intel Core 2 Duo 2.67GHz/AMD Phenom Quad Core 9750 2.4 GHz, 2GB RAM, Windows XP/Vista/7 (32-/64-bit), 1280x800 display

> We're accustomed to seeing a new version of Sonar each year, but last time around we got v8.5 instead of the expected v9. (It was a feature-packed update all the same.) Now, Cakewalk have hurled another curve ball by giving us Sonar X1, effectively resetting their version counter. Sure, it's essentially Sonar 9 by another name, but it's also indicative of the serious overhaul that's been undertaken.

For those unfamiliar with it, Sonar is a PC DAW that provides everything you need to make quality tracks from start to finish. It's got several great synthesisers, a virtual piano, drum kits, mixing effects galore, audio features like timing adjustment (Audio Snap) and pitch correction (V-Vocal), and lots more. We're looking at the full Producer Edition (see *Version revision* on p92 for details on the different editions).

The big new feature for Sonar X1 isn't a sexy new plug-in or editing tool, but a revised interface. Now, don't get us wrong; we liked the old Sonar. A lot. But it had begun to creak under the weight of nearly a decade of feature-creep, and its plethora of icons and obscure key commands could be intimidating. Sonar X1, on

the other hand, is clean, uncluttered and inviting - a vast, vast improvement. It could be mistaken for a totally new product, but the Sonar we know and love is hiding just beneath that slick new exterior. Cakewalk have clearly listened to their users and taken note of the better ideas found in competing products. Anyone previously put off by Sonar's GUI should take a fresh look at it, while old-timers may well feel a newfound sense of speed and freedom once they get used to it.

### Old views, new views

The old look is still apparent in the clips and the Track view. However, the tabs at the bottom of the latter for I/O options, FX bin and so on are gone. All such options are now available in the Inspector, which, in typical DAW fashion, exists as a strip down the left-hand side. The Inspector itself is tabbed so you can choose to view the Channel Strip, expand the ProChannel (more on this later), view clip options, etc. Plus, it shows the channel strip for the selected track or bus and that of its assigned output. Just like Logic!

The Browser is now a dockable (or floatable) tabbed window for quick access to plug-ins,

“It’s clean, uncluttered and inviting – a vast improvement”

media, presets and other things. You can drag plug-ins or audio into a track, FX bin, loop-slicer or wherever’s appropriate. Alas, it doesn’t work in reverse, so you can’t drag an audio clip back into the Browser. Still, the new design is tightly integrated and speeds things up considerably.

The Browser, Piano Roll, Mixer and other windows (including plug-ins), can be docked in the MultiDock. This collapsible, floatable pane can itself be moved around or stuck on a separate monitor. The Control Bar replaces the old transport bar and numerous toolbars that once cramped Sonar’s style. It’s customisable, with modules for markers, loop recording, quantise, ACT and more. You can stick it up top, down below, or float the thing.

So, several of the GUI elements can be expanded, collapsed, floated, docked and otherwise rearranged. You can save and toggle between configurations using the Screensets. This new interface arrangement/management system is collectively known as Skylight.

One of the most impressive new ideas comes in the form of Smart tools. Here, a single tool changes functionality depending on what you’re doing. It works wonderfully and unobtrusively, switching from, say, a selection tool when hovering over data, to a pencil for notes in the piano roll. You can still choose tools manually, too.

### Changing channels

Sonar has always had a solid selection of mixing plug-ins, but our expectations have been upped



**Left: ProChannel brings quality EQ, compression and saturation to every channel of your mix**

**Below left: The MultiDock can hold your choice of windows, with tabs to switch between them**

**Bottom Right: Refusing to fade away? Not any more! Fades are now reflected in audio clips’ waveforms**



considerably in recent years by third-party efforts, not to mention the SSL-modelled mixer integrated into Propellerhead’s Record. Perhaps taking inspiration from the latter, Cakewalk have blessed Sonar with ProChannel, a powerful channel-strip that’s not a plug-in but is instead built right into each channel. It features a superb EQ, analogue-style saturation and some very tasty compression options.

The EQ is a four-band affair with adjustable Q, level and frequencies for each band. The low

and high bands toggle between peak and shelving modes. You can switch between vintage, modern and pure characteristics, and there are also high-/low-pass filters with the slope adjustable from 6 to 48dB/octave in 6dB increments. Oh, and there’s a Gloss button, which adds “air” at the push of a switch. This EQ certainly packs a lot into its small GUI footprint.

ProChannel’s compressor has two modes. First is the PC76, which is obviously patterned after the industry standard Urei 1176. It offers



**The Staff View has been given a few strokes of the brush, but not the reworking some had hoped for**

### Continued concerns

**With so much attention focused on the interface, there are some users who are feeling somewhat slighted by the fact that a few long-standing issues and omissions haven’t been addressed. Some of these are features that are taken for granted by users of other DAWs, while at least one is a bug that has been around for a while.**

**If you’re a heavy MIDI user, you may have encountered the dreaded ‘MIDI crosstalk’ bug, whereby Sonar seems unable to distinguish between its own MIDI inputs. The result of this problem is that MIDI data leaks between inputs, controllers and tracks. This has been known about for some time, yet it remains an issue in Sonar X1 – we encountered it ourselves while reviewing the software. We also noted that attempts to select ‘None’ as our MIDI input were ignored, with the setting defaulting to ‘Omni’ instead.**

**The news is slightly better for those plagued by out-of-tune bass notes in Dimension Pro’s factory sound-set. The problem persists, but it’s suggested that an upcoming expansion pack will take care of it. Similarly, Cakewalk have stated on their forum that the ability to drag an instrument from the Browser onto an existing instrument (to replace it) is “fairly high-priority”.**

**Another long-desired feature are rulers that adapt to quantise settings. This seems obvious – if you’ve ever edited triplets, you know our pain.**

**Those of you awaiting major improvements to the Staff View will have to keep waiting, unfortunately. There are some minor tweaks, but nothing that rocks our world.**

**While none of these things are disastrous, it’s a shame that Cakewalk haven’t laid to rest a few long-standing bugs as part of their refresh.**

five ratios (including an infinite option) and attack, release, input and output knobs. A flick of a switch calls up the PC4K option, an SSL-like with a GUI to match. This one sports attack, release, fully adjustable ratio and make-up gain, and the ability to perform sidechaining (via the built-in high-pass filter or an external input). We tended towards the simplicity of the PC76, but both sound superb and are not your average DAW-bundled efforts. Both have dry/wet knobs, too, for easy parallel compression.

ProChannel's final trick is a tube saturation emulator. There are two modes, and the parameters are simple: input, output and drive. The sound is terrific, particularly for subtle sweetening. We can see it being applied discreetly on the master bus. A routing strip at the bottom of ProChannel lets you drag its three modules into any order, and you can place ProChannel itself before or after the track's insert effects bin. You can disable any or all modules, too.

## Chain gang

Speaking of routing, multiple effects can now be slung together and treated as a single FX Chain (you can still access plug-ins individually). Chains can be stored for later recall, but they can't include instruments or MIDI effects.

There is, of course, some new audio and MIDI content, with 1.2GB of sample material from Loopmasters and Sample Magic. Loops are in REX format, and it should be pointed out that Sonar now supports 64-bit REX files. The content is diverse and of the highest quality.

There are plenty of minor tweaks, too. Clip fades are finally reflected in the clip's waveform display. We also like the Edit Filter, which enables you to show only the automation envelopes that you want to work on (there are still no automation lanes, but Cakewalk say they're coming at some point). The new Key Clusters scheme attempts to make logical sense of the way key commands are grouped (eg, all looping commands are available via the L key and various modifiers - Alt/Shift/Ctrl), and they succeed as well as can be expected. And there's plenty more that we simply don't have the space to cover!

Sonar X1 performed like a champ, even though our test machine (with Intel Core 2 Duo 2.4GHz CPU and 3GB RAM) was, on paper, slightly under spec for the job. We could run up to 30 ProChannels at once, with the 76 compressor, tube saturation and all EQ bands active - not bad for a below-par setup! Maybe Cakewalk's system recommendations are playing it safe, or they expect users to pile on



ProChannel is a brilliant-sounding addition, though pre-existing effects like the VX-64 Vocal Strip and VC-64 Vintage Channel still have plenty of mileage left in them



There are no new instruments, but you shouldn't feel the pinch because the Producer edition already has several greats, such as superb sample-playback synth Dimension

## Version revision

Sonar comes in three editions: Essential, Studio and Producer. The primary differences between them lie in the bundled instruments and effects. The RGC Suite, Rapture, V-Vocal, Audio Snap and Sonitus:fx suite are only in Studio and Producer, while Producer exclusives include ProChannel, Dimension Pro, Session Drummer 3, True Pianos, and the Channel Strip Effects (VC-64, PX-64 and VX-64).

Still, much of the focus in Sonar X1 is on the superb new interface, including the Inspector and various Skylight functions. Every edition gets all this, so even if you're on the bottom rung of the Sonar ladder, you'll have something

substantial to look forward to. Smart tools, Screensets and the Browser are all here, as is the new Control Bar and MultiDock. That's pretty good considering the relative price-points of each version, and don't forget that you can always upgrade to Studio or Producer edition later on.

Sometimes it feels as if DAW updates are just annual additions of a few new effects and instruments, their primary purpose being to generate some upgrade-path income for the developer. As such, new versions rarely add much to the lower-tier editions of those applications. Sonar X1 is a welcome exception.

more plug-ins than we did. Whatever the reason, we suffered no dropouts or other ill behaviour during normal use.

## Sonar, so good?

Cakewalk took a big chance with X1 - and it's paid off. Handled poorly, such sweeping changes could have alienated existing users. Thankfully, it's tightly woven, well thought-out and a joy to use. We found the transition to be immediate, if not instantaneous. If you're a long-time user, don't mistake the new interface for a new look - this upgrade could make your music-making experiences more about you and less about your DAW. If you're new to Sonar then there's never been a better time to get into it. And for users both new and old, ProChannel should not be underestimated - it sounds killer and the direct integration means it's always on hand.

To sum up, with Sonar X1, Cakewalk have shortened the winding pathway between your imagination and the sounds coming out of the speakers. That, surely, is the best upgrade that anyone could ask for. **cm**

Web [www.cakewalk.com](http://www.cakewalk.com)  
 Contact Roland UK, 01792 702701  
 Info Essential Edition, £89; Studio Edition, £189

## Alternatively

**Steinberg Cubase 5**  
**cm137 >> 9/10 >> £497**  
 This cross-platform powerhouse is a perennial favourite

**Cockos Reaper 3**  
**cm144 >> 9/10 >> \$150**  
 Cross-platform DAW that's long on features, but short on bloat

## Verdict

**For** Vastly improved, clutter-free GUI  
 Smart tools really are very clever!  
 ProChannel is superb  
 Drag-and-drop from the Browser

**Against** Some minor bugs persist  
 Can't drag files into the Browser  
 Can't chain instruments or MIDI effects

More than a mere reskinning, X1's GUI truly revitalises Sonar's workflow, while ProChannel gives it a huge sonic boost

**9/10**