



**WHAT IS IT?**

The latest incarnation of Cakewalk's flagship software sequencer

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**HIGHLIGHTS**

- 1 ProChannel console emulator
- 2 Slicker design
- 3 Modular layout



# Cakewalk by Roland SONAR X1 Producer | £379

The flagship sequencer gets a major graphical revamp. *Kevin Redding* fires it up and takes a look...

Last year's SONAR 8.5 was a highly polished, highly developed product, befitting from nine years of intensive development. However, this process also had a side effect of making Sonar a bit of a monster. The feature creep of such a generationally-crafted system was pretty visible in 8.5, with endless streams of drop-down menus, screens full of iconised buttons and a manual that could take down a rainforest.

While this made the SONAR enthusiast revel, for those more used to its mainstream competitors – or indeed, the sequencing newcomer – it presented a concrete wall rather than a learning curve. Cue SONAR X1 which

attempts to redress this by tearing away the old interface and reworking it from the ground. X1 is a highly stylised graphical and workflow overhaul that digs many of its finest features from out of the multitude of menus and slaps them right in your face.

**Opening the box**

For an interface update, the GUI is quite a picture. Gone are the blue and grey hues of old, replaced with grey and, well, greyer. Having been using SONAR 8.x intensively this was a slight disappointment to me – possibly even losing some of SONAR's uniqueness – but after some time I found it to be easier on the eye during protracted

sequencing sessions and less likely to burn a hole in your retina.

Aesthetics aside, this GUI revolution is all about workflow. It starts with a concept Cakewalk have dubbed 'Skylight' whereby the main work area has combined all elements of a project into one modular zone that can be shaped to the needs of your current task. Gone are the traditional windowed design of most DAWs and elements can be floated, docked or hidden with a few simple button presses. While audio and MIDI can be dragged and dropped from window to window. Plus, screen sets can be saved quickly for instant recall depending on the situation you find yourself in.

Moving from MIDI editing to arranging, to instrument GUIs to the mixer is now a simple single key press or mouse click, rather than wading through drop-downs or hunting out a tiny icon.

What's more, every on-screen function has its own context sensitive tool-tip. Hover your mouse over a function and a help box appears to let you know what it's called and its associated keyboard shortcut. And it works. Within 15 minutes of installation I was flying around the interface, recording guitars, sequencing drums and arpeggiating one of the excellent included software synthesizers without hitting a confusing menu or losing a function anywhere.

**Go with the flow**

So let's get into the nitty-gritty – I want to start with the new Control Bar that sits at the top of the main screen. This expandable interface offers 13 modules that can be docked in to the bar and arranged as you see fit. These include the obvious transport functions, 'Snap-To' and the metronome, as well as a performance indicator showing disk use, RAM and multiple core CPU loads to name but a few. This replaces the array of buttons present in previous versions and puts control directly at the end of your mouse pointer, displayed in a logical and easy to manage way.

By far the best addition to workflow is the new MultiDock window. Place it at your chosen screen edge and it houses any and all of SONAR's work screens, each one accessible by an easy-to-reach tabbed system at the bottom of the window. The icing on the cake (no pun intended) is the much-improved browser. Dock it in the MultiDock and you have immediate access to your audio and MIDI library – which can be instantaneously auditioned – your plug-ins, instruments and presets. Grab an effect and drop it into an effects bin and it pops open ready for editing. Instruments can now

**X1 Producer Edition: Now With ProChannel**

Exclusive to the Producer Edition of X1 comes the all-new ProChannel unit. It's available to any channel from within the Console mixer and can be shown for the selected channel in the Inspector.

The compressor is versatile and effective and is designed to impart analogue warmth. The EQ offers Pure, Vintage and Modern modes, six bands, two shelf/bells and four bell/notches, high- and low-pass filters and a 'gloss' mode. The Tube saturation imparts a

smooth drive to the material and has two types available for tweaking. Each unit can be switched on and off on a per-track basis and the modules signal routing can be altered at will.

Cakewalk's aim was to rid the PC-based musician of one of the oldest foibles in digital recording history – the fact that true waveforms digitised and stored on hard disk as ones and zeros lack the warmth and clarity that true analogue recording equipment boasts through

second- and third-order harmonics. ProChannel is a shining example of how far that technology has developed.

Rather than reach for costly additional plugs (and deal with a variety of UIs and foibles) I increasingly found myself leaning on the ProChannel to do most of my workhorse tasks thanks to its ease of use and great sound. It's a simple to learn, easy to use 'one stop' shop for practically any tweak you could want to make. Great stuff.



**SPECS**

**System requirements**

**OS:** Windows XP Service Pack 3 (32-bit), Vista Service Pack 2 (32- or 64-bit), Windows 7 (32- or 64-bit)

**CPU/RAM:** Intel Core 2 Duo E8200 at 2.67GHz or an AMD Phenom Quad Core 9750 at 2.4GHz with at least 2GB RAM

**Screen:** 1280x800 minimum screen resolution (much higher recommended)

**HDD:** 4.5GB for minimal installation, 15GB for complete installation

**The best addition to workflow is the new MultiDock window which houses SONAR's work screens**

middle will allow you to pick it up and move it. There's a smart tool for almost every scenario and it works surprisingly well

be dragged and dropped into the arrange window where the track is created and the instrument appears.

Then there's the Smart Tool. This is a context sensitive tool at the tip of your mouse pointer that dynamically changes to the most sensible editing

device depending on where you point it. For example, when editing in the arrange window, hovering near the edge of a clip will allow you to adjust start and endpoints, hovering near the top edge will allow you to apply a fade in or fade out, and hovering near the

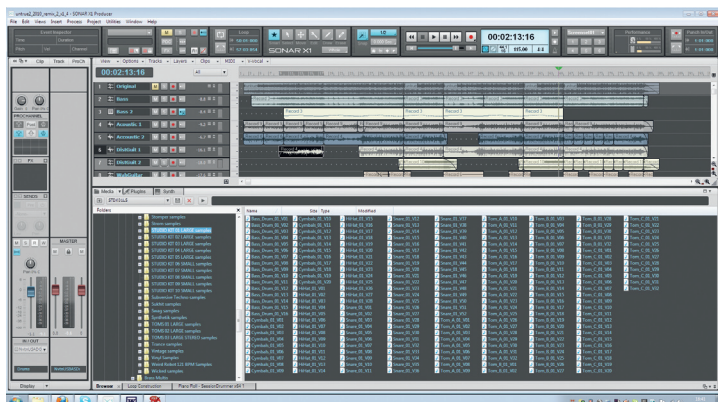
and enhanced my workflow substantially.

It only falls over when you have zoomed out too far, making the tool very sensitive to your pointer position. Luckily you have the option to select the precise tool you wish by pressing 'T' to pop up the tools selection box or by having it permanently docked in the Control Bar. Very cool.

**Closer Inspection**

The new inspector, initially docked on the far left, presents two track channels, displaying the master buss and the buss associated with the selected track or clip. Here you can quickly adjust the track you are editing, add effects and display valuable information on the clip or track you currently have selected.

In the Producer version, you can display the new ProChannel effects



The new browser is much improved, allowing drag-and-drop of almost anything

ALTERNATIVES



Steinberg Cubase 5

£497

Dual-platform sequencer, that's become slightly less popular due to a buggy development process. Version 5 is much better than versions of old, but its stock plug-ins don't come close to SONAR's plethora.

[steinberg.net](http://steinberg.net)



Ableton Live 8

£300

Highly developed, slick audio and MIDI production environment with a focus on live work. Top notch.

[ableton.com](http://ableton.com)



energyXT2

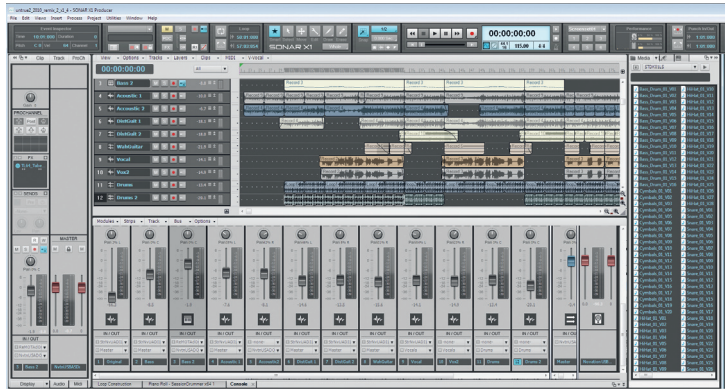
59 Euro

Sometimes I think I'm the only one championing energyXT, but it really is an incredible bit of sequencing software, minus any bloat, and it's cheap as chips. Try it out. I insist.

[energy-XT.com](http://energy-XT.com)

processor in the Inspector or in the mixing console. ProChannel offers a warm four-band parametric EQ, a highly transparent and versatile compressor (with emulation two modes 'PC46' and 'PC4k') and a tube saturation modeller. Its present and correct on every track and buss in the console and you can mix and match which of the three units you want active on a per track basis. Impressive. More in the *ProChannel* box.

Behind the scenes there are a string of other improvements too techy



The mixer can be docked into the MultiDock, and any other docked window is accessible from the tabs below it

The effects and instruments justify the price alone and the refined workflow is second to none

effects and instruments that ship with the software justify its price alone and the refined workflow is second to none. Team it

to mention, suffice to say that I would like to point out that finally, after 10 iterations of SONAR, your audio no longer drops out when opening a part, deleting a track or saving your song. I'm pleased to see this one finicky bugbear finally squished. (Although I did get it to pop up when reassigning track outputs to busses!)

Other issues I experienced include a strange blip where the snap value mysteriously resets itself to one tick, an annoyance if you don't keep your eye on it. And there's also some odd behaviour when deleting whole tracks while playing your song, which kicks other tracks out of sync. On the whole though this first build was pleasingly stable and I had no reservations in

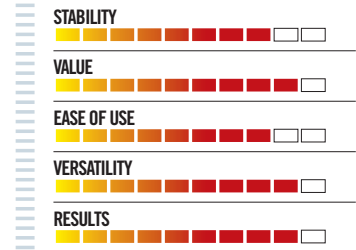
committing my most important new projects to it at the earliest opportunity.

Hard-earned

So the question remains, would I buy it? Initially I was reluctant – other than the stupendously good ProChannel, there's nothing here you cannot already do in SONAR 8.5 – this just does it more efficiently and *better*. However, after further thought and while watching the timeout countdown on this review version, I have to say that Cakewalk can have my cash for exactly that reason – it's more efficient and it's certainly better. And – maybe for the first time ever – for those buying their first high-end sequencer SONAR X1 is wise move. The range and quality of

with a pair of monitors for a dual screen set up and you'll fly. Try the demo, check out the sounds on the DVD then go and talk to Roland UK. **FM**

FutureMusic VERDICT



It's slick, instant and packs some excellent features. Still the best high-end DAW on the PC.

Resolving the Resolution

You're going to need serious screen real estate to make the most of X1. An example comes when looking at the Control Bar – it's very wide. I have a dual monitor setup with two 1980x1080 screens.

With 13 modules activated at the same time at my maximum

resolution the left-hand side of the bar is floating off the edge of the main screen. Single monitor setups will find that they cannot display all of the modules at once.

The Console Mixer is also very big, and docked into the MultiDock you're going to have

to use that scroll wheel to see anything. Or hit 'C' to toggle Control Bar when needed and save space when not.

Undocked, it completely obliterates the single screen setup, although again, you can choose to hide any element of it to fit the environment you are

working in. I can see why Cakewalk are using the phrase 'high resolution environments' in their marketing material and in reality, you're going to need at least a 1600x1280 pixel display, ideally widescreen and preferably a dual monitor setup, so keep that in mind.

