



### WHAT IS IT?

A software sampler, synth and sound design system

### CONTACT

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### HIGHLIGHTS

- 1 Interface customisation
- 2 FlexPhraser
- 3 Built-in synth engine

### PRICING

HALion 3/HALion Sonic to  
HALion 4  
£85



# Steinberg HALion 4 | £295

The wait has been long, but Steinberg have finally served-up the successor to HALion 3. **Bruce Aisher** looks at whether it was worth the wait?

**H**ALion 4 has been a long time in the making. It's seven years since HALion 3 first hit the streets, and ten years since the HALion line got started. Lots has happened in the world of software samplers since then, so the arrival of version four has been much anticipated. Steinberg, unusually began releasing a few morsels of information via their HALion 4 Blog last year, but this is the first time we've got to see it in the virtual flesh.

HALion, like most Steinberg software, uses the eLicenser USB copy-protection system, but installation and authorisation is as easy as it gets. It should be noted that HALion 4 runs as a standalone program, and in both

32- and 64-bit plug-in versions. It is capable of running in the thoroughly up-to-date VST3.5 plug-in format, although it will also run in Audio Unit and VST2-based hosts under OS X and Windows respectively.

It is perhaps at its best in the VST3.5 guise, as it fully supports VST Expression 2.0, Note Expression and Quick Control integration.

### None more black

The most noticeable change from HALion 3 is the look and feel of the interface. Gone is the rather 'under-designed' interface of old, and in its place we getting something slicker, visually much busier, and rather dark. Immediately, it is clear that there is

going to be a lot to get to grips with in HALion 4. The interface although quite formidable at first glance is, extremely flexible in terms of customisation. The window layout can be saved as a 'Screen Set' for recall later, but most significantly each element can be resized and even undocked into a separate window. This makes it possible to have a trimmed-down playback-only layout, or one that spans multiple monitors and multiple-windows. This is all very useful given that there are potentially 18 different editing windows, and makes HALion 4 one of the best plug-ins I've seen for functional visibility.

At the core of HALion 4 you'll find 64 slots, each of which can host a Program. A Program is an instrument or sound that can combine layers, sample and synth zones, audio busses, MIDI modules, and FX modules. A Program Tree section is displayed for any selected Program and represents the signal flow from top to bottom. This is perhaps the best way to get a grip on what is going on under the hood. Searching for Programs is made very easy with the use of HALion 4's own internal MediaBay tagging and searching window.

Besides using the factory content (see the *HALion 4 Sound Library* box on the next page), the other clear use for HALion is to sample, manipulate or

create your own sounds. Although it doesn't have its own recording function, this is where your host DAW conveniently steps in.

Partnered with Cubase, I could drag an audio event directly into HALion 4 whereupon a Program is created automatically in a new slot. Multiple slices can be imported in a similar way, although the HALion sample editor doesn't have any of its own beat-slicing functionality – something that many users might come to expect from a top-flight sampler.

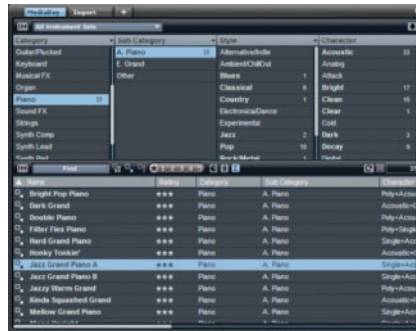
The manual states that “HALion allows you to import a wide range of sampler formats...”, though none are specifically mentioned. Unlike Native Instruments, who in the case of Kontakt, positively revel in listing the formats it will import, Steinberg appear entirely vague on this matter. I tried importing user created NI Battery and MOTU Mach Five content to no avail, though Apple EXS24 and NI Kontakt instruments did load.

In terms of the sound engine itself HALion 4 allows the use of so-called sample or synth zones. A sampler zone is rather basic in playback terms, in

## The HALion 4 Sound Library

HALion 4 comes with nearly 15GB of ready-rolled content covering most of the usual instrumental bases. They are of a generally very high quality, and make for a playable instrument.

As well as numerous Programs, Steinberg provide a number of 'Multi-Programs' that demonstrate some of the additional features of HALion 4. I booted-up the 'Modern Jazz Quartet' on my first outing with HALion and had lots of fun noodling around the keyboard. It should be noted that much of the content is shared with the HALion Sonic Library, though there are 270



additional HALion 4-only Programs (about 2GB).

These extra Programs are welcome, though I'm not sure how much need there is for five more FM pianos – I sense the hand of Yamaha at work here. However, to put things in perspective, NI Kontakt

comes with a whopping 43GB of content, and Spectrasonics Omnisphere – perhaps the last word in the marriage of sample playback and synthesis – has 40GB, albeit without the library creation capabilities of HALion 4.

configurations is of paramount importance to a professional sampler. HALion is no slouch here and really goes to town with the various voice

It has a very good (if modestly sized, in comparison to some of the competition) core sound library, plenty of editing and performance options, and lots of

flexibility. It is perhaps at its best when partnered with Cubase, though it still works well with other DAWs.

The big question however

is whether it can make up for lost time and knock Native Instrument's Kontakt from prime position? Let's see where things stand in another seven years. **FM**

**FutureMusic VERDICT**

**STABILITY**

**VALUE**

**EASE OF USE**

**VERSATILITY**

**RESULTS**

**More content would have been welcome, HALion 4 offers a wealth of features for the pro samplst.**

## FlexPhraser – a sophisticated arpeggiator/phrase player... proved to be a great songwriting ideas tool

that it caters for forward or reverse playback and looping. It was disappointing that an area such as granular synthesis was not explored, something that competitor Kontakt has featured for many years.

This is perhaps made up for with the rather good synth engine, that has some great oscillator options and fine-sounding filters. You'll also find fully featured mixer with a range of high quality effects, though pride of place has to go to Steinberg's IR-based reverb REVerence.

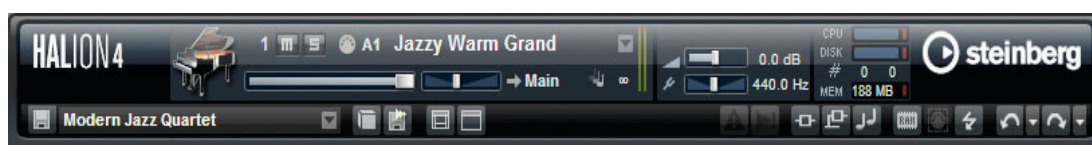
### It's all in the performance

Besides the sound engine, the ability to handle large numbers of samples in layers, splits and varied triggering

management options. As well as supporting individual Note Expression (under VST3), MegaTrig allows for detailed condition-based triggering that is up there with the best of the competition. This is part of the 'MIDI Module' section that also features FlexPhraser – a sophisticated arpeggiator/phrase player with presets for most instrument types.

It delivers quite convincing guitar strums, basslines and drum parts, with the ability to liven-up even the simplest of Programs, and proved to be a great songwriting ideas tool.

We've only scratched the surface, but in summary I believe HALion is a positive step on Steinberg's part, if not the giant killer one might have hoped.



HALion 4's minimised view crams a lot of functions into a small space

## SPECS

### System requirements

Intel Core Duo 2.0 GHz processor (or Athlon 2.0 GHz dual-core CPU), 2GB RAM and at least 15GB of free disk space, display resolution 1024 x 768, USB component port for USB-eLicensor (not included), DVD-ROM drive with dual-layer support  
**PC:** Windows Vista and Windows 7, Windows DirectX compatible audio hardware (ASIO compatible audio hardware recommended for low-latency performance), VST 2 or VST 3 compatible host for using as plug-in  
**Mac:** OS X 10.6, CoreAudio compatible audio hardware, VST 3 or AU compatible host for using as plug-in

## ALTERNATIVES



### Native Instruments Kontakt

**£300**

Now one of the most popular software samplers, and with a well-justified reputation for sonic and functional versatility, and with a huge library.

[native-instruments.com](http://native-instruments.com)



### MOTU MachFive

**£350**

A well-regarded sampler plug-in that has an easy-to-use one window interface. Works well with older hardware sampler formats, and comes with 32GB of content.

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



### HALion Sonic

**£180**

If you don't need to sample your own sounds then this streamlined workstation synth takes many of the new HALion 4 features and delivers them behind a simpler interface.

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