



PHOTOGRAPHY BY SIMON LEE

Propellerhead Balance with Reason Essentials

£379

Audio interface and software package offers an easy entry to computer-based music production *by Trevor Curwen*

Using a computer rather than a hardware device has become the norm for recording and there are plenty of different programs and audio interfaces out there to facilitate it. While all programs feature common basic principles such as recording onto tracks and using EQ and effects, the way these things are implemented and presented is often different – meaning a steep learning curve and a fair bit of faffing before you can get seriously stuck into making music.

One company that aimed to create a program that was easy for musicians to quickly grasp, with a specific focus on creativity, was Propellerhead, which introduced its Record software back in 2009, when we reviewed it. Since then, it has integrated Record's features into its Reason software and is marketing a product that again aims to get the creative juices flowing without getting too hung up on technical issues. This time it's a hardware and software combination, Balance with Reason Essentials, that pairs a user-friendly audio interface – Balance – with a cut-down version of Reason featuring a reduced set of instruments and effects, but offering the core functions in an accessible package.

The software is easy to install from the supplied DVD-ROM and the registration and authorisation won't give anyone a headache. Plug in the Balance interface and there are a few more easy steps to set up some preferences, and then you are ready to start recording.

In Use

The Balance interface is a unique design that sits firmly on your desktop at a jaunty angle for easy use next to your computer keyboard and features clearly laid out tactile controls and a soft-to-the-touch rubberised surface. Propellerhead wants the whole experience of using an audio interface to be as transparent as possible and – understanding that users will at various times want to record mic signals, guitar output or line level signals – has put inputs for all of those round the back of the unit. This means you can keep them permanently plugged in and simply select which source you want for each of the two input channels from a neat row of front panel buttons. Setting the input gain is done via two stepped knobs that will easily allow you to recall previous settings as well as perfectly match the gain of channels one and two if recording in stereo. Setting the output volume to your headphones or to a pair of monitors through the main outputs is a cinch with the large knobs and you can easily switch from the sound from the input directly to the output for near zero latency monitoring by holding down the mute/direct monitoring button. Overall, Balance sends really good quality audio to your computer from whichever input you use and, while some audio interfaces can be a little basic, this has a thoughtful, stylish design that is a pleasure to use.

While Balance will work perfectly well as an audio

interface with other software, it has a couple of nifty extra features when used with Reason. One of these is the meter/tuner switch, which brings up a large input meter display and a guitar tuner on your computer screen. The other unique feature, clip safe, is especially useful for getting you out of a sticky situation – it can be all too easy to record too high a signal on occasion if your sound source is louder than you have set the input gain to handle and this can result in a clipped and distorted signal being recorded. With clip safe engaged the software will

The Rivals

If you're just looking for a two in/two out audio interface there are many available at various price points, some with bundled third party DAW software. For an integrated package comprising hardware and software, **Presonus** offers a range of audio interfaces that come with versions of its Studio One software, such as the **Studio One AudioBox 44VSL** (£289). If you want to have Pro Tools as your DAW of choice there are also several options from **Avid** bundling Pro Tools with its Mbox or M-Audio interfaces or, specifically for guitarists, the **Eleven Rack** (£759) – see our review on p130.

record a duplicate signal at a lower level, which you can use as a backup if you do go into the red. You can restore distorted audio with one click.

As for the software, ease of use is again paramount and it



Record and Reason Essentials aims to get creative juices flowing without getting hung up on technical issues



doesn't get much easier than just three main pages (called up via your computer's F5, F6 and F7 keys): the device rack, which holds a range of virtual instruments and effects, the mixer based on an SSL mixer and featuring a bus compressor as found in the hardware, and finally the sequencer where you arrange your tracks. Unlike many other DAWs, Reason does not support third party plug-ins but aims to cater for all your music production needs in an essentially a self-contained environment. For building up your arrangements and creating a foundation to record guitar over, there are a range of instruments, including a drum machine, sampler, loop player, synth and the general purpose ID8, which is designed to provide access to a bunch of the most commonly used sounds including keyboards, strings and brass. Instruments can be played with a MIDI keyboard connected to your computer but if you don't have one don't

worry, because the on-screen piano keys window enables you to play instrument devices using either your mouse or computer keyboard.

When it comes to recording your guitar there's built-in amp modelling, courtesy of Line 6 and offering three guitar and two bass amps, expandable with more amps and cabinets through model packs available for purchase. The guitar sounds you get include Fender Deluxe, Marshall 'Plexi' and Mesa/Boogie Rectifier models, but there are other Reason effects modules that can be added to create a rig including the Scream 4, which provides loads of distortion types. Add in the chorus/flanger, delay and reverb modules and you can conjure up a wide range of usable tones.

When all your parts are recorded, mixdown is pretty straightforward and you can use a range of mastering effects to create a stereo mix, which can then be exported. You can

also export individual track 'stems' if you wish to get the track mixed elsewhere.

Verdict

This package provides all the essential elements for the guitarist or singer/songwriter who desires a home studio with which they can record backing tracks and record their own instrument and voice. There's certainly enough here to put together some sophisticated professional-sounding productions but, should you want to add more, there's a straightforward upgrade to Reason 6 readily available. Perhaps more importantly, though, both hardware and software are easy to set up and use, which means that anyone new to computer recording is likely to be up and running with a minimum of fuss and the more experienced should have less messing about with the sort of mundane tasks that can interrupt the creative flow. **G**



Reason Essentials is intuitive to use and very powerful

The Bottom Line

We like: Ease-of-use; useful integration of interface and software; Line 6 amp simulations

We dislike: Third party plug-ins not supported

Guitarist says: A neat user-friendly package for singer-songwriters or guitarists wishing to compose and record their own material

Propellerhead Balance

PRICE: £379

TYPE: Audio interface

CHANNELS (A/D, D/A): Two in, two out

SAMPLE RATES/BIT RESOLUTION: 44.1kHz, 48kHz, 96kHz, 24-bit

CONNECTIONS: Balanced XLR mic inputs x 2, unbalanced standard jack inputs x 2, balanced TRS jack line inputs x 4, balanced TRS jack line outputs x 2, standard jack stereo headphone output, USB

POWER: USB hub power

DIMENSIONS: 130 (w) x 195 (d) x 75mm (h)

Reason Essentials

PRICE: Included with Balance

TYPE: Music production software

AUDIO TRACKS: Unlimited

INSTRUMENT TRACKS: Unlimited

VIRTUAL INSTRUMENTS: ID8,

SubTractor analogue synth, NN-X

sampler, Dr Octo Rex loop player,

Redrum drum computer

EFFECTS: Line 6 Guitar Amp,

Line 6 Bass Amp, Scream 4 distortion,

RV7000 reverb, DDL-1 delay,

CF-101 chorus/flanger, MClass

mastering effects

RANGE OPTIONS: Full version

Reason 6 Upgrade (£139). Existing

owners of Reason, Balance receive

a free upgrade to Reason 6

SYSTEM REQUIREMENTS: See web

Sound Technology UK

01462 480000

www.propellerheads.se

Test results

Build quality	★★★★★
Features	★★★★★
Sound	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★