

WHAT IS IT?

A multi-engine synth and sound design instrument from Spectrasonics

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HIGHLIGHTS

- 1 Multiple approaches to synthesis types
- 2 Vast library of engaging sonic 'starting points'
- 3 Effects, arpeggiators and processors aplenty



Spectrasonics Omnisphere | £299

After all the technology developments over the years, who thought the future of sound design was STEAM powered? **Jono Buchanan** enters a golden age...

Back in January at NAMM, among the announcements that had the whole music tech industry smacking its lips in anticipation was Omnisphere, a new power synth from Spectrasonics, the creators of Stylus RMX, Trilogy and Atmosphere. What was surprising was that Omnisphere would not be released until nine months later which, if nothing else, has given us all even more time to anticipate and get excited. During this time, a series of videos and teaser trailers have been released on the Spectrasonics website, all of which have

given Omnisphere's release something of a 'Hollywood blockbuster' vibe. All of which begs the question – is this release rising straight to the top of the box office charts, or will we find it in bargain buckets before the year is out?

Omnisphere essentials

To give an overview of Omnisphere, here are some essentials. Its release sees the demise of Atmosphere as, in the loosest sense, Omnisphere is its replacement, albeit one with several times the processing power. At the heart of Omnisphere sits a 50GB sample library

which supplies the raw data from which Omnisphere patches are created.

Responsible for shaping these samples is the new STEAM engine, which is Spectrasonics' new approach to sound generation. STEAM has been six years in development and it's the system which will power all future Spectrasonics' releases. Like the SAGE engine which powers Stylus RMX, STEAM has been developed as an open-ended system which will allow Spectrasonics to develop plug-ins and instruments which can adapt quickly to changing operating systems and computer developments.

The raw sample data for Omnisphere has been collected from Spectrasonics' team of sound designers around the world and, as you can see from the *Psychoacoustic Sounds* box on the next page, it contains some extraordinary approaches to sound creation. The result for Omnisphere users is an instrument whose sound is liquid, shifting and unpredictable yet gloriously playable all at once.

Installation takes place via six DVDs, while authorisation is achieved via a challenge/response code and your copy's serial number. Thereafter, you're free to explore the goods that Omnisphere has to offer.

Taming the Monster

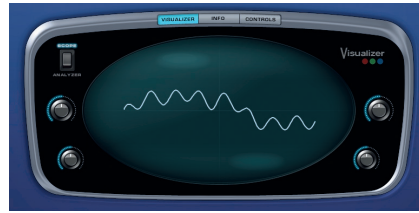
The first thing which will greet you upon start-up is Omnisphere's patch browser, from which you can choose sounds, either alphabetically, or via search criteria such as category, musical genre, or even via the name of the sound designers themselves. As each patch is tagged with information relating to how it was constructed, this latter category is surprisingly useful, as you can soon learn the artistic approach of each designer and can then seek out the work of those your favour.

There are over 1,000 patches in total, which should keep you busy for a while. Once you've chosen a preset, you can close the patch browser window, which takes you into the main Omnisphere interface. The interface approach will be familiar to anyone with an existing Spectrasonics instrument, with each synthesis module incorporated into a 'metal' virtual rack.

However, Omnisphere dramatically expands the synthesis options over Atmosphere in particular, with a hugely flexible engine, which throws up unexpected delights at each and every turn. The central section allows you to choose a source for each layer of a loaded sound, with samples rubbing shoulders with synthesis types including

Psychoacoustic Sounds

Psychoacoustics is the study of the perception of sound, in other words the way in which your hearing system and brain combine to understand the sounds around you. This is different just from 'hearing', as the brain can play some interesting games with sounds – filling in missing frequencies, perceiving direction and being able to pick individual sounds out from a group just three examples. At the heart of Omnisphere is a library of unique, organic sounds, all of which have



been recorded with microphones. Raw sample data includes light bulb filaments, instruments recorded in unusual settings so that unique ambiances are brought to the fore and, as you'll probably already have seen out there on the web, a burning piano.

These raw samples are then processed by Omnisphere's STEAM synthesis engine to provide you not with 'novelty' effects sounds but detailed, playable instruments which contain resonances the like of which I've never heard in a plug-in.

SPECS

System Requirements: 2GB or more of RAM, Dual Layer compatible DVD-ROM drive, 50GB of free hard drive space

Mac: 2.0 GHz or higher processor, G5 PowerPC compatible – Intel Core2Duo or higher recommended, OSX 10.4.9 or higher, AudioUnit, VST 2.4 or RTAS capable host software, Native Universal Binary for Intel Macs

PC: Pentium 3.0 GHz or higher (Intel Core2Duo recommended), VST 2.4 or RTAS capable host software, Microsoft XP SP2 or later, Microsoft Vista compatible

simultaneously, resulting in some hugely rich sounds. A full patch will load either a sample or the relevant synthesis type onto both layers but you're free to modify these independently once in the Main Edit area so if you like one half of a sound and not the other, you can make the necessary adjustments.

Once you've chosen the sound source of your choice, to the right you

Key Follow and Envelope dials allow you to adjust your filter treatment, with a handy gain slider available at this stage too. Below this, the envelope section provides tabs to let you adjust the amp and filter envelopes, while also allowing access to four modulation envelopes.

You can keep envelopes in simple ADSR forms, or expand their functionality, which is where the fun really starts. By clicking on the

microscope button you can bring up an in-depth graphical display for the envelopes, which offer break-point, fully editable steps. These can be

shaped manually, one step at a time, or you can rely on the Chaos envelope designer to take control for you. The Chaos button randomly adjusts the curves and envelope steps to yield unexpected results, though you can restrict the amount and type of randomisation, if you don't want something wildly off the scale.

Envelopes can be looped and synced to the tempo of your host sequencer, so you can achieved anything here from bubbly, filtered basslines to wild, eternally shifting soundscapes. There are six independent LFOs with a variety of waveforms too and as with all things relating to the Omnisphere interface, you can either keep things simple by setting up a single modulation routing directly in the main window, or you can maximise the view to get an overview of all routings on a single pop-out page. There are 24

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subtractive synth waveforms, FM synthesis, ring modulation and wave shaping. Additionally, Harmonia allows multiple synth oscillators to be loaded

can activate the filter section, which offers variants in three categories: high-pass, low-pass and speciality. Below the filter type, cutoff, resonance,



Spectrasonics maintained the metal-rack look for Omnisphere

routing options available for any patch and you can control which of the layers will be affected by routings you set up.

Effects and Main Page

Omnisphere's Effects section is comprehensive, as you have the opportunity to apply effects either to Layer A, Layer B or to the shared output, via the 'Common' tab. This means that up to 12 effects can be added to a basic patch, with plenty of options available within each effect type. There is an assortment of EQs, three reverbs, a fine complement of delay variants alongside Spectrasonics' own weird and wonderful effects such as Tape Slammer and Tube Limiter.


There's amp simulation too, which works wonderfully on many of Omnisphere's more organic waveforms, warming these up creating wonderful, earthy sonic hybrids. The simplest page within Omnisphere is 'Main' which provides basic controls for a Patch's most fundamental controls – the balance between its two layers and their relative pan positions, a short-cut to low-pass or high-pass filter types, plus settings for pitch-bend range and velocity response curves. Omnisphere is multi-timbral too, allowing eight layers of patches to be played back

Arpeggiators

Omnisphere has gone Arpeggiator crazy, with a powerful engine now capable of taking any patch and sending it spiralling into tempo-sync'd madness. There are 32 steps available for any sequence, with buttons below each step

acting as on/off switches. A variety of modes let you decide whether movement will be chord based, upwards, downwards, randomised and the like, while the range can be extended from anything from one to four octaves. Clock is available from

1/1 to 1/32 notes, while a Length dial knob lets you restrict the note length of the sequence globally. You can introduce swing via another knob, which shifts the 'even' steps late, so that straight patterns can become progressively 'skipped'. What's particularly impressive is that an independent Arpeggiator is available for every layer of a multi, so if you have eight patches loaded simultaneously, they can all be independently Arpeggiated. Now that's what I call power!



parts, plus set up and control of four auxiliary effects busses, as well as a mastering effects chain. Additionally, a Live mode allows you to organise and assemble patches ready for live use, while the Stack button lets you layer your multi parts into an all-singing, all-dancing monster patch. Seemingly the possibilities are endless – just make sure you've got enough RAM and processing power!

samples is combined with a powerful, multi-approach synthesis engine. Omnisphere's STEAM is certainly that, while it manages to provide users with an interface which is far from intimidating. Having wondered what took Spectrasonics nine months to launch Omnisphere from its NAMM debut, I now applaud their careful approach to getting this release absolutely right – from the onboard manual, to the video

tutorial area on the Spectrasonics website, it's painless to understand Omnisphere despite its complexity as a plug-in. Most

importantly, however, it sounds extraordinary. It would be easy to dismiss some of the sound sources as novelty but to do so would be a serious mistake, as the result is a sound designer's dream – a set of 'real' sounds manipulated in the richest way. A box office smash, without question. **FM**

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simultaneously. To handle mixing duties in such circumstances, the Multi button at the top launches Omnisphere's mixer, which allows level balance between

Conclusion
Omnisphere is a phenomenal instrument. It shows what can be done when the power of real, unusual

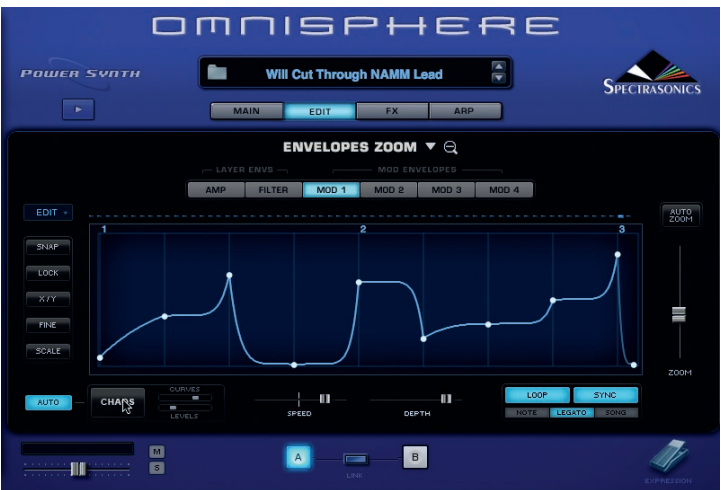
ALTERNATIVES



Absynth 4
£140
Absynth is another synth-player's dream, with an equally unique approach to sound production. It offers even more synthesised flexibility but lacks Omnisphere's sampled waveform library.
native-instruments.com



Kontakt 3
£300
With a vast sample library and modules aplenty for sound creation, Kontakt 3 is also capable of delivering hugely rich, evolving tones with sampled roots.
native-instruments.com



The Chaos button generates random envelope points for your patch

FutureMusic **VERDICT**

STABILITY

VALUE

EASE OF USE

VERSATILITY

RESULTS

Great-sounding, flexible and unique. What more could you want? Omnisphere was worth the wait.