

WHAT IS IT?

The latest version of Steinberg's multi-platform "Advanced Music Production System" – DAW to you and me

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HIGHLIGHTS

- 1 Retrologue 2 synthesizer
- 2 VST Transit – cloud collaboration service
- 3 Import tracks from projects feature



Steinberg Cubase 8.5 | £406

Steinberg round off 2015 with a Cubase update... **Bruce Aisher** takes a look at this half-step iteration of Steinberg's favourite DAW

This time last year I mentioned that Steinberg seem to be settling into an annual rhythm as far as major or

half-step updates were concerned. Not wishing to disappoint me, those in charge of Cubase development have once again delivered a potential pre-Christmas treat.

The arrival of Cubase 8 Pro brought with it an attempt to tidy up some of the legacy issues associated with window handling – which with the arrival of Windows 10 do make more sense. However, in some circles the update has met with a certain amount of hostility related to unfixed bugs, and perhaps a certain amount of wishful thinking – though it is fair to say that

this is very common in most software circles. Despite this, C8 introduced some significant new features, with the most important perhaps being Render In-place, though VCA Faders, Direct Outputs and a new Plug-in Manager were also most welcome.

The most noticeable thing is that it all looks visually similar. As far as Steinberg are concerned, the headline new features in Cubase Pro 8.5 are VST Transit, a cloud collaboration service, and the updated analogue-style, subtractive synth, Retrologue 2. Alongside these though, there are plenty of other tweaks and additions.

The Chord Pad functionality has been updated – take a look at *Back To My Pad* for more on this – but there are

some notable enhancements in other areas of MIDI and note entry. The Drum Editor now has a note length mode, and visibility agents make it easy to see only those lanes with content. All MIDI editors now have an extended range of event editing shortcut keys, allowing you to create and alter length, velocity, position and pitch in one.

In terms of track handling, there are a few tweaks that make Audio and Group track creation a little more immediate in terms of routing choices and their position in the project page. The big news here though is Import Tracks From Project, which allows you to grab track content (on a range of track types) from a previous project without having to open it. You can create new tracks or replace existing ones (with Track Versions automatically enabled). The only thing missing for me was that only the MIDI could be imported when MIDI tracks were routed to Rack Instruments – not the instrument tracks as well. Shame.

Now with added punch

A very useful change in C8.5 is the way in which punch-in and punch-out recording works. Previously this was linked to the left and right locator positions, which was somewhat inflexible and lead to unnecessary button pressing or mouse clicking. Finally the two are separate, with the

5 Great New Features

There are a lot of smaller tweaks in this update. Here we've picked some of the most important – big and small



VST Transit

Having set up the required online profile and added a project, a dedicated button in the VST Transit window allows you to sync it to the cloud. You can then invite 'Friends' to collaborate who then appear in the Project Members list – and can then each sync the Project to their own computers. It's important to realise that not all aspects of a project are sync'd, and that new tracks (Audio, Instrument and MIDI) are added into their own folder section. Besides new tracks and events, mixer fader, pan and Steinberg plug-in changes are included, alongside event volume, event mute and note velocity.



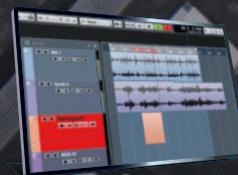
Retrologue 2

Retrologue has always been a simple but very effective subtractive synth – and one that did a pretty good job of conveying an analogue-style vibe. Cubase 8.5 sees it move to version 2, which manages to keep the straightforward (mainly) single window interface, while addressing a few shortcomings of the original and adding some extras. It's good to see an extra oscillator, envelopes and LFOs, but you also get an advanced multi-parameter arpeggiator, extra effects and a drag-and-drop modulation system. There are more filter types and 400 new presets, making Retrologue 2 a surprisingly versatile little beast.



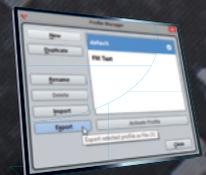
Import Tracks

There is already a way of importing audio and MIDI data from old tracks into an existing one using basic drag-and-drop. However, this necessitates the opening of the older project. This new Import feature makes the process more straightforward and covers Audio, MIDI, Instrument, Chord, Marker and Video tracks. One great aspect of this new import function is the ability to import to existing tracks, whereupon old and new versions can be selected using the TrackVersions tab. Audio files can also be automatically copied to the newer Project's audio folder and undergo sample rate conversion if required.



Punch Points

We've waited a long time, but we finally have them – punch-in and punch-out locators that are independent of the main left and right locator positions. It may seem like a minor thing, but the beauty here is that you can set a track to cycle and only record the specific moments you require – and, unlike tape machines of old, the existing Cubase pre-record helps catch anything missed just before the punch-in. The whole process is very easy, with an updated Project ruler making use of different (and now customisable) colour designations.



Profile Manager

Cubase is large and complicated with lots of customisation options. This makes getting set up on another user's system – or supporting multiple users on a single system – an elaborate process. Profile Manager aims to streamline the whole thing by allowing you to store and recall program settings and preferences as a series of profiles for different users which can easily be moved between machines. A profile includes Preferences, Key Commands, Inputs and Outputs, Window Toolbars, Global Workspaces, Plug-in Collections, Quantize and Crossfade settings, but not track/plug-in presets or hardware-dependent settings.

ALTERNATIVES



Ableton Live 9
from £249

For those looking for a slightly different approach, or one that fits better with live performance, Live could well be the answer.

www.ableton.com



Apple Logic X
£150

Logic X has seen quite a few changes over the last few years, and it offers a lot for its relatively modest price – but you'll need to purchase an Apple Mac as well.

www.apple.com



Avid Pro Tools 12
£480

Pro Tools is, of course, a cross-platform industry standard that comes with a healthy complement of tools and sound creation options. Avid also offer a monthly pay-as-you-go option.

www.avid.com



The Transport Bar has been redesigned for clearer visibility and access plus better integration with the Transport menu

ability to drag punch points independently in the toolbar – and you can now use punch-in/out in cycle mode – neat. With a nod to this more refined approach, the Transport Bar, Project Ruler and Mixdown window have also been tidied and refined, and Tempo Track scaling when moving tempo changes is a lot more fluid.

Cloudy with a chance of collaboration...

Steinberg have been exploring different collaborative systems over the last few years. VST Connect (which in its SE guise is still bundled with Cubase) is a remote recording solution aimed at real-time peer-to-peer collaboration. VST Transit is a somewhat different beast in that it integrates more fully with the DAW, and is aimed at collaboration on a Project level. As such, it embraces a non real-time cloud-based approach.

Collaborators are each required to create a login on MySteinberg and then a VST Cloud profile. This profile can be

public or private, and includes information about skills, genres, instruments and a short (30s) audio demo. From here you then create a Project within the VST Transit window (located in the new VST Cloud drop-down menu) that can be sync'd to the cloud.

Only certain parts of a project are sync'd, and it is therefore mainly geared to the adding of new ideas. So although, at the moment at least, it does not allow complete freedom, it is nonetheless a great way of allowing others to add ideas to a track in a more formalised fashion.

By default, Steinberg give you 500MB storage space and 1GB traffic per month free. Apparently, premium accounts with more traffic and storage will be available from mid-January, though there is no pricing available at the moment.

Retro but more so

In a world inhabited by numerous virtual-analogue synths, one would be

forgiven for not paying much attention to Steinberg's Retrologue. However, this would be a mistake. In its original incarnation I have found Retrologue to be a surprisingly capable synthesizer, and one that makes a real virtue of its relative simplicity. Its one-window approach means that creating and tweaking sounds is very quick, but it also sounds good. Each of its oscillators has a range of interesting shaping options, its filters do a good job, and it can create authentic analogue-style sounds and textures – to the extent that I have used it far more than I will admit to anybody.

Retrologue 2 is not a radical overhaul – you still get the black, grey and blue interface – but it expands its capabilities in a few significant areas. The two main oscillators have been joined by a third with a similar feature set, with the existing sub-oscillator, noise source and (slightly expanded) ring-modulator capabilities still in place. Sync and cross-mod have been joined by XOR (great for retro computer game

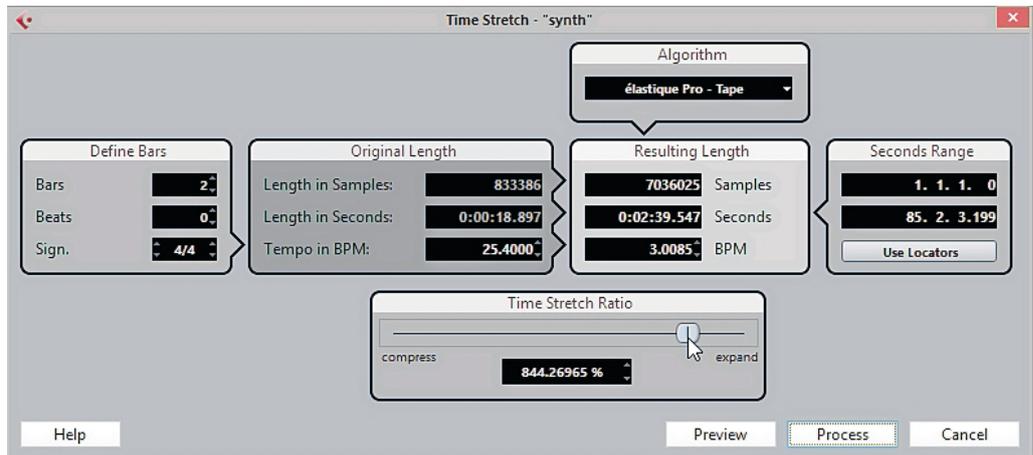
Elasticated – zPlane élastique v3

This update also sees an upgrade to the pitchshift and time-stretch algorithms. For a while now Steinberg have used zPlane's élastique code, which delivers very good results. Cubase 8.5 takes this to

version 3. The most noticeable aspect of the change is the much expanded range of stretching ratios that are now available. You can now shrink an audio event to 1/10th its size or expand it

by a factor of 10. One of my favourite uses of this is in 'Tape' mode, where it is now possible to create long, low-frequency weirdness by slowing (and pitching) everything down.

Of course, it's almost impossible to get rid of any audio artifacts at extreme time-stretch settings, particularly on rhythmic material, but the results are surprisingly good.



Back To My Pad

Although they may not perhaps be on the radar of many users, the various chord prediction and playback features of Cubase have grown in sophistication over the last few versions.

While there is a Chord Track feature that allows you to programme a track from the chords up, Chord Pads provide you with a bit more interaction, and can be a lot simpler to use. Cubase 8.5 ups the ante

with a series of new trigger keys for triggering individual notes in a chord assigned to a given pad. This makes it possible to set up a series of chords and get a whole range of interesting and appropriate

note sequences with only a few key presses.

These features in Cubase can be quite an interesting area to explore, even for the more musically-minded who may dismiss them as a bit of a toy.



SPECS

System requirements:

Mac: OS X Version 10.10/10.11

PC: Windows 7/ 8.x/ 10

Both: Intel Core or AMD dual core CPU, 4GB RAM, 15GB free HD space, 1366 x 768 display resolution, Graphics card with DirectX 10 and WDDM 1.1 support (Windows only), USB port for USB-eLicenser (license management)

stylings), and each oscillator has a range of waveform trigger and phase modes, including a 'free-run' option for a more authentic analogue vibe. The filter section's 12 filter types are now doubled to 24 and there are some additional digital distortion modes.

bipolar envelope, but the really big news is the 32-step arpeggiator. In fact it is so big, it needs its own window. This is not your simple up-down pitch arpeggiator, but one that adds four lanes of parameter control as well. It makes creating

drag and drop mod sources to their intended destination.

Conclusion

With so many potentially different types of user, it is always going to be hard to please everyone, and this update is no

exception. If you mainly record live audio and collaborate in person, then it's likely that only the workflow and editing enhancements will

The headline new features are VST Transit, a cloud collaboration service, and Retrologue 2

Effects were always basic in Retrologue. This time we get an expanded choice with free routing via a dedicated window. The Resonator and algorithmic reverb are both good to see, and there's now a sense that Retrologue patches are far more self-contained, requiring less outside processing.

Modulation is greatly enhanced with two additional LFOs and a multipurpose

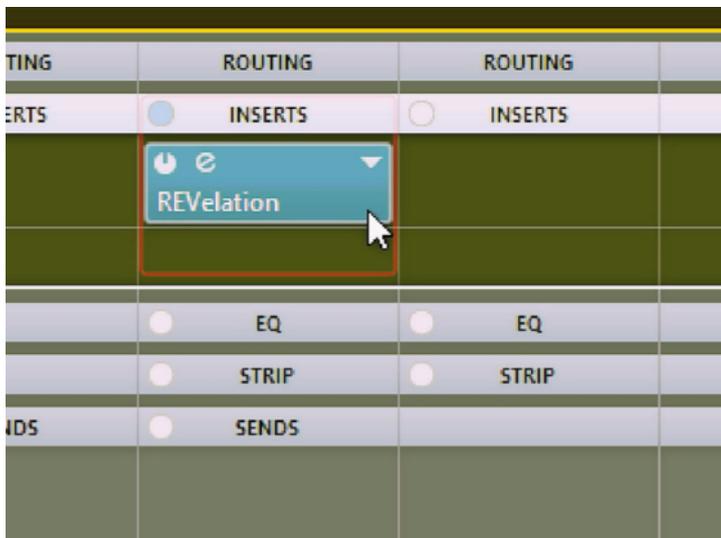
step-sequencer style pulsing patterns very easy, with the added benefit that you can export a pattern as MIDI information by dragging it into your Project page. Overall the new arpeggiator is both fun and useful.

The modulation features in Retrologue have also been bolstered with extra slots in the Modulation matrix and, more significantly, the ability to

hold any appeal – though there are quite a few here, and the import track feature is a potential winner.

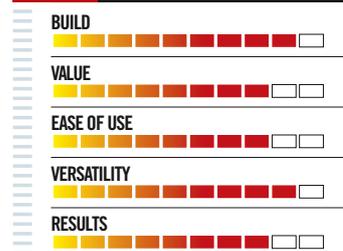
VST Transit is a very interesting idea, though it does, of course, require all collaborators to be using the same DAW version and plug-ins. Collaborative writing yes – but maybe not group-based mixing just yet.

The fact remains that all major DAWs are very close in terms of features – and seem to look ever more similar. For existing users there may be enough to tempt you to part with the £36 upgrade fee, and for new users Cubase still has a lot to offer. **FM**



MixConsole has also undergone various tweaks to make parameter editing more intuitive

FutureMusic VERDICT



The 8.5 update comes highly recommended, and offers enough to warrant its price of entry.