



**WHAT IS IT?**

The most recent update to Steinberg's well-established multi-platform 'Music Production System' software.

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**HIGHLIGHTS**

- 1 Easy multi-track editing
- 2 New timestretch and pitch-shift algorithms
- 3 Accurate tempo detection



# Steinberg Cubase 6 | £508

Two years on from its last major revision, **Bruce Aisher** wonders if Cubase still has what it takes to compete in the ongoing DAW wars

**C**ubase 6 is here, and like any other avid production software geek I got a tingle of excitement while

scanning the 'new features' list. The question as always is – will it be a great late Christmas or a hangover of forgotten New Year resolutions?

Cubase 5 brought with it the introduction of the very neat VariAudio feature, as well as things like Multi Channel Batch Export, VST Expression and the interesting LoopMash VSTI

plug-in. The C5.5 interim update saw the arrival of a raft of visual changes – some of which left me pontificating between 'underwhelmed' and 'frustrated' – as well as updates to the Automation functionality, plus the odd efficiency and functional tweak.

Since then, Steinberg have issued a statement saying that ongoing support (and testing) for the XP operating system had been dropped. Which is where Cubase 6 comes in. C6 now supports 64-bit versions running on

Mac or Windows systems, although 32-bit versions (that run quite happily within a 64-bit OS) are still provided in order to host the large swathe of 32-bit-only plug-ins out there.

For the purposes of this review I installed and ran Cubase 6 under OS X, Windows 7 x64 (both C6 x86 and x64) and Windows XP (yes, it works). The eLicenser USB dongle requirement applies, as before, and installation was quick and simple, with Cubase 6 picking-up all my Preferences from the previous version (which still runs fine).

**Inside the cube**

On loading an older project, my first impression of Cubase 6 (once I got my bearings) was of a graphically more sophisticated interface. Many of the tweaks that were carried out in the previous updates have now been consolidated, and having carried them through to all areas of Cubase, give a consistent feel to all the windows.

The Mixer windows appear darker than before – my original reaction to C5 as well in fact – but there is plenty of tweakability if the defaults don't satisfy. However, it does seem that differential colouring of the various track types

(MIDI, Audio, FX, Group etc) has been removed, which does make navigation on big projects a little harder than before. MIDI and Audio parts in the Project window have also seen an overhaul, but newly added appearance Preference parameters allow a considerable degree of control over these. I should point out at this stage that there appeared little difference in the way of CPU hit between the different versions, and stability appeared generally good.

### Elastique fantastique

Let's not beat about the bush (no pun intended), one of the biggest omissions in Cubase has been its ability to compete with ProTools – and more recently Logic 9 – with regard to tempo/hit detection and beat quantising or replacement, especially when multitrack recordings were involved – as is often the case with acoustic drums or multi-mic guitar cab recordings.

Cubase 6 brings all of these to centre stage, and Steinberg are clearly proud of the results. My excitement got the better of me, so I decided to give Cubase 6 a quick test. Using the new HALion Sonic SE plug-in (more on this later), I loaded up a suitable drum kit

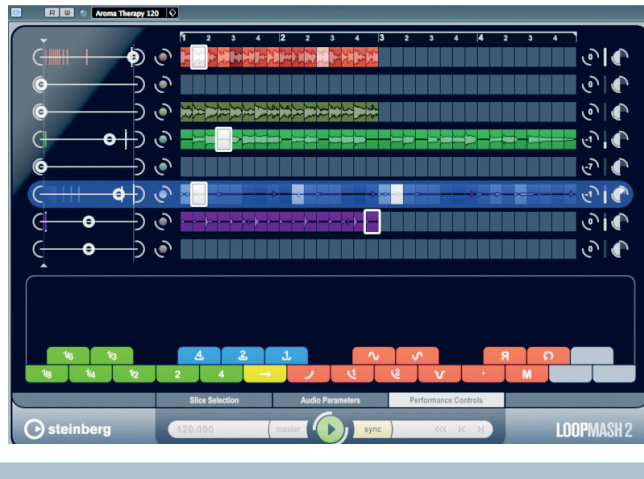
### In The Loop

While HALion Sonic SE is solid, workmanlike and a little bit sensible, LoopMash 2 is nothing of the sort – in a very good way! In its earlier incarnation LoopMash was interesting and capable of some good results, but perhaps pointed to greater things. LoopMash 2 has added some fantastic new features that seem to give it a new lease of life. The

interface has seen a slight redesign, which is most obvious in the lower part of the window. Scene mapping and selection is now more intuitive and incorporates labelling, while a jump to the Performance tab reveals a wealth of fun.

Each button here is assigned to a live slice effect – ranging from Mute, Reverse and

Staccato, through to Scratches, Backspins and Tapstaps to Slurs and Stutters. All these can be selected by MIDI input, are a lot of fun and really open up the creative possibilities. If that wasn't enough, each of the slice effects can be assigned to individual slices on any of the tracks above, making for a very involved beat generation tool.



### SPECS

#### System requirements

**PC:** Windows 7\*, Intel or AMD dual core CPU, 2GB RAM, display resolution of 1280 x 800 recommended, Windows compatible audio hardware (ASIO compatible audio hardware recommended for low-latency performance), 8GB of free HD space DVD-ROM dual-layer drive, USB port for USB-eLicenser, Internet connection for license activation

**Mac:** OS X Version 10.6\*, Intel dual core CPU, 2GB RAM, Display resolution of 1280 x 800 recommended, CoreAudio compatible audio hardware, 8GB of free HD space DVD-ROM dual-layer drive, USB port for USB-eLicenser, Internet connection for license activation. Native 32-bit and 64-bit Cubase version  
\* Native 32-bit and 64-bit Cubase version

## My first impression of Cubase 6 was of a graphically more sophisticated interface

and played a short segment of 'live' drums from my MIDI master keyboard. I recorded the (pretty bad) result to an audio track, and selected Tempo Detection from the Project Menu, hit Analyse and waited for the results. Very quickly, a Tempo track became visible with tempo changes automatically

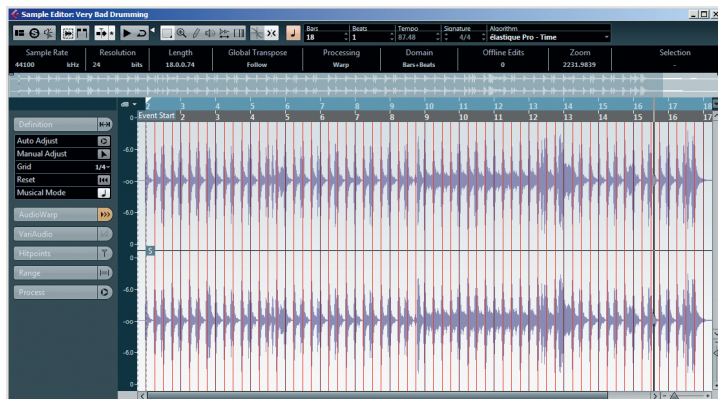
inserted on each down beat. It should be added that I did not play to a click in the first place, or even begin at the beginning of a bar – this might as well be a random recording dumped straight into program. Playing back the original beat with the metronome enabled proved that the two were both now

locked together – check the DVD to hear the results. This is truly excellent, and makes tempo map creation a breeze, although there are

additional functions available if you need to deal with more tricky material.

Things don't stop there. If you want to shoe-horn your 'free drumming' into a fixed tempo project, just select 'Set Definition From Tempo' from the Audio menu, and the tempo changes will be hard wired to that particular audio event. By enabling 'Musical Mode' in the Pool the event will automatically track any changes in the Project tempo by timestretching or pitch-shifting the audio. There are some extreme examples on the DVD demonstrating the new élastique Pro time algorithms, which really are infinitely superior to those in C5 – in fact they are quite amazing. It's worth pointing out that these tempo definitions can be stored within a project, or as part of an audio file's metadata – especially useful for reusability across multiple projects.

Hitpoint detection has also been improved. I always found that although



Got an unruly drummer? No problem Cubase 6 can detect a tempo and fix a track to match your project



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quite good on some material, the earlier Cubase algorithms seemed to require quite a lot of tidying-up, and were especially prone to placing hitpoints before the main transient peak of certain drum hits.

I can confirm that there is a most definite improvement in C6, with much more accurate placement of the hitpoints using just one click. The Sensitivity slider has been replaced with a 'Threshold' control to determine how many hitpoints to use, which works in a manner similar to a noise gate (familiar to users of the Detect Silence function), and gives clear visual feedback. Cubase 6 is now very well-equipped in the multi-track editing department (check

out the *Life in the Fast Lane* box for more on these exciting developments.

### Super sonic

Although there are no radically new and different synth-based instruments provided with Cubase 6, there are two noteworthy examples of progress on Steinberg's part. HALionOne has been dropped in favour of HALion Sonic SE, their new sample playback VSTi.

HALionOne, although sonically good, was most definitely limited in terms of functionality. HALion Sonic SE however is the little sister to the full featured HALion Sonic workstation, and provides multi-channel access to a range of very high-quality sounds,

featuring much more in the way of editing and flexibility than before. In fact, mixing, effects and control are much more developed here, and even disk streaming is utilised to accommodate growing content size.

HALion Sonic is a VST3.5 instrument which means it is also capable of working with the new 'Note Expression' feature – part of C6's VST Expression 2 technology. VST Expression was Steinberg's way of addressing standard MIDI editing limitations when it comes to Key Switching and other performance controls. VST 3.5 instruments can now automatically transfer articulation setups for every sound to an Expression

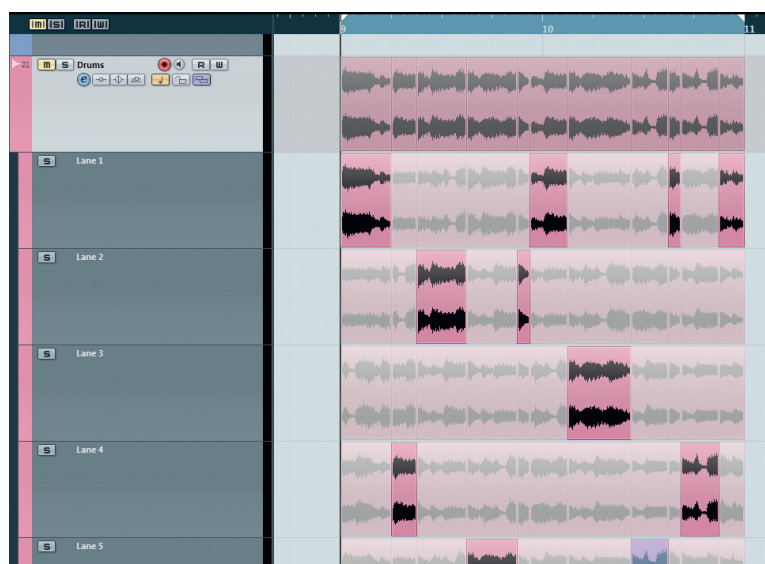
## Life in the Fast Lane

Cubase 6 brings with it some streamlining its audio comping features by tweaking the use of 'Lanes'. Each take is assigned a different lane, parts of which can be highlighted.

All the highlighted elements are then combined into a master comp track visible at the top of the lane list. All the lanes can then be hidden once comping is complete – which is rather neat (and reminiscent of Logic's 'Quick Swipe' comping tool).

Also, Folder tracks now include a 'Group Editing' button (that small '=' sign). Essentially, this means that what you do on one track in the folder will be replicated in the others – including the new comping process mentioned above. So, we have multi-track comping, but we also now have multi-track timing correction.

Just scan the hitpoints in one track, and you can slice and



quantise all others based on the original detected hitpoints – perfect for drums.

This process makes use of the new Quantise Panel, and

represents another streamlining of workflow. Not to be forgotten with all these drum-friendly features is the 'Create MIDI Notes' function in the Hitpoints

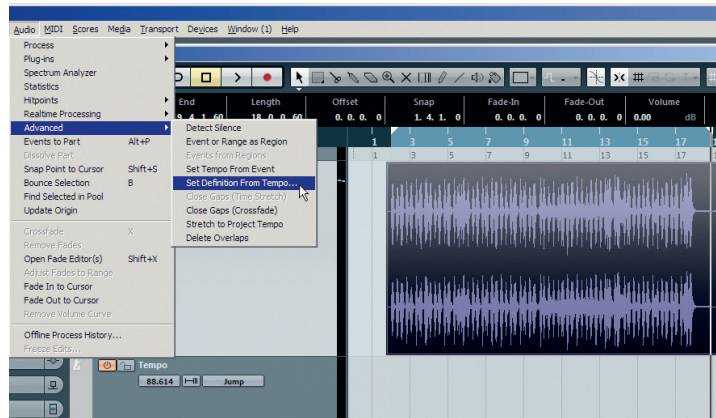
tab of the sample editor – perfect for drum replacement duties. These additions to the Cubase armoury will make many an engineer smile.

Map, but the real revolution here is the aforementioned Note Expression functionality – a completely new way of assigning, recording and editing performance controllers on a note-by-note basis. What this means is that each note – even those playing simultaneously – can have their own controller data. Combined with the general principle of VST Expression, Steinberg really seem to be onto something here, and it points the way to an interesting future for software MIDI.

### Up to 11

Steinberg have clearly had an eye on the competition when it comes to plug-in processing, and this has borne fruit in the form of the new VST Amp Rack – although, it should be added that most other changes to the FX plug-in armoury of Cubase 6 are nothing more than cosmetic.

VST Amp Rack is a guitar amp simulator that goes much further than the older and more spartan ‘AmpSimulator’ plug-in. Amp Rack is



Love your free and funky playing? Instantly create a tempo map that locks the rest of the project to it

listing what they left out – and in Steinberg’s case often what they put in, and why! However, without sounding like a starlet’s Oscar acceptance speech, I think Cubase 6 is an exceptionally good update to a solid workhorse of a production system. They have, at last, addressed issues regarding multi-track editing, and have also vastly improved its tempo and beat detection

This brings us to what might be missing. There are ongoing issues with using 32-bit plug-ins in the 64-bit version of Cubase utilising Steinberg’s sometimes problematic VSTBridge (although there are better third-party solutions to this problem), but this issue will become less important as developers update their ranges to the new format. Although, Cubase still does

not offer true mixer grouping (apart from the existing fader linking feature), it is now possible to add plug-ins and assign send FX across tracks

## By incorporating ‘élastique audio’ algorithms, its time and pitch tools are second to none

different beast altogether, incorporating as it does emulation of a full guitar recording chain from Pre-Effects (guitar stomp boxes), through Amplifiers, Cabinets and Post-Effects (more stomp boxes) to Microphone Position and Master output (with EQ and a Tuner thrown in). I was pleasantly surprised by this plug-in, and it is great way of adding realism, vibe or grit.

### Conclusion

It is often difficult to sum up major DAW updates (of any flavour) without

capabilities. By incorporating the simply stunning ‘élastique audio’ algorithms its time and pitch manipulation tools are second to none.

Individual ‘Note Expression’ points in a very interesting direction, and offers something genuinely new for those requiring precision control in the MIDI realm. VST Amp Rack fills a hole in the Cubase plug-in palette, making it far more rounded and self-contained than before, and the interface now feels more coherent, incorporating all the changes that began with Cubase 4.

simultaneously, which a simple but important addition (so new, it’s not even in the manual). In my review of Cubase 5 two years ago, I made the point that Logic comes with much more ‘content’ (loops, samples etc), and has, on the face of it, a more comprehensive range of instrument and effect plug-ins. I still feel Steinberg need to address this, but this shouldn’t detract from Cubase’s suitability as a well-rounded and self-contained production software.

As far as I am concerned, Cubase 6 is a resounding success. **FM**



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This important update, addressing some old gripes, and introducing some genuinely innovative features.

### ALTERNATIVES



**Apple Logic Studio 9**  
**£417**

The most obvious rival to Cubase in its various incarnations for nearly twenty years. Has more in the way of plug-ins and content – but Mac only – though functionally very similar to Cubase’s offering.

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



**Ableton Live Suite 8**  
**£475**

Ableton Live has always cut a different course to conventional DAWs, but it offers some great functionality built into its scalable interface. Definitely the choice for those also involved in live performance or processing.

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



**Digidesign Pro Tools 9**  
**£505**

Pro Tools is now hardware-independent, meaning it potentially now competes for the same ground as Cubase and Logic. Particularly alluring to those who feel the call of Digidesign’s ‘industry standard’ moniker.

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