cm/mini reviews

A rapid-fire round-up of sample libraries, ROMplers and more

Native Instruments
Maschine 1.6 £532

Format PC/Mac, VST/AU/RTAS
Contact Via website
Web www.nativeinstruments.com

Maschine is a groovebox system using software controlled by dedicated hardware. It was clearly intended to blow away Akai's MPC series of hardware units – which had become almost de facto within the hip-hop genre – and we'd say it largely succeeded, as Maschine's widescale adoption has been entirely impressive.

Since we reviewed v1.0 (cm138, 9/10), a whole heap of much-requested features and functions have been added. These include drag-and-drop of audio and MIDI, REX file import and modelled vintage sampler effects. v1.6, though, is one of the most important updates so far.

The big new feature is VST/AU plug-in hosting. Now you load instruments to be triggered by Maschine's internal MIDI, and effects to be applied to the resultant sounds. One of the neatest things for performance-led artists is the new Learn Mode, which maps plug-in parameters to banks of eight macro knobs,

which can be controlled by the hardware's eight physical knobs. With these new features, NI have done a great job of almost limitlessly expanding Maschine's potential without it feeling like the hardware controller itself has become swamped with possibilities, thus losing its immediacy. The only thing you need to be wary of is that piling on plug-ins can lead to greater CPU drain, but that's to be expected.

Also new for 1.6 is swing/shuffle per sound and Pad Link, which allows triggering of several pads at once from a single 'Master' pad – very useful for layered kicks and snares. On top of that, there are now 16 stereo outputs,

drag-and-drop from the Finder/Explorer, and a whole heap of new sample content. With Maschine 1.6, NI have built on and significantly improved what is already one of the strongest music-making products on the market.

9/10

### EastWest
Spaces €268

Format PC/Mac, VST/AU/RTAS
Contact Via website
Web www.soundsonline-europe.com

Virtual instrument supremos EastWest branch out into effects with Spaces (or Quantum Leap Spaces, to give it its full title), a 24-bit true-stereo convolution reverb. Designed with fidelity as its main priority, the interface is simplicity itself, featuring just knobs for input, dry and wet levels as well as a predelay control. Other factors in the design are very low CPU usage and the inclusion of both standard stereo and true-stereo impulses. For the most part, the latter have been captured with pairs of both front and rear room mics, allowing for convincing multi-channel reverb using multiple plug-in instances. We understand that future updates will also include a reverb mono selector, high- and low-pass input filters accessed via a main window graphic, and an option for 'insert' or 'aux send' operation.

With few tweaking options, in use QL Spaces is all about the sound and the accompanying library. Presets are arranged across five main categories – churches, concert halls, off-beat locations, plate/digital and rooms/stages – with

the same reverbs also sensibly grouped into instrument-specific folders. Preset labelling is spot-on and includes decay (in seconds), type (mono/stereo or true stereo) and mic position (front or rear).

Sonically, things really hit the mark, with Spaces delivering a wonderfully expansive yet smooth and rich sound, unadulterated by adjustable parameters and the distraction they can bring. Some might balk at such a basic interface, but the true star of the show is the impulse library itself, which includes not only skilfully captured concert halls, studios and churches, but also excellent plates, digital reverbs and gated reverbs. There might not be
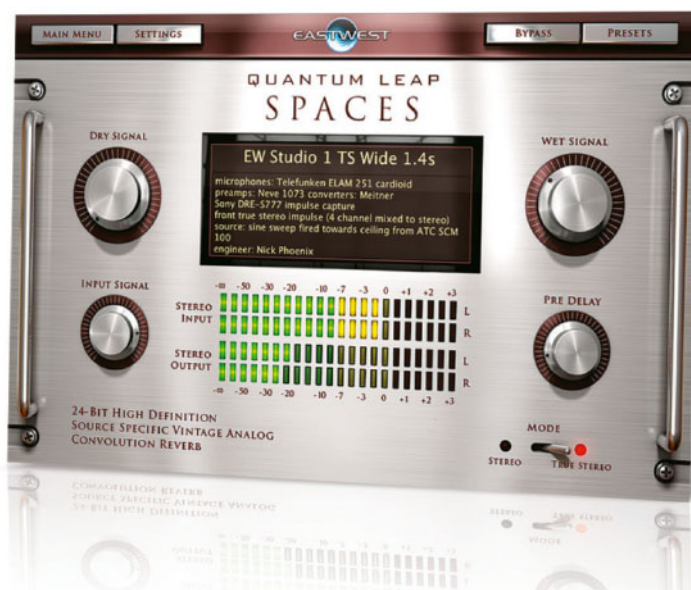
much to tweak, but these spaces fit so well into the mix as-is that it doesn't really matter.

With the imminent addition of filters to complement the adjustable predelay, Spaces is surely about to earn itself a place amongst the best-of-the-best when it comes to convolution reverb plug-ins.

8/10

Toontrack
Metalheads EZX £50

This EZX for EZdrummer and Superior Drummer 2.0 comes from the same recording sessions as the Metal Foundry SDX (**cm**142, 9/10), with the sounds pre-mixed by ace metal producer Daniel Bergstrand. Further star power is found in the MIDI grooves, where Meshuggah's Tomas Haake plays 12 of his band's perplexing polyrhythmic songs. Cool though this is, a set of standard metal beats would be more universally useful.

Forming the foundation of the kit is a double kick setup (14x26" Ludwig or 18x22" Sonor). You get an extra mixer channel for a kick 'trigger', which is a highly processed kick sound that you mix in to reinforce the mic – a standard technique in metal and something we felt was missing from Metal Foundry. The Ludwig trigger sample's bassy sustain can cloud the low end, so we routed it to its own output and used a transient plug-in to attenuate the sustained part.

There are two taut, snappy snare drums, both

6.5x14", with top/bottom mics and a trigger channel. Toms are full of thunderous bounce, with two setups, one higher-tuned. Cymbals are mostly Sabian, with two rides, one set of hats, and nine crashes/splashes/Chinas, some with two options, including a few bonus 'FX' bells.

The sound is pure tight, punchy modern metal, sitting perfectly in a mix. Kicks and toms are a highlight, but we'd happily trade in some cymbals and toms for more snares. Speaking of which, EZdrummer's Humanisation ruins the snare drum consistency – a real downer for metal. At any MIDI velocity other than full, it 'juggles' between a few samples (eg, a rimshot and a normal hit), causing drastic variance in hits. Bizarrely, it even afflicts the triggers. To alleviate this issue, we used an extra instance of

EZdrummer with Humanisation off, and blended in parts (eg, the snare) to achieve consistency.

Metalheads can give excellent results, but you may have to work around its flaws, which isn't quite in the 'plug-and-play' EZX spirit.

7/10

Antares
Mic Mod EFX £123

Mic Modeler first appeared in hardware and software form over a decade ago. Now repackaged as Mic Mod EFX, this novel concept returns with a fresh look and VST, AU and RTAS support. You select a source mic (the one you used to record the source material with) and a modelled mic, both from the list of over 120 mics – the plug-in then uses a bit of DSP magic to make the source mic sound like the target one. Settings can be fine-tuned using the model-specific low-cut filter and pickup pattern options. For non-omni patterns, you also have some control over proximity (zero to 36 inches). Rounding things off is a tube saturation control.

Mic Mod EFX is a surprisingly flexible tool, capable of both subtle and more audible results, and the proximity and saturation options provide room for creative applications too. Some might be unimpressed that the DSP side of things hasn't changed since the original version, but we have to say that it's held up nicely. The only real disappointment is that it still doesn't include enough of the commonplace budget condenser mics that many of us will be using as sources.

8/10
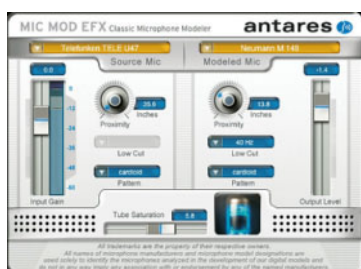
MeldaProduction
MAutoAlign €50

MAutoAlign addresses the age-old problem of time alignment and phase cancellation in multi-mic'ed recordings. It offers both a simple, automatic 'analyse and fix' option and manual tweaking of the applied delay.

To use it, put MAutoAlign on the tracks you want to align with each other, play the track and hit the Analyse button. Seconds later, it applies track-specific settings. It's one of the simplest approaches to this concept we've tried. The only caveat is that plug-ins that introduce latency can confuse the analysis, but you would usually correct phase issues before starting to mix anyway. Plug-in instances can be grouped – eg, you'd put drum tracks in a separate group to multi-mic'ed guitar tracks. You can also select a 'master track', which all other grouped tracks will try to conform to. Finally, the plug-in can apply just delay, or delay and polarity reversal. Results did vary depending on which part of our track we played, but this is understandable. If we have a gripe, it's that phase reverse can't be modified manually, but we understand this could be added in an update.

8/10

Soundware round-up

Monster Sounds
Black Noise Warehouse £40

Like a can of comedy worms, these AIFF/Live/REX/ WAV samples leap out at you in all directions. It's a collection of whistle-blowing ravey sounds from Black Noise, the house incarnation of Aquasky. All the sonic elements are covered, the MC-like vocals being a surprise gem. The drums are a little thin but the basses and leads are so badass we'll forgive them.

www.loopmasters.com

8/10

Prime Loops
Big Phat Wobble Bass £18

This release gives you 121 big, phat, wobbly basslines. It's in all the common formats and despite the narrow theme, there's more here than just square-wave 'wom wom wom' noises. Nothing is particularly stand-out on the hook front, though, and you'll have to chop out individual notes if you want to use it to play your own tunes. It's a good sound source nonetheless.

www.primeloops.com

7/10

Sonokinetic
Arpeggio €50

A large concert harp has been sampled for this Kontakt 4 patch. It has a custom interface and articulations for short, sustain, flageolet, picked, bisbigliando, pres de la table and effects. You also get EQ and convolution reverb. Highlights are the sound – consistent and not too roomy – and glissando with up, down and up/down variations in five scale types. A fine effort.

www.sonokinetic.net

8/10

Sample Magic
Toolroom Records Samples 01 £40

With 535MB of samples (in all typical formats), this is a modestly-sized pack, but as you'd expect from both Sample Magic and Toolroom, it oozes quality. There are basslines, FX, drum loops, one-shots and more. There might be fewer sounds than in competing titles at around this price point, but the difference is that these ones have been polished to perfection.

www.samplemagic.com

9/10

Sounds of Revolution
Clicks and Glitches €13

100 loops here from SOR's golden-eared Oliver Schmitt, claiming to be just what you need to add "charm and groove" to your clean productions. The collection is made up of heavily swung distorted twitches and pops that bounce and spark out of your speakers. This focused pack gets our thumbs-up, and the production is top-notch.

**www.sounds-of-revolution.com**

8/10

Waveform Recordings
Classic House £23

Think of classic house and you might think of vocal-led, Korg M1 piano classics. This pack, though, is full of quite modern-sounding loops and effects (in WAV format), slathered in what sounds like a fake vinyl effect. The 500MB of 'dusty' grooves take the 'dusty' aspect a tad too far at times, though the sounds themselves are very usable.

www.soundstosample.com

7/10
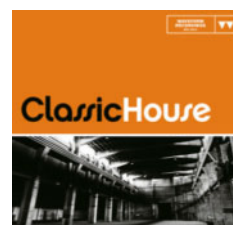
Pakotec Productions
Short Claps Vol 1 £10

The clue is in the name: 50 brief claps in WAV format is all you get, with nary a spatial effect to be found. The sounds are good but nothing you won't find in many other packs, and even £10 seems way too pricey for what you get. They could have at least put in some layered or 'special effects' claps to justify it. Maybe that's what's in store for Vol 2…

www.producerloops.com

4/10

Digital Loopline
Modern Pop £79

Dance and electronic music have infiltrated today's pop and this pack rides the trend with 35 construction kits and 7202 total files in the common sample/sampler formats. Modern Pop is a tribute to all things Gaga, Perry and Peas, but it's arguably too tame for club producers and too full-on 'dancefloor' for popsters. It still makes a decent pick 'n' mix bag, thanks to the mass of content.

www.bestservice.de

7/10

Big Fish Audio
Modern Country £88

Centred on 15 construction kits in WAV/Apple Loops/ REX/RMX formats, Modern Country is a clean and crisp nod to an ever-popular genre. It's not just about steel guitars, though – there's also a rock element that justifies the 'Modern' tag. It's well recorded, played and put together over two discs and as ever with these niche genre titles, it's more for the library music crowd, being a little too expensive for those simply seeking sonic spice.

www.timespace.com

8/10
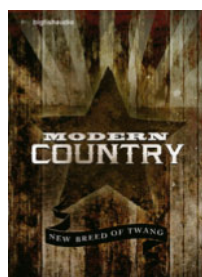
Camel Audio
Dubstep £25

This pack is for Camel Audio's Alchemy synth/sample-based instrument, and comes with the free Alchemy Player. It contains 75 sounds, and while the hallmarks of dubstep are present, it's very techno-influenced, with lots of pads and atmospheres. Some good basses stand out, but most are more like good starting points. The synths are more consistent, though more IDM than dubstep. A solid if not entirely genre-adherent effort. **cm**

www.camelaudio.com

7/10