PAGES
Switch between the three main page views: Play, Mix and Edit

LIVE
Delve into SampleTank 3's new Live performance mode

BROWSER
Browse and select Multi/Instrument presets and MIDI Patterns

MULTI
Each Multi includes up to 16 Instruments, each on its own MIDI channel

MACRO CONTROLS
Each Instrument includes eight pre-assigned sound editing controls

FX
Grants quick access to the currently selected effects plugin in an Instrument, Auxiliary or Master slot

INFO
Click for Instrument details and Macro Control assignments

KEYBOARD
Use this to trigger notes, keyswitching and playback of key-assigned loops

GLOBAL PLAY BUTTON
Start and stop playback of all selected audio and MIDI loops

TEMPO
Piece together a custom kit or 'generate' one from scratch

IK Multimedia PC MAC

SampleTank 3 €280

This venerable ROMpler is long overdue an update, but can v3 do enough to keep it spry in the face of stiff competition?

> It might seem hard to believe, but the third version of IK Multimedia's sample-based virtual sound module, SampleTank (VST/AU/AAX/standalone), has been ten long years in the making. Now based on 33GB of sample content, 25GB of which is new, it greatly improves on the previous version while maintaining compatibility with old patches (you can import all your 'Powered by SampleTank' libraries).

Just like its predecessor, at the fundamental level, SampleTank 3 works like a traditional multitimbral synth/sampler, with Instruments loaded into each of its 16 independently triggered Parts. However, beyond that, it's a whole new ball game, with a brand new engine and a redesigned interface.

The action is now spread across three main windows (Play, Mix and Edit), each containing further sub-pages as required. Sets of Parts are combined in Multis (import of old SampleTank Combis is supported), each including four auxiliary effects sends (via the Mix page), and groups of which can be controlled via the new Live mode (see *Live Sets*). There are five insert effects slots per Instrument, as well as on each Auxiliary return and the Master output.

Big numbers
The Instruments themselves come in three types: 'standard', 'articulations' and 'looped'. Articulation Instruments are multi-articulation patches employing one of three switching modes – key, velocity or mod wheel – while loop Instruments are audio loops that sync to the global tempo. The vast majority of Instruments are standard multisampled patches, however. Each Multi Part can also include up to 128 MIDI patterns, assigned to individual notes/keys for triggering. Patterns get their own tab in the Play page browser, where they're categorised much like the Instruments. You can adjust the velocity Intensity and Quantise settings of loaded patterns, and drag them into your DAW arrangement as MIDI clips.

In terms of numbers, what all of this amounts to is over 4000 Instruments in 21 categories, more than 2500 audio Loops and over 2000 categorised MIDI files. The sheer volume of effects is similarly impressive, with 55 excellent processors extracted from IK's T-RackS and AmpliTube suites, including six amp simulations, 14 modulation processors and a range of classic emulations such as the Vintage EQ-1A EQ and Black 76 compressor. With all that in mind, we're quite surprised that ST 3 doesn't go the whole hog and tie in to IK's Custom Shop.

SampleTank 3's workflow transcends that of its predecessor (**cm**68, 8/10), which was cluttered and fiddly to use. High points include ready access to the currently selected effects plugin from all pages via the FX button, and quick preset editing in the Macro control panel at the bottom of the GUI. We also really like the

"As well as its instruments, SampleTank 3's loop library is surprisingly good"

new instrument Edit page, with easy Part selection buttons always to hand on the right-hand side.

In the 'Tank

So, how are the sounds? Well, the keyboard instruments are particularly great, offering an abundance of acoustic pianos, electric pianos and organs. Tuned percussion instruments like marimba and vibraphone sound rich and wide, and the orchestral strings, brass and woodwind come from IK's superb Miroslav Philharmonik package, with plenty of articulations and both ensemble and solo patches. There are also some edgy new pop brass and woodwind patches.

Acoustic drums are very well covered, with a handful of core kits serving as the basis for numerous presets, and individual component menus (kicks, snares, cymbals, etc), providing plenty of flexibility. There's also a collection of electronic drums, with patches labelled by style (Dance, Glitch, Dubstep, Trap, etc).

ROMpler-generated guitars often sound weak, but here the electric patches are remarkably convincing, including Stratocaster, Les Paul and hollow body instruments. The basses comprise Fender Precision and Jazz, Music Man and Rickenbacker, with picked, finger and slap playing styles covered.

The synth sounds are grouped by type (Lead, Pad, Bass and FX), and we were most impressed by the variety of the Pad and Bass categories. Naturally, the programming flexibility on offer is nothing like that of an actual synthesiser, but the Edit page's filters and envelopes allow for a reasonable level of tweaking. Rounding things off are some decent 'ethnic' sounds (bouzouki, dulcimer, gamelan and suchlike).

As well as its instruments, SampleTank 3's loop library is surprisingly good, covering current electronic styles (hip-hop, EDM, dubstep and house) plus Latin and Cuban styles, and drum kit loops. Obviously, they're not a replacement for an ongoing collection of bespoke sample packs, but they do deliver quick, convincing results,

Now on its own page, the new Instrument Editor is far more user-friendly than in previous versions

The Live page lets you combine Multis into Songs for easy live recall

Live Sets

SampleTank 3 includes a new preset management system for live performance situations. Accessed via the Live tab in the Play page, it enables you to combine Multis into Songs, then save those Songs as a Set List.

A Set List can include up to 64 Songs, with a MIDI Program Change number assigned to each of them. With each Song comprising up to 16 Multis, the idea is that you use a different one for each part of your song performance (verse, bridge, chorus, etc). Once again, each Multi can be assigned a MIDI Program Change number, and slightly frustratingly, you can't simply nest Instruments directly in a Song – you have to first place them inside a Multi. On the upside, though, SampleTank 3 prevents you from duplicating Program Change assignments, keeping the MIDI side of things easy to set up.

Selecting a Song (either by clicking it or via a MIDI Program Change message) loads all its constituent Multis into memory, with a progress bar just below the Song name letting you monitor the process. Overall, it's a great system that makes Multi switching on the fly nice and swift.

and the Stretch (SampleTank REsynthesis TeCHnology) engine, with its individual control of Pitch, Time and Harmonic Shift, is great for manipulating them in real time.

Third time's the charm?

Our biggest criticism of SampleTank 3 is that, although there are loads of Instrument presets onboard, there are very few 'combi' presets, layering those sounds into larger-than-life patches. Also, while you can audition MIDI Patterns before loading them, you can't preview Instrument patches (via, say, a pre-rendered audio 'demo', like in Ableton Live 9) nor is there a way to audition a patch for play without overwriting and thus losing the current one. And finally, you can't load Instruments into Live songs without first putting them in a Multi.

That aside, SampleTank 3 has a lot going for it, succeeding in doing what some of the best hardware workstations do: enhancing a solid set of samples with just the right effects, thereby delivering ready-made patches that genuinely inspire. If you approach and use it as a high-quality sound module packed with well-produced but very much 'workhorse' sounds, rather than an ultra-flexible sample-based synth, you won't be disappointed. **cm**

Web www.ikmultimedia.com
Info Upgrade, €160; Crossgrade, €200

Alternatively

Steinberg HALion Sonic 2
N/A » N/A » £203
With 2500 instruments and 20GB of sounds, Steinberg's ROMpler is a strong rival to SampleTank 3

UVI Workstation
N/A » N/A » From $99
A multitimbral workstation that loads sample packs from UVI's extensive library

Verdict

For Slick, ergonomic new interface
Vastly extended sample set
Excellent effects
Crossgrade pricing for IK users

Against 64-bit only
Few Multi presets in library

One of the best bread-and-butter sound modules – hardware or software – that money can buy, SampleTank 3 is big and beautiful, if not particularly bold

8 / 10