

WHAT IS IT?

The latest iteration of Steinberg's multi-platform DAW – and now with a Pro designation

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HIGHLIGHTS

- 1 Render in-place
- 2 Plug-in manager
- 3 MixConsole enhancements – VCA faders and direct outputs



Steinberg Cubase Pro 8 | £449

Two years after the introduction of Cubase 7, a new Pro update arrives. **Bruce Aisher** wonders if it can still play with the big boys and girls

Steinberg's release schedule for major Cubase updates is now well established. For the last few months their forums were buzzing with anticipation of what might arrive at the close of 2014 – and sure enough Cubase Pro 8 landed at the beginning of December.

The most noticeable difference, before even loading the software itself, was its new Pro moniker. The cynics out there might see this as a leap into the Apple Logic territory, though it does at least help differentiate it from the trimmed-down (and cheaper) Cubase Artist 8.

Two years ago, when Steinberg introduced Cubase 7, the most noticeable change was the MixConsole.

Hailed as a much more flexible update to the traditional mixer windows, in the end it proved to be something of a mixed blessing. After a few weeks of use I realised it wasn't quite up to the mark – style over substance perhaps. In fact, it had great features, but suffered from some serious, scaling and font issues (which many users grappled with for months).

Despite this, I made the leap to Cubase 7 (and then C7.5), and over the last couple of years have enjoyed many of the other new features. Track Versions, Advanced Channel Linking and ASIO-Guard were among my favourites, but we shouldn't forget the Chord Track, VST Connect, Track Visibility options, Multi-channel

Instrument Tracks and new or updated plug-ins such as LoopMash FX, Revelation, Magneto 2, HALion Sonic SE 2 and Groove Agent SE 4.

Going Pro

This brings us to Cubase Pro 8. Visually, there's nothing radically different here – so no nasty surprises. Of course, the first place I went after loading an older C7.5 project was the MixConsole. There have been a few minor graphical tweaks so, on the face of it, it's mostly the same. I still have gripes over the lack of globally accessible mixer set-up presets. One of the biggest time-wasters is the hassle of reconfiguring the three mixer windows when loading older projects, or ones created on a different computer. Cubase workspaces do a decent job of saving and recalling multiple windows but the MixConsole is crying out for something like this. Incidentally, there is now an Update Workspace function, which does really help their overall usefulness.

One noteworthy visual addition to MixConsole is the new Wave Meters. Previously seen in Nuendo, this shows a vertical scrolling waveform display in the meter bridge instead of the PPMs. Sadly, this only works for audio channels – and no key command switching is available – which perhaps limits their relevance, though for single monitor users they may be helpful. They do look nice! In the functional

Cubase Pro 8: What's New?

Here are five of our favourite new additions. We suspect all have been on Steinberg's 'most requested' list for some time – and now they're here...



Render In-place

There are plenty of options for rendering a selection of MIDI and audio parts or full tracks with and without effects, and various routing options. Reverb and other effect tails can also be accommodated. There are a few aspects that need ironing out. Sidechain processing is not included in the rendered audio, and multi-timbral VST instruments with separate outputs are picky about which options have been set. Notwithstanding these issues, this is an important step forward for Cubase.



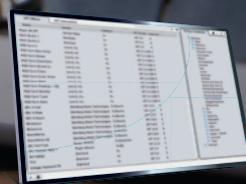
Direct Routing

Direct Routing allows you to send channels to multiple destinations at once. This makes it very easy to create monitor and stem mixes, parallel processing busses, and sidechain sends with only few clicks. By default you can switch between multiple output sources with a single click – great for auditioning different signal chains across groups – but with Summing Mode eight destinations can be active at the same time. This really helps to make MixConsole feel more like a hardware desk.



VCA Faders

Another analogue desk throwback. These are independent fader channels that can be used for controlling other channel levels (plus mute and solo status) – somewhere between a Group Channel and a Channel Linking. Multiple VCA faders can be nested under another VCA fader, a useful tool when building-up complex mixes. When automation is involved, VCA automation can be merged with individual or group channel automation curves. It sounds complex, but it is a proven workflow tool in Pro Tools and large format hardware desks, and is simple to get your head around when applied in practice.



Plug-in Manager

A long called-for feature, which has been increasingly needed since the arrival of the VST3 format plug-in, is a plug-in manager. Well, our prayers have been answered, and it's great. You can build so-called collections of different plug-ins, each with their own folder structure and plug-in order, and then switch between any plug-in selection window. A simple yet powerful tool, though some may have wished for the ability to rename plug-ins or provide abbreviations.



Better Window Handling

No, it's not glamorous! All windows can now be placed outside of the main desktop area. Previously, for Windows users, this could only be done for some windowed elements. This may seem like nerdy stuff, but it makes using multiple displays much better – and all windows are now accessible using standard Windows OS commands (Alt+Tab works a treat, and even for plug-ins). Previously, the Always On Top plug-in option did not work correctly with some other windows. This now, thankfully, functions as it should.

SPECS

System requirements:

Mac: OS X 10.9/10.10

PC: Windows 7/Windows 8.x

Both: Intel or AMD dual core

CPU, 4GB RAM, 15GB of

free HD space, Display

resolution of 1366 x 768,

Graphics card with DirectX

and WDDM 1.1 support (Win

Only), USB port for

USB-eLicenser (license

management), OS

compatible audio hardware

DVD-ROM dual-layer drive

PRICING

Cubase Pro 8

£449

Cubase Artist 8

£244

Update from Cubase 7.5

£82

Update from Cubase 7

£121

Update from Cubase 6/6.5

£161

Update from Cubase 4/5

£244

Upgrade from Cubase

Artist 8

£162

stakes direct routing and VCA faders are both extremely useful 'pro' features.

One disappointment for some Windows 7 users will be the necessity of having to turn on DWM composition and use an Aero theme. If ever there was an excuse for moving to Windows 8, then this is it. Even if you use Cubase exclusively, the Aero themes lack much tweakability, making some menus and taskbar tabs hard to read – at worst it looks cheap. Bring on the Apple fan boys and girls!

On the upside, overall window handling in C8 is much improved. Though it appeared to be a side-effect of the older classic window-handling, it's a shame we had to wait two years for this to be fixed.

Guardians of the latency

Next stop was the Performance Meter. Steinberg have slightly uprated their quite modest minimum specs for Cubase Pro 8. My three-year-old 16GB Intel i5 rig was well above these, though processor load is going to be highly dependent on the current project.

Comparing the same project, consisting of audio and MIDI alongside a host of third-party plug-ins, proved that Cubase 8 did not consume more CPU than previously – a common complaint in software updates. In fact, it was marginally less than Cubase 7 (with and without Aero). This is partly helped by the variable buffering of ASIO-Guard 2, which now supports multi-timbral and disk-streaming instruments. An option has been added to set the ASIO-Guard 'level', with progressively more potential latency and

Rhythmic Agents



Groove Agent SE 4 gains a new 'agent' in the form of **Acoustic Agent** – a self-contained acoustic drummer module that includes both samples and patterns. A pleasant surprise was that, despite being preset-based in many respects, there is a lot that can be done to control the kit mix and playback style. The latter can be tweaked in real time by using keys or pads to trigger different patterns and an x-y pad to

adjust intensity and complexity, with other controls over the use of crash, hit and ride cymbals. MIDI patterns can be both imported and exported. The built-in mixer provides access to individual kit mics, stereo overhead and room sources, as well as EQ, compression, tape saturation, envelope shaping and four aux sends (for each). This is before you even consider that mic balance

(including bleed), tuning, attack, hold and decay can all be adjusted. It's a shame that this perhaps wasn't created as a separate plug-in with simple and advanced modes. Groove Agent, like HALion, is very powerful, but can be fiddly at times. Nevertheless, this is a very welcome addition. Perhaps those at Steinberg HQ had been eyeing-up Apple Logic X, which includes its own Drummer.

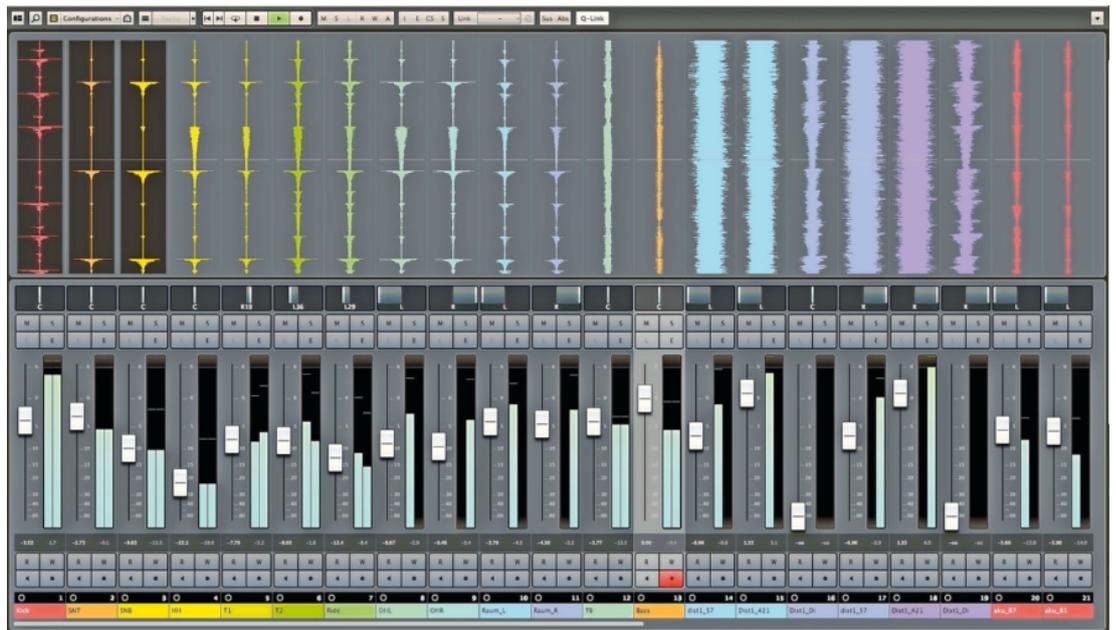
memory usage when moving through the Low, Medium and High settings. In any event, this feature can also be turned off on a per plug-in basis should you wish. This certainly helps minimise spurious CPU spikes, with some users reporting quite hefty improvements in processing overhead and/or lower

latencies. Real-time peaks were down considerably on some of the projects I tested.

Incidentally, Cubase 8 retrieved and imported my C7 preferences, key commands, presets, workspaces and other settings automatically. So the transition was pretty painless.



The new 'virgin territory' feature makes it noticeably easier to experiment with fader/parameter automation



The new scrolling Wave Meters are a nice addition, but MixConsole could still use some tweaks

Plug-in play

A special mention should be made of Quadrafuzz. This disappeared from the Cubase line-up some years back and now returns with a nicely updated feature set. The origins of this processor lie in a DIY electronic circuit for guitarists designed by Craig Anderton in the late '70s, and its digital equivalent was developed 15 years ago (and added as a bundled plug-in three years later). At its most basic it is a four-band distortion processor, but Quadrafuzz v2 takes this much further by adding a noise gate and ducking modulated feedback delay to each band. This is a great plug-in, which can be put to work on all kinds of sources – whether to add some subtle flavour or all-out nastiness.

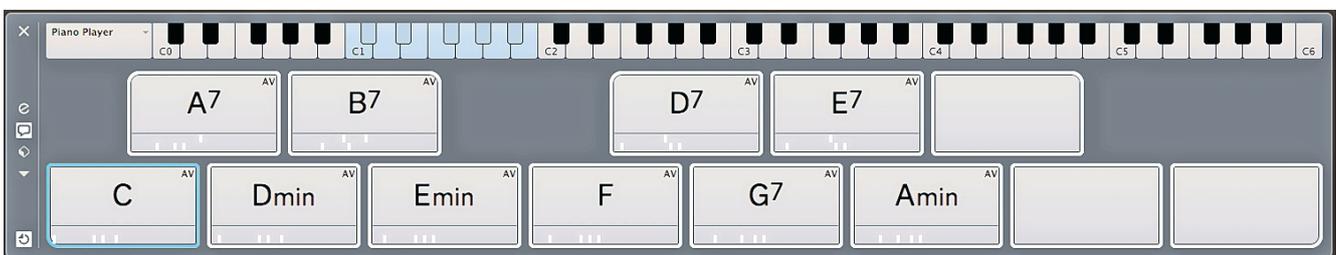
Steinberg have also introduced a multiband version of their Envelope Shaper and Expander. The Envelope Shaper is quite interesting to experiment with on drum loops, whilst the Multiband Expander left me a little cold – although in fairness it is perhaps a little more niche in its appeal.

The DeEsser has been updated with low and high-pass filters and sidechain support, making this a far more versatile tool, and not just for vocal use – it has also been added to the Channel Strip module, which is still somewhat visually crude and unappealing. Usefully, the Channel Strip pre-filter now has a range of five selectable slopes for both the high and low filters, and the EQ section offers note/pitch-based editing.

Like the DeEsser, Multiband Compressor has seen both functional and graphical improvements. Sidechaining is far more complex, with individual monitoring, filtering and control over sidechaining for each band. Again, this makes for a more interesting and creative tool. Tuner has been tweaked, and adds a strobe tuning mode.

Four years ago, VST Amp Rack was added to Cubase, which provided a decent emulation of a full electric guitar recording and processing chain. Cubase 8 now includes a low-end partner for it – VST Bass Amp. Functionally it is almost identical, but with the effects, amp, cabs and microphones tailored for bass instruments.

Long Live MIDI



Audio processing and virtual instruments usually get all the glory, but it's worth remembering that good old MIDI data still underpins significant areas of functionality in the modern DAW. MIDI (like Audio previously) now gets its own

Tempo Detection feature. The principle here is that you jam or play without reference to the internal tempo or click, and that Cubase will create a tempo map for the performance that will then be realigned to the current project's grid at fixed tempo. It's

not perfect, but it is helpful and welcome.

The Chord Track features which were introduced in Cubase 7 have been enhanced with the new Circle of Fifths and Proximity Assistant modes. Proximity Chord Assistant

helps make suggestions for chords based on a reference chord (with visual cues as to its complexity). The Circle of Fifths mode employs the classic harmonic 'wheel' to aid selection. Both of these features work with the new

Chord Pads, which allow single keys to play chords with variable voicings.

As a way of learning and exploring harmony, or even getting out of a creative rut, these features are interesting and worth exploring further.

Finally, we also get a decent plug-in manager, which is essential in this age of big plug-in bundles and unmovable VST3 plug-ins.

Back on track

Back in the main project window, the Track List and Inspector have seen some refinements making them generally clearer. Track Control settings can now be saved and recalled more easily, whilst the configuration window is more detailed and offers an in-window preview of each control section. The Instrument rack and MediaBay can now be docked to the right of the main arrange page (another Apple influence?) – both a great help when mapped to a keyboard shortcut. Automation is left largely untouched, with the exception of so-called virgin territory handling.

When enabled in the automation preferences, automation will only be written (and therefore read) where it has been explicitly added. In sections where automation data has not been placed, you are now free to move the fader/parameter. It's a small thing, but now provides an easy way to practise possible automation choices before committing.

I think that the most important aspect of this update, for many, is going to be the much-requested

The Full Cubase Family

The current Cubase 8 line-up consists of both Pro and Artist versions.

Given that the Artist version is £200 cheaper, there may be some appeal in taking the Artist option, especially when you consider that it is by no means deficient in feature terms. In fact, by my calculation, you can actually save £42 by buying Cubase Artist 8 and then upgrading to Pro!

In terms of new features in Pro that you don't get in

Artist 8, you will miss: VCA faders, automation virgin territories, VST Connect SE, direct routing, Wave Meters and Proximity Chord Assistant.

Artist does have limitations in terms of numbers of tracks, mixer views and included effects, but these aren't too problematic. If, however, you want to delve into mixing bigger projects, use lots of automation and need to employ the full range of

audio editing options, then you will need to go for Cubase Pro 8 – after all these are all 'pro' features.

In fact, for the cheapest taste of Cubase you can still buy Cubase Elements 7 online for £82.

Steinberg offer updates from most historical versions of Cubase (going back eight years to Cubase 4 which cost £600 at the time), and upgrades from all Artist, Elements, LE, AI versions as well as Sequel 2.



ALTERNATIVES



Apple Logic X £140

Logic X is far cheaper than Cubase (not including the computer to run it) and offers considerable bang for buck in both instrument and effects terms.

www.apple.com



Ableton Live 9 £249

Ableton have always carved their own furrow, and manage to successfully straddle both studio and performance scenarios with Live.

www.ableton.com



Pro Tools 11 £549

Now fully native and 64-bit, Pro Tools is a cross-platform industry standard.

www.avid.com

The most important aspect of this update, for many, will be the much-requested render in-place function

Looking right across the DAW landscape, there is still a way to go when it comes to truly automating production workflow and

render in-place function. Thank you Steinberg, it's brilliant.

Another useful addition for those looking for inspiration in the absence of a large recording space is the Allen Morgan Pop-Rock Toolbox. This includes 30 full audio project construction kits, as well as a number of decent Groove Agent SE kits (see *Rhythmic Agents*).

Apart from the various MIDI-based improvements mentioned elsewhere, and some good tweaks to the VST Connect SE remote recording tool, that just about rounds up everything new in Cubase 8 – well as reported by Steinberg at least. Take a look on their official forum, and you will find a 'Hidden Cubase 8 features' thread with some other additions such as Disable Instrument Tracks.

Conclusion

I'm still not 100% happy with MixConsole, and there are legibility issues in some parts of the program but, for a release version, Cubase 8 feels pretty solid. Load times appear quicker and I had no crashes whilst testing – which certainly counts for something.

I'd like to see even more key commands, mixer configuration presets, a simple keyboard-oriented sampler and improved delay effects but, who knows, they may arrive in C8.5?

I suspect Windows users will look increasingly likely to move to Windows 8.1, given some of criticisms of Windows 7 detailed earlier, but this shouldn't detract from the quality of Cubase 8 – it does also run under OS X after all.

the mix process – automatic vocal alignment, comping and mixing anyone? Whilst one could argue that nothing on offer here is earth-shattering, all things considered, this is a very strong update in my view, with some real and worthwhile enhancements. **FM**

FutureMusic VERDICT

BUILD	■■■■■■■■■■■
VALUE	■■■■■■■■■■■
EASE OF USE	■■■■■■■■■■■
VERSATILITY	■■■■■■■■■■■
RESULTS	■■■■■■■■■■■

A solid update, built on strong foundations, with some genuinely useful new features.