STEP SEQUENCER
Up to 16 steps, with Slew function and Trigger mode

COLOR
Sweep the playback start point through the waveform

SHAPER
Three filter modes for a wide range of frequency-shaping

COLOR MOVEMENT
An AD envelope for the Color parameter

EFFECTS
Five modules, each with two controls, plus dry/wet mix

RANDOMISER
Random modulation with a 'rainfall' style interface

LFO
Make curved saws and triangles for cyclical modulation

MODULATION
Set mod amounts using the collars around each knob

EUCLIDEAN SEQUENCER
A looping trancegate in all but name

TUNING
Shift an octave up or down, and detune in semitones

MIX
Set the output blend of the two Source waveforms

Softube
Parallels £104 PC MAC

Visually beguiling and powered by a very special library of evolving waveforms, this new synth from Sweden walks its own path

> Having successfully made the move from the effects domain into the area of softsynths with their Heartbeat drum machine (8/10, **cm** 222) and Modular Eurorack emulation, Softube's new plugin instrument, Parallels (VST/AU/AAX), is a 14-voice two-oscillator polysynth with a 1.6GB library of multisampled waveforms at its core. These have been captured from an array of classic and boutique hardware synths, and environmental recordings, and they aim to go further than other, similar sampled soundbanks in their duration and depth, serving as a deep reservoir of source material for filtering, modulation and processing in an interface that any synthesist should be able to get to grips with in a matter of minutes.

Special Source
Parallels' GUI is striking and consistently informative, from the use of colour and shading to represent modulation assignments and mix levels, to the tastefully animated modulators and cool iconography. It's a thing of real beauty.

The two Source 'oscillators' each host any waveform from the categorised library (Digital Synth, Analog Synth, Chords, Drones, Distorted, Environment, etc), and are blended with the big Mix knob. Every one of the 97 waveforms is 15 seconds long, and constantly evolving in

> "The waveforms are designed specifically to be scanned through, rather like enormous wavetables"

amplitude, harmonic content and/or pitch throughout its progression from start to finish. They're designed to be scanned through, like enormous wavetables, and this is done with the Color knobs, which simply offset the playback start point within each waveform, as visually indicated by their encircling amplitude graphics. The name is a little misleading, though, as while most of the waveforms get 'brighter' the further clockwise Color is swept, that's down to the content of the sample itself rather than any 'algorithmic' effect on the part of the knob.

Sending MIDI notes to the synth, then, initiates looped playback of a very short segment of each waveform starting at the Color position. Bizarrely, the length of this loop is prescribed for each one and set in stone, so you can't zoom in to snatch a single-cycle wave, say, which is something we found ourselves wanting to do quite often. The loop can be defeated by activating One-shot mode, under which

> "It sacrifices a degree of depth at the altar of simplicity, but most will find its focused approach refreshing"

Get your West Coast on with the Low Pass Gate filter mode

playback simply continues to the end of the waveform if not modulated to do otherwise.

Both Color knobs are available as modulation targets (see below), of course, but they also have their own AD envelopes (Color Movement). Attack (1ms-16s) determines the time it takes to sweep clockwise to the point set by the Amount slider, while Decay (also 1ms-16s) dictates how long it takes to return to the start point.

The remaining Source controls comprise an ADSR volume envelope, Octave and Pitch knobs, and on/off for mod wheel-driven Vibrato. Each Source feeds into its associated Shaper section, wherein one of three very different filters is brought into play – see *Throwing Shapers*.

Parallels processing

The left-hand side of the GUI (the 'Mod Pod') houses four modulation source slots, each of which can host an LFO, envelope, randomiser, step sequencer or Euclidean sequence generator. The LFO is freely shapeable from a triangle to a saw waveform, and curvable; the envelope switches between ASR and ADSR behaviour; the randomiser is superb, with its XY control of rate and 'noise filtering'; the Euclidean generator is analogous to a cycling trancegate; and the 16th-note step sequencer features a Slew control for 'glide', and can output variable amounts or fixed 100% steps. They come together as a hugely creative quintet of signal generators – easy to use, yet genuinely fun.

Modulation assignments are made by dragging the collar around the target parameter to set the mod amount, and each target can mix the input from two sources at a time, balanced with its popup Modulation Mix slider. It's a clever system, but we're surprised at the two-modulator limit – why not an XY pad with a modulator on each corner? Also worth noting is that modulation is positive-only for all parameters bar Pitch, so downward envelopes are out, as is negative modulation of the Color control. It's a shame, too, that the filter displays
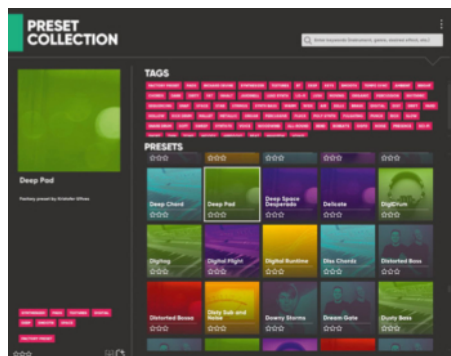
Great for tagging and identification, but absurdly histrionic when you just want to audition a few presets

Throwing Shapers

Softube being the masters of analogue modelling that they are, we had big expectations of Parallels' filters – and they certainly don't disappoint.

Each Source feeds into its own filter section, called the Shaper, offering a choice of three filter modes: Low-Pass Gate, State Variable Filter and Resonator, each with three modulatable parameters, manually adjusted in the graphical display and/or using the trio of knobs below.

The Low-Pass Gate is a languid Buchla-inspired vactrol-controlled resonant filter/VCA that responds dynamically to modulation. It's great for adding organic lift to any patch.

While the LPG is a great option for expressive low-pass filtering, the resonant State Variable filter is considerably more versatile, with the Type control sweeping its frequency response from low-pass through band-pass to high-pass and back.

Last but not least, the Resonator is a three-filter bank that can be used for eliciting formants and vowel sounds from the Source waveforms. The Tilt knob 'see-saws' the top and bottom peaking filters (one up, the other down), while Spread spaces them apart and Freq shifts all three up and down. Modulate the whole lot for wild vocal-style effects.

don't animate with modulation, and that, while Source Mix can be modulated, individual Source volume levels can't.

Finally, the five serially arranged effects modules – Distortion, Chorus, Flanger, Delay and Reverb – are well up to Softube's usual standards in this department, bringing plenty of glamour, spectacle and polish via just two knobs (plus dry/wet mix) each.

Synth of the future

Despite the shortcomings mentioned (and the return of Softube's overwrought preset browser/manager, which we won't get into again here beyond saying that the more patches it addresses, the more frustrating it gets – and in this case, that's very frustrating indeed), Parallels is a fantastic instrument. We love its intuitive, captivating interface, groovy modulators, excellent effects and thoughtfully designed waveform library, and, ultimately, the stunning noises it produces. Yes, it sacrifices a degree of depth at the altar of architectural simplicity, but most will find its focused, contemporary approach refreshing. There's nothing else quite like it for quickly and easily summoning complex, colourful synth sounds of all shapes and sizes. **cm**

Web softube.com

Alternatively

**Spectrasonics Omnisphere 2
cm220 » 10/10 » £339**
The daddy of sample-based synthesis, but nowhere near as friendly (or affordable) as Parallels

**Waves Flow Motion
cm266 » 9/10 » $99**
Similarly imaginative in its interface design, and sonically unique

Verdict

For Stunning waveform library
Succinct but powerful one-window GUI
Fabulous filters
Fascinating modulation sources
Top-notch effects

Against Can't resize playback loop
Modulation underachieves in places

Despite some puzzling niggles, Parallels is an interesting and thoroughly 'now' synth that sounds freakin' awesome

8/10