PRESET BROWSER
Access a multitude of factory presets, and save your favourites

UTILITY ENGINE
New Utility Engine adds noise, analogue samples, and sub osc

EFFECTS
Click to add effects including filter, EQ, compressor, and delay

SEQUENCER
Access controls for arpeggiator and sequencer, with polyrhythms and randomisation

HARMONIC ENGINE
Pigments 3 features the Harmonic Engine, which includes additive synthesis

MIDI
Click here to view and change MIDI CC control assignments

TABS
Click on these tabs to view the keyboard, envelopes, etc

STANDALONE AND PLUGIN
Pigments runs standalone as seen here, or as a plugin

MODULATION
Use this panel to configure global modulation and macro settings

COMBINATORS
The Combinate tab now has three Combinators for modulation tasks

MPE
Configure your MPE parameters here for deeper hardware control response

Arturia
Pigments 3 €99 PC MAC

The Pigments powerhouse gets upgraded to v3, adding more engines, more waveforms and more effects. Have we reached saturation point?

> After 20 years of successfully producing software synths based on classic hardware products, Arturia released their first unique synth, Pigments, in 2018 – and now we have Pigments 3. Pigments is a synth instrument that works as a standalone application so you can play live with a keyboard controller, or as a plugin within your favourite host software. Pigments combines virtual analogue and wavetable synthesis, and includes filters, effects, modulation, sequencing and arpeggiation. Version 2, released in 2019, added sample-based and granular synthesis, as well as MPE (MIDI Polyrhythmic Expression).

Now we're looking at Pigments 3, which includes a new Harmonic Engine for additive synthesis; a Utility Engine, with a sub oscillator, supplemental analogue waveforms, and two noise sources – so now up to three Engines can be layered together. There are also 80+ new wavetables, and other additions and improvements. Pigments 3 installs as Audio Unit, VST, or AAX plugins, as well as the standalone mode. The review was conducted with a 2019 iMac running macOS Big Sur, Ableton Live 11, and assorted MIDI keyboards and controllers.

All of Pigments' controls are contained in one panel, but some tab-clicking is required –

"More focused on blatantly being a synth rather than emulating real instruments"

inconvenient but not unusual for such a full-featured synth. From left to right, there's the preset browser, Synth, FX, and Seq tabs, a Tips icon, and Master Volume. Below that, there are the tabs for three Engines – 1, 2, and Utility, followed by a Filter section, then a row of modulation controls, with more tabs – this time toggling views of an on-screen keyboard, envelopes, LFOs, Functions (three complex modulation sources), randomisation, and Combinators (another type of modulation source that combines two other modulation sources). Finally at the lower right are four Macro controls, and a button which enables MPE and displays some relevant options.

The extensive preset library tells you everything you need to know about Pigments in general – excellent quality sounds, with depth and movement, more focused on blatantly being a synth rather than emulating real instruments, and many using the built-in

"Pigments has always stood apart from Arturia's more 'traditional' collection of vintage softsynths"

arpeggiator and Sequencer, which are always good with Arturia.

Beyond that, as we've reviewed Pigments before, let's focus on what's new in version 3, starting with the Utility Engine, which is a third sound engine in its own right – you can even turn off the first two, and use Utility on its own, dialling up two different noise forms, and adding the oscillator and filters. The noises are based on a range of samples including machine noises, digital tones, and natural sounds such as forests and rain. The oscillator presents a choice of waveforms, and each element, noise and oscillator has its own Filter, Mix and Volume controls (two filters are shared by all Engines). Being able to stack up three of these Engines leads to some profound sound design moments, the third Engine enhancing what's already an excellent sounding synth. In the same way, a third Combinator takes modulation into wild new areas. As we said earlier, these are a way of building a modulation source from others, with assignable behaviours for each, so you might take LFO 1 and LFO 2 as sources, then choose how they'll combine (difference, multiplication, and so on). Each Combinator can also use the other two Combinators as a modulation source.

Four new audio effects have been added, in the form of a rather excellent pitch shift delay, a multiband compressor, the BL-20 flanger, and Jun-6 Chorus, derived from Arturia's V Collection. We didn't have an MPE-compatible controller available for this review, and it's not a new addition to Pigments 3, but we just want to mention that we used Live 11's new MPE envelopes features to control Pigments, and it worked very well, with some of Sensel's free Pigments presets.

Pigments 3 is up against many other big name synths, but really it's not a competition in that sense; they all have their good points. A list of the usual names could include Serum, Massive, Iris 2, Hive 2, and Sylenth. And let's not forget that most DAW software includes a great synth or two, examples being Ableton Live's

Arturia's Analog Lab

Analog vs digital

As far as Arturia's software synths go (they also have a range of hardware synths), they're primarily about emulating vintage hardware products – anything from a Synclavier V, to a Moog Modular, to a Roland Jupiter 8. The Moog Modular V software instrument was designed in collaboration with Dr Bob Moog himself, and has been supported and maintained with the necessary updates since it was first released in 2003 – we've had it that long and still use it.

Against that background, Pigments stands out as something unique and unashamedly modern, although Arturia have certainly benefited from the experience of working with the virtual classics. Unlike the more focused synth instruments of the past, synths like Pigments aim to cover as much ground as possible, with synthesis types including wavetable, virtual analogue, granular, and sample-based. Arturia are offering a discount price for current users of their Analog Lab, which is kind of a 'greatest hits' of their analogue-style offerings – with that, and Pigments, you're pretty much covered for synths!

Anyway, the point is that philosophically, Pigments is quite different from the analogue offerings, and it's so comprehensive, we can't imagine that Arturia could ever come up with a second original synth!

Now that Ableton Live 11 includes MPE control, it can send those messages direct to Pigments 3, with or without a compatible hardware controller

Operator, Bitwig Studio's Phase-4, and Logic Pro's Alchemy. The truth is, we all end up with more synths than we know what to do with. Pigments has always stood apart from Arturia's more 'traditional' collection of vintage softsynth instruments, and we mean that in the best possible way. This isn't a situation where you choose one style or another, and for Arturia, we'd guess it's a way of keeping users connected to them even when they want different, more modern, sounds – especially as bundle prices and discounts for current users are available. And why on earth not? Pigments isn't a token gesture – it's a fully functioning, potentially deep, synth in its own right. There's no need to debate the value of upgrading, as it's free for anybody who's using Pigments 1 or 2 already. For those who aren't using Pigments already, this could be a good time to jump onboard.

This is a great-sounding synth that can go very complex in function while still being easy to use, with some fantastic presets, and the control layout is impressively clear and rewards experimentation. Sometimes we wish we could see more of the content contained in the various tabs at once, but that's about it as criticisms go. Used as a plugin or standalone, Pigments 3 is a fine addition to any synth library. **cm**

Web arturia.com

Alternatively

XFer Serum
cm213 » 10/10 » $189
Ever-popular wavetable synth that includes sample loading and editing in the synth

Izotope Iris 2
cm216 » 10/10 » $149
Iris 2 is primarily about sample-based synthesis, but also includes osc-generated synth waveforms

Verdict

For An incredibly powerful modern-sounding synth
Upgrade greatly expands potential
Pigments 3 includes four new effects
Runs as a plugin or standalone
Users can import samples/wavetables

Against Too much to fit the display
Almost too much factory content!

A great synth and a bargain given the number of features and sound quality

9/10