

zenAud.io ALK2

€199

MAC



Like a looper pedal on steroids, this groundbreaking, tactile new audio and MIDI DAW lets you take your laptop to the stage like never before

> The basic premise behind zenAud.io's live performance "sequenced looper" is quite ingenious. An ALK2 project is essentially a precisely 'prepared' template into which you record and loop separate audio and MIDI parts live - the latter triggering and automating your VST/AU/hardware instruments - and apply and automate plugin effects. Loops are recorded and subsequently replayed at specific points on the timeline, and automation targets for one or more MIDI controllers are switched as the project progresses, again according to your 'pre-flight' setup - although you can, of course, make changes to all of this during the gig, too.

Each track hosts one or more Record Loop regions, followed by one or more Play Loops. When the playhead hits a Record Loop, all inputs into that track (a mix of any combination of MIDI or audio inputs, and the outputs of other tracks) are recorded for its duration, and the recording is automatically duplicated into all subsequent Play Loops on the track set to reference it. For example, you hit record to start playback and recording, then record a one-bar guitar riff for the 'verse' as the playhead hits the first Record Loop on track 1, with the metronome track outputting to your headphones. Your contiguously-placed 15-bar Play Loop then cycles that riff continuously while you perform a synth line on your MIDI keyboard into a Record Loop on track 2. At bar 17 on track 1, a second

Record Loop is ready and waiting for your incoming chorus riff, followed by another seven bars of Play Loop, etc.

Loop the loops

All of this happens live in real time, and by constructing a manageable arrangement of carefully-considered track/input combinations (and importing whatever existing audio and MIDI clips you might also need), it's possible to pull off far more complex performances than any looper pedal could handle. Audio and MIDI timestretch automatically to match the project tempo, and Record and Play Loops can be freely resized, moved, copied and pasted. There's no audio editing beyond pitchshift, however, and, more troubling, no access to captured MIDI note data - see *Missing MIDI*.

Two discrete track types offer separate implementation of 'on/off' and continuous automation, and can house pre-programmed parameter movements or recordable regions, each one assigned to its own track, instrument or effect parameter. Use a single knob or fader to tweak the filter cutoff in the verse, then panning in the chorus, for example.

There are a few clever little secondary touches, too, such as pre-recorded reference clips for instant substitution, should a particular live recording go awry (Panic Mode), and Hover mode, for auditioning tracks only when the

mouse pointer is over them. Obvious omissions are the use of the QWERTY keyboard and trackpad for live note and automation input, and the ability to open multiple projects at once to form a set list.

A new paradigm

Relating ALK2 to the looper pedal brings to mind the old 'DJing with Ableton Live vs turntables' comparison, in terms of the simplification of the performance process and the immense creative empowerment that software brings over hardware. It's genuinely innovative and powerful, great fun to use, and clearly has a bright future ahead of it. **cm**

Web www.zenaud.io

Alternatively

Ableton Live 10
cm255 » 9/10 » €349/549

This studio/stage DAW presents a different take on live performance

Bitwig Studio 2
cm243 » 9/10 » €379

Also geared up for gigging, and deployment as a studio DAW

Verdict

For Brilliant core concept
Flexible I/O routing and submixing
Good timestretching
Panic Mode is a reassuring safety net

Against No MIDI or audio editing
No QWERTY/trackpad MIDI
Can't open multiple projects at once

Taking the looper concept to new heights, ALK2 achieves its remit but a few fixable shortcomings currently hold it back

7/10

Missing MIDI

While MIDI note data can be recorded and imported into, and exported from ALK2, there's absolutely no editing of it after the fact. A couple of simple tools are on hand for non-destructive MIDI processing, however.

The Quantize menu for MIDI and Instrument tracks enables notes to be iteratively snapped to a variety of timing values, from 1/4 to 3/64, to a degree determined by the associated knob. The Note Repeat function offers the same list of note

values, this time slicing sustained notes into repeated notes at the chosen resolution.

Between them, these two systems effectively facilitate instant tightening up of sloppy performances, and a modicum of real-time manipulation that could prove useful from time to time. As handy as Quantize and Note Repeat are, though, ALK2's workflow suffers for the want of a proper MIDI editor, particularly post-gig. It simply can't be added soon enough, as far as we're concerned.