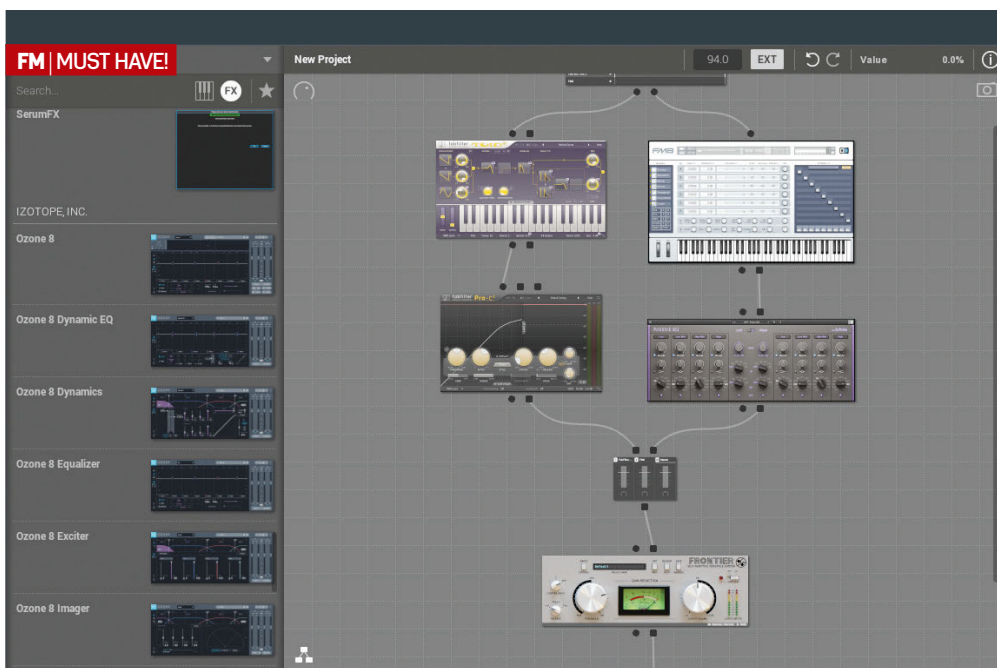# Plugin-Hosting Plugins

Combine your synths together and create complex effects racks with the Russian doll-like plugins that prove that meta is better


New Sonic Arts Freestyle €129

Freestyle lays out all your plugins in a browser, ready to drag onto a surface where you can combine and tweak them. Immediately, it's better than any DAW for selecting, placing and controlling your software. With two views – one for routing signals between plugins, the other for controlling them in a friendlier way – you can treat your computer like a pedalboard or performance device. You also get eight macros for control over chosen parameters directly in the Freestyle container. There's onboard sequencing, Snapshots that save and recall setups, cloud patch-saving, and great integration with New Sonic Arts' other commercial plugins (available separately) even allowing you to automatically sample the output of a plugin synth. While the interface looks great, it still needs work – while bigger can be better, Freestyle's size won't fit comfortably on every laptop music setup.

With this recent platform still under development (v1.5 will add containers to group elements together), it's a good time to buy into Freestyle.

newsonicarts.com

VERDICT 8.5
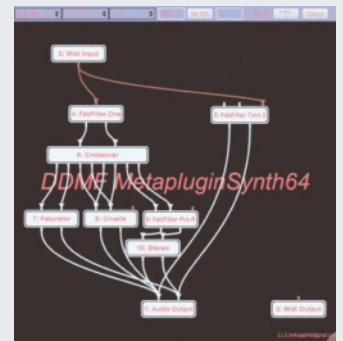
DDMF MetaPlugin £34

This one's a classic for pushing plugins to their limits, creating 'pedalboard' formulations of your installed VSTs and AUs, and testing them out too. Drag plugins from a (suitably text-based) browser onto the main surface, and connect them together with virtual audio and MIDI virtual cables. There's an effects-only version, and the instrument, MetaPlugin Synth, loads both instruments and effects.

There's also oversampling and single-parameter automation so that MetaPlugin (and therefore your DAW) can control specific functions on the loaded plugins. DDMF include a few extra tools also useable separately as plugins in their own right, such as a mid/side splitter and a gadget to send and receive signals to or from anywhere in your project. Very clever, very cool.

The interface could be friendlier, with lots of items on the control surface needing right-clicks, and seemingly no way to select multiple items for moving, bypass, deletion, etc. Gain controls appear while hovering over any parameter, which is nice but makes crowded setups fiddlier. It'd be useful if MetaPlugin's default was to connect the input/output stages, so no audio got lost upon calling it up. One final grievance: the absence of Undo/Redo functions.

ddmf.eu

VERDICT 6.1

Blue Cat's PatchWork

€99

Blue Cat have made a name for themselves in the plugin-hosting sector, turning the art of the VST-in-a-VST into several useful applications, such as their Axiom amp sim (add plugins into the virtual studio signal flow) MB-7 Mixer (create multiband setups with your own plugins) and Late Replies (add plugins before or after a delay line, or even within the feedback loop).

PatchWork takes that basic functionality and focuses on it, serving as a rack hosting up to six parallel chains of up to eight effects each, plus Pre and Post sections, for a possible total of 64 running within one instance. What effects? There are 30 built-in, and you can load VST, VST3 and AU plugins of your own as well. There are macros onboard, with parameters mappable (or learnable) to single knobs on the front end, which are then automatable in your DAW.

PatchWork may be one of the more expensive options here, but Blue Cat's pedigree in the plugin formats world makes it feel slightly more reliable, and that's not to mention the 30 effects that come with it, although these are only available within PatchWork. This host can feel a bit more like a utility than a creative workbench, but for professionals needing reliability in the studio and on-stage, it's a good choice. Note that in comparison to the other entries in this round-up, PatchWork doesn't have an instrument-hosting version, although it can work standalone.
bluecataudio.com

VERDICT **7.8**
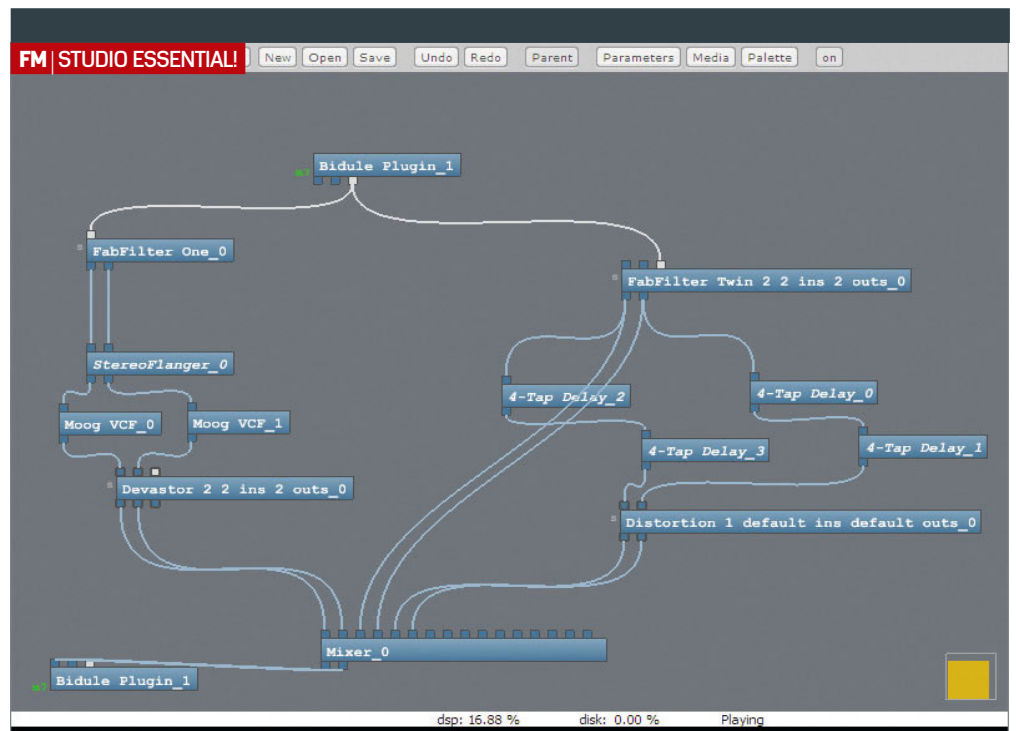
Plogue Bidule £76

There's a host of functionality and patchability within Bidule's interface that makes it a perfect candidate for rabid tweakers. Reaktor power-users will love Bidule for its ability to add esoteric and mathematical modules (or 'Bidules') into the rack and its ability to load plugins at the same time.

Categories of Bidules you can add include Building Blocks (Delay Lines, Math processors, Oscillators and loads more); simple Effects, MIDI functions (MIDI Echo, Note Splitter, Quantizer…), Mixers, Routing, all sorts of Utilities, and of course, all your own plugins. It's a hellishly comprehensive system that leaves no stone unturned, and its implications to what you can do are only limited by your imagination and dedication. Add LFOs to plugins that don't have them, create complex MIDI processors to use time and time again, build your own sampler… it's all here! The one drawback: the lack of a dedicated effects-only plugin version, although Bidule can run standalone.
plogue.com

VERDICT **9.1**