cm mini reviews

A rapid-fire round-up of sample libraries, ROMplers and more

IK Multimedia
iLoud £240

Web www.ikmultimedia.com
Format Mac/PC/iOS/Android

We have to confess to a certain amount of eye-rolling when we first heard that IK were releasing a portable speaker cab for mobile musicians. Apart from the obvious issue of stereo imaging, we just weren't convinced that enough power and accuracy could be designed into something so small. How wrong we were!

The iLoud packs an impressively robust set of speakers and an iRig mic/guitar input into a sturdy plastic housing roughly the same size and shape as an iPad from the front, just shy of 6cm deep and weighing 1.33kg. The speaker system comprises two 3" neodymium drivers, two 3/4" tweeters and a bass port, and DSP is used to control the four onboard power amps (totalling 40W) and their digital crossovers, making the iLoud "the smallest bi-amplified audio system on the market". Frequency response of 50Hz to 20kHz is claimed, but we could still just about hear a sine wave at 30Hz.

Power comes from a rechargable Li-Ion battery, which gives a very respectably ten hours of use at medium volume, and fully charges in about two. Audio input is via Bluetooth (just hold down the Pairing button on the back to pair up to two devices at once), or stereo 1/8" minijack (a 1m TRRS cable is supplied). While Bluetooth is fine for recreational listening, its latency renders it ineffective for monitoring of software instruments, so musicians will definitely want to plug in.

Jack a mic or guitar into the 1/4" mic/instrument input and, rather than passing directly to the amp, it's sent to the connected iOS or Android device for processing and recording in any app you like (IK's own Amplitube, for example).

We're pretty stunned by iLoud's performance – it really does sound great. Obviously, it has a very narrow stereo field and it can't pull off the sheer weight and depth of a full-sized monitor setup, but it does deliver an unexpectedly tight low end, impressive clarity in the mids and highs, and bags of volume before it starts to lose the plot. You wouldn't want to mix with it, certainly, but for writing, sound design and recording on the go – not to mention simply listening – it's a resounding success.

8/10

Blue Cat Audio
PatchWork €59

Web www.bluecataudio.com
Format Mac/PC

Taking the plugin hosting side of Blue Cat's MB-7 Mixer 2.0 multiband mixer (**cm**198, 8/10), expanding on it massively and presenting it as a self-contained plugin (VST/AU/RTAS/AAX), PatchWork is a versatile instrument and effects chainer that serves as both a problem-solver and a creative tool.

Hosting up to 64 VST effects plugins in one instance (any number of which can be further instances of PatchWork), it centres on a configurable grid of up to eight rows and eight columns, the first column always being a series of Pre effects and the last a series of Post effects. In between them, the rest of the slots make up a stack of Parallel chains, all simultaneously fed by the Pre chain and outputting into the Post chain, which finally arrives at the wet/dry Mix control. The Pre and Post chains have input and output gain controls respectively, while the Parallel chains all have both. Latency compensation is applied throughout and reported back to the host, so everything stays in sync, no matter how mad your patching gets.
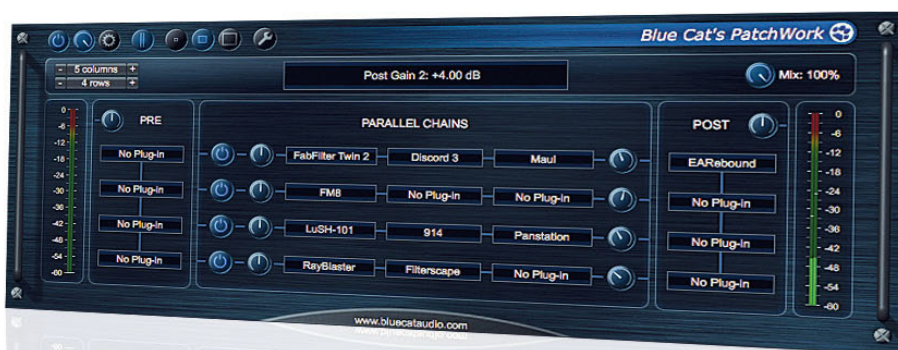
When PatchWork is loaded as an instrument, the Pre section becomes redundant, the first slot in each chain hosting an instrument plugin, enabling stacks of up to eight synths/samplers, each running through up to five effects, then the summing Post chain at the end. Should that not be enough, simply load another PatchWork into one of the instrument slots for up to eight more!

The problem-solving angle comes from PatchWork's ability to host VST plugins in non-VST hosts like Logic and Pro Tools. We found that this worked brilliantly, despite the odd crash in Logic – likely the DAW's fault, not PatchWork's. It's worth noting that 64-bit hosts still require VST plugins in PatchWork to be 64-bit.

Automation and MIDI learn are supported, as is multichannel operation, and overall, PatchWork does exactly what it claims to, offering much, much more full-featured hosting than MB-7. We'd prefer to be launching VST plugins from a menu, rather than spending an extra second or two hitting the Load VST button and browsing for them, and per-slot wet/dry mix could be handy, as could the ability to colour slots for easier visualisation; but such quibbling aside, PatchWork works well and is worth every penny of its asking price.

8/10

Slicksquare
SVF-42 $40

Web www.slicksquare.com
Format Mac/PC

A component-modeled plugin effect (VST) inspired by the Akai MFC42, SVF-42 is the debut release from Swiss newcomers Slicksquare. A multimode filter (high-, low- and band-pass), switchable between 12dB and 24dB/octave roll-off slopes and with a cutoff range of 16Hz to 16kHz, its headline feature is an intuitive-yet-deep modulation setup.

The three primary modulation sources comprise an envelope follower, a sidechain input and an LFO, each routable to the filter cutoff or resonance. The follower and sidechain feature Attack and Release controls (tiny screwhead rotaries that would benefit from some sort of value indicator) and bipolar depth settings. The stereo LFO is the highlight, though, featuring phase shift between the left and right channels for panning japes, host tempo sync and six waveshapes including S&H.

The cutoff and resonance can also be modulated via Slicksquare's proprietary VirtualCV system. This converts VST automation data sent to the CV Cut and Reso In targets to a virtual "analogue CV" signal, via a modeled amp-based CV stage, the mod depth of which can be adjusted postively or negatively, making for a cool alternative to conventional automation (which is also on tap for both parameters, of course). To make visual sense of all that signal wobbling, the LED ring around the cutoff knob animates to show its modulated setting – we're not sure why resonance doesn't get the same.

At the end of the line, a modeled soft clipper and dry/wet mix control offer optional limiting and parallel processing.

SVF-42 perfectly captures the spirit of the MFC42, Electrix Filter Factory and other "hands-on" analogue filters of their ilk, being huge fun to use and almost impossible to not get good results from. Most importantly, it sounds absolutely superb – seductively fluid, whip-crack sharp at high resonance settings and ear-warmingly analogue. The modulation system might appear quite simple in terms of individual elements, but bring them all together and truly intricate rhythms are the order of the day. It's a monster on drum loops in particular, imbuing them with energy, heat and groove.

If we were to nitpick, we wish we could point each mod source at the cutoff and resonance simultaneously, each with its own polarity and depth controls (or even have two banks of modulators, one dedicated to each), but as it stands, this is a flying start for Slicksquare and a righteous gem of a filter for the rest of us at a great price.

9/10

Native Instruments
Action Strikes €299

Web www.native-instruments.com
Format Mac/PC, Kontakt 5/Kontakt Player 5

The sequel to Action Strings applies the same "instant mix-ready patterns" approach to percussion.

The sample library has 12 hefty percussion ensembles (Taiko Invasion, Heroic Drums, etc), used in three Kontakt instruments. In Ensemble, 105 preset rhythms with five variations per ensemble are strung together via keyswitching, with dynamics controlled by the mod wheel and some instrumentation control available in the ability to freely combine the Low, Mid and High sections from up to three ensembles. The other two instruments – Instrument and Hits – offer single-instrument loops and banks of multisampled one-shots respectively.

Like Action Strings before it, Action Strikes sounds bombastic, vibrant and resoundingly cinematic. If you need intricate control over your drum and cymbal sounds, there are far more flexible options, but for impressive instant results, this is hard to beat, particularly for soundtracking.

8/10

Output
REV $199

Web www.outputsounds.com
Format Mac/PC, Kontakt 5/Kontakt Player 5

A Kontakt/Player library based on a library of reversed sounds and comprising four instrument "engines", each one powering a sizeable collection of categorised presets. Instruments are keyboard-playable multisampled patches; Timed Instruments are timestretched instruments; Loops are banks of tempo-synced, pitchable loops; and Rises are various types of timed build and riser. Each engine has its own interface (they share many common controls). Instruments and Timed Instruments are dual-layered, with four versions of each sample (reverbed, dry, looped and forwards), enabling you to mix and match.

The engines aren't dazzlingly innovative, but Output have used many of Kontakt's best scripting features, like triggerable effects and timestretching, to great effect. The main thing is that it's a 6.8GB sample library that's beautifully produced and endlessly explorable. How much use you'll find for REV will depend on your style, but it's particularly good at effects, pads, ambiences, risers and esoteric instrumentation. We like it a lot.

9/10

Soundware round-up

Loopmasters
Static Sounds Vol.1: Broken Electronica Loops and Pads £25

A quirky collection of techno-centric pads and rhythms that do the business sonically (glitchy, hypnotic, textural and bursting with analogue flavour), but are quite repetitive in terms of groove – particularly the basses.

www.loopmasters.com

7/10

Drumdrops
Rogers Big R Dub Kit £40

Available in Single Hits, Multi-Velocity and – reviewed here – Kontakt 5 versions (see website for details), this five-piece drum kit with extra percussion and a choice of two snares sounds wicked and includes a basic mixer. Being so tight-sounding, easy to play and affordable, it's the sort of acoustic kit that producers of any kind of music – "live" or electronic – will find plenty of use for.

www.drumdrops.com

9/10
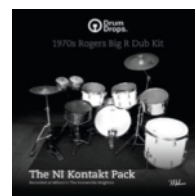
Toontrack
EZkeys Electric Grand £105

The latest EZkeys expansion/standalone (£55 if you're already a user) is a sampled Yamaha CP-80, fronted by Toontrack's weird but powerful "songwriting" interface. A set of ten nicely varied preset effects chains (by Overloud) are included, giving limited but effective control over the sound, which is every bit as spangly and retro as you remember. If that's your bag...

www.timespace.com

8/10

Samplephonics
Nevo Analogue Machines £89

Consisting of over 17,000 samples of Minimoog, Korg MS-10, Oberheim M6R and Roland JX-10, SH-101 and Juno 106 synths, this is one of the best straight-up retro synth Kontakt libraries yet. The scripted interface covers all the standard bases (LFO, envelope, arp, step sequencer, effects, etc, but no mod wheel assignment, strangely), and the sounds are gutsy and authentic.

www.samplephonics.com

8/10

Singomakers
Evil Dubstep Vol. 2 £30

Nasty, nasty Singomakers! 880MB of relentlessly vicious (apart from some surprisingly pretty melodics) dubstep loops (140bpm), one-shots, MIDI files, Massive presets and more. The sinuous basslines, dark "back loops" and pads (only 15 of them, alas) are the highlights, but there's nothing here that shouldn't be. An on-point soundware library if ever we heard one.

www.loopmasters.com

9/10

Sony Creative Software
Sunrise Soul: Smooth R&B £28

Another set of rather lightweight construction kits from Sony with which to recreate/remix nine prefab songs. The production is slick and excellent, but the smooth West Coast-ness of it all will be far too syrupy for some, and as with most loop-based construction kits, while it's good if you need to knock out tunes in an instant, it's not as useful for those working on their own original tracks.

www.sonycreativesoftware.com

6/10

Sample Magic
Bass House £17

275 garagey deep house loops (122bpm) and 90 one-shots taking influence from every era of house. The drum loops (supplied full and as stems) are spectacularly funky, while the basslines and music loops have a quintessentially classic vibe. There's a bit of irksome clipping very occasionally, but that doesn't detract from the fun. Great sounds, great value.

www.samplemagic.com

9/10
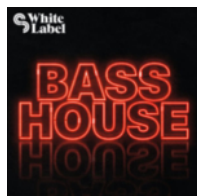
Native Instruments
Resonant Blaze €49

The first Expansion for Maschine 2.0 makes only very occasional use of the new Drum Synths in its 43 bass music-orientated (more DnB than dubstep) kits, which is mildly disappointing. The production standard is as high as ever, though, particularly in the all-important low end, which is solid, punchy and full of energy. Another great addition to your Maschine library.

www.native-instruments.com

8/10

Luxonix
Cajon £15

20 Kontakt 5 instruments drawing on 363MB of compressed cajon (a Peruvian percussion instrument essentially comprising a large wooden box) samples. Up to ten velocity layers and 16 round robin samples have been captured for each of its seven tones (Bass, Slap, Tip, etc), and a capable mixer is built in. The whole thing plays well and sounds just like the real thing, making for an interesting (if rather gentle) drum kit substitute.

www.luxonix.com

8/10

Big Fish Audio
Zodiac £125

8GB of sampled found sounds and real instruments have been processed and manipulated into a wealth of beautiful, dramatic pads, basses, percussives and more in this "organic" sound design library for Kontakt. The interface is basic, to say the least, offering just amp envelope, pitching, reverb depth and type, delay and EQ, but it's enough to make a difference. A gorgeous thing, sonically, then, but an expensive one.

www.timespace.com

8/10