



Steinberg Cubase Pro 9

£468

Cubase is the latest of the big DAWs to get a major update.
Bruce Aisher gets creative

CONTACT WHO: Steinberg TEL: +49 (0)4042 236115 WEB: www.steinberg.net **KEY FEATURES** Advanced Music Production System, Mac OS X (OS X 10.11/macOS Sierra) or Windows (64-bit Windows 7 and above), 64-bit Intel or AMD multi-core processor (Intel i5 or faster recommended), 4GB RAM (8GB or more recommended), 18GB free HD space, Graphics card with DirectX 10 and WDDM 1.1 support (Windows only), USB port for USB-eLicenser

THE PROS & CONS



MixConsole History – it was some time coming but well worth the wait

Sampler Track – simple but well-conceived

Lower Zone – may not rock everyone's boat, but it is useful for making quick edits. Laptop users may rejoice

VST Transit now supports third-party plug-ins



MixConsole still has usability issues in relation to its (albeit very flexible) take on interface scaling

Logic X is a lot cheaper (unless you include the price of an Apple Mac)

December, the month of Christmas cheer and Cubase updates. Steinberg have hit an annual rhythmic stride with their major (and half-step) updates to this long-running DAW. So it was, with a buzzing crescendo on the forums, that Cubase Pro 9 hit the streets on 7th December last year.

Being one of the big increments there is always some trepidation as to what might be in store – software

updates inevitably being a mixture of brand-new features, tweaks to the existing look, feel and functionality, and sometimes the retirement of features. The modern DAW now, necessarily, has to cater for a wide range of users, and it is very hard to please all the people all of the time. One important omission, for some at least, may be the fact that Cubase is now 64-bit only as far as plug-ins are concerned. In reality, this should cause no major headaches if you use jBridge to provide 32-bit support. This third-party application still does

VERSION EXCURSION

As always there are different flavours of Cubase, with Cubase Pro 9 – the subject of this review – sitting at the top of the heap.

However, given that going 'Pro' costs nearly £500 it is worth considering the other options. Cubase Artist doesn't skimp on that much and is nearly half the price. The important additions in the latest update, such as MixConsole History and the Sampler Track, remain. However the supplied plug-in pool is slightly smaller and VariAudio (the graphical pitch-editing engine) as well as some more advanced mixer options are not included.

A full comparison can be found at www.steinberg.net/en/products/cubase/comparison.html

Don't forget that students (and teachers) can get educational pricing (which knocks off about 40% of the price below).

FULL VERSIONS Pro 9 – £468, Artist 9 – £266, Elements 9 – £80, AI 9 – free with some Steinberg and Yamaha hardware

UPDATES from Pro 8.5 – £80, from Pro 8 – £161, from 7/7.5 – £201, from 4/5/6/6.5 – £242

UPGRADES from Artist 9 – £201, from Artist 6 onwards – £266, from Elements, LE, AI, Essential, Studio, SX, SL or Sequel – £363

CROSSGRADE Pro 9 Crossgrade – £363

an admirable job, and has even undergone a speedy update to address certain C9 issues.

In broad terms, Cubase 9 does not look substantially different from its predecessor. The dark look and feel of the project and editor windows remains, alongside the now well-established and reconfigurable MixConsole. The key new aesthetic feature, from a Steinberg perspective at least, is the 'Lower Zone'. Taking its cue from something very similar in Apple's Logic Pro X, this utilises the lower portion of the project window as a function-dependent mix and edit environment. This sits alongside the multi-window approach of old – so is an optional extra – but does make quick tweaks easier. More on this in a bit.

In version 9 Cubase finally has a dedicated, and easy to use, sampler in the form of Sampler Track. Although Groove Agent SE did provide some quite comprehensive

sampling functionality it could be fiddly to use and was not integrated into the overall project workflow.

I have always been a big fan of the way Logic ties its EXS-24 sampler into the broader features of the DAW. Hopefully this is the start of an equally beautiful friendship in Cubase.

The third of the big new features is MixConsole History, which adds full undo/redo functionality to all mixer tweaks, including changes to third-party plug-ins. Not only that, but a fully time-stamped history list keeps track of all changes. This will finally banish the 'oops, I didn't mean to move that' moments that required re-loading an old project to return to the previous (and hopefully correct) settings. It also allows for a more comparative approach when applying processing and adjusting the mix. Even being able to see what you did, and when, is incredibly useful. MixConsole History isn't

THE ALTERNATIVES



Apple Logic X £150

A lot of bang-for-the-buck, and very much a pro DAW, but you'll need to factor in the purchase price of an Apple Mac as well.

www.apple.com



Ableton Live 9 Suite €599

Always happy to take its own route. Live is especially good if you want take your tracks on the road. Happy on Mac or PC.

www.ableton.com



Avid Pro Tools 125 £480

Another cross-platform contender which has managed to remain somewhat of an industry standard even since embracing native-only versions. There's also a monthly pay-as-you-go option.

www.avid.com

glamorous, but it is certainly an important addition.

Besides cosmetic updates to Brickwall Limiter and a few others, the main plug-in news is that Cubase 9 brings with it a new EQ plug-in and feature-boosted Maximizer and Autopan effects. In a world swamped with EQ plug-ins you may question the relevance of another EQ in Cubase, especially when it sits alongside – rather than replaces – the regular channel EQ. However, Frequency, as it is called, brings a Linear Phase mode and Mid/Side processing to the party. These are both worthwhile additions, especially when you can turn each on or off individually for each of its eight bands. Metering is clear, and the keyboard overlay showing MIDI notes against frequency is surprisingly helpful.

The original Autopan was always rather basic. The new improved version allows you to create custom curves with an adjustable phase

offset when tempo-sync'd. Press the link button, and it turns into a chopper that can readily create decent sidechain style pumping. Maximizer now features Modern mode, in addition to the original (now labelled Classic). This delivers a potentially more finessed approach to bringing up the average level in a mix, as well as extra control over the recovery time and shape.

Incidentally, audio can now be routed into VST 3 instruments that support sidechaining. In Retrologue

for example, pressing the sidechain button adds an input level control in the Oscillator Mix section. This external audio can then be processed through the synth's filter and effects as if it was an additional oscillator source (so you'll need to trigger the amp envelope to hear anything).

How low can you go?

Let's return to the new Lower Zone. This is perhaps a natural extension of Steinberg's earlier efforts to draw more key features into the Project

MixConsole History will finally banish the 'oops' moments that required re-loading an old project

SAMPLE CREATION, TRACKS AND CONTROL

One interesting aspect of the new sampler in Cubase 9 is the fact that it gets its own track type – the Sampler Track. This in turn is linked to the Sampler Control section in the Lower Zone. While you would expect that audio can be dragged into the Sampler Control window, there are numerous other ways of creating sampler tracks dotted throughout Cubase – from selected audio events in the Project window, right-clicking in MediaBay, after highlighting an audio range in the Sample Editor, or just using Add Sampler Track as you would any other track. Once in the Sampler Control you can edit your sample in most of the usual ways, with control over trimming, looping, pitch, amplitude and filter settings.



Envelopes provide dynamic control over the latter three, with more extreme treatments possible via the AudioWarp tab. Samples and settings can be transferred to another Sampler Track or Groove Agent SE (plus Groove Agent and HALion if you have them). This is an easy to use and immensely useful addition to Cubase, but is intended for simple, immediate sampling, so there's no multi-sample mapping.

window, including a fixed Transport Bar at the bottom of the main window. Three new buttons open and close the left, right and lower zones – though you may want to edit their current three-button keyboard shortcuts. With the Lower Zone open you can then use tabs to switch between viewing small (but resizable) versions of the MixConsole, Editor, Chord Pads and Sampler Control. The MixConsole has buttons for quickly viewing faders, inserts or sends. The Editor window is track specific, meaning that for MIDI it will be the Key or Drum Editor (no List Editor) and audio tracks will use the Audio Part or Audio Sample editor. Double-click on an event and the relevant editor will appear in the Lower Zone. You can also switch the Left Zone to show the relevant editor's Inspector. It's useful too to be able to synchronise the editor's cursor with that of the project. The Lower Zone, I suspect, will be used more for MIDI and audio editing than for mixing, though laptop users will welcome most aspects of this new feature.

Another useful new feature is the ability to create multiple Marker Tracks. This is of interest when using Cubase for sound design or music to picture, but also facilitates easier song mapping and correction tagging. Markers can now be used to set multiple audio ranges for exporting mixes or stems in one hit.

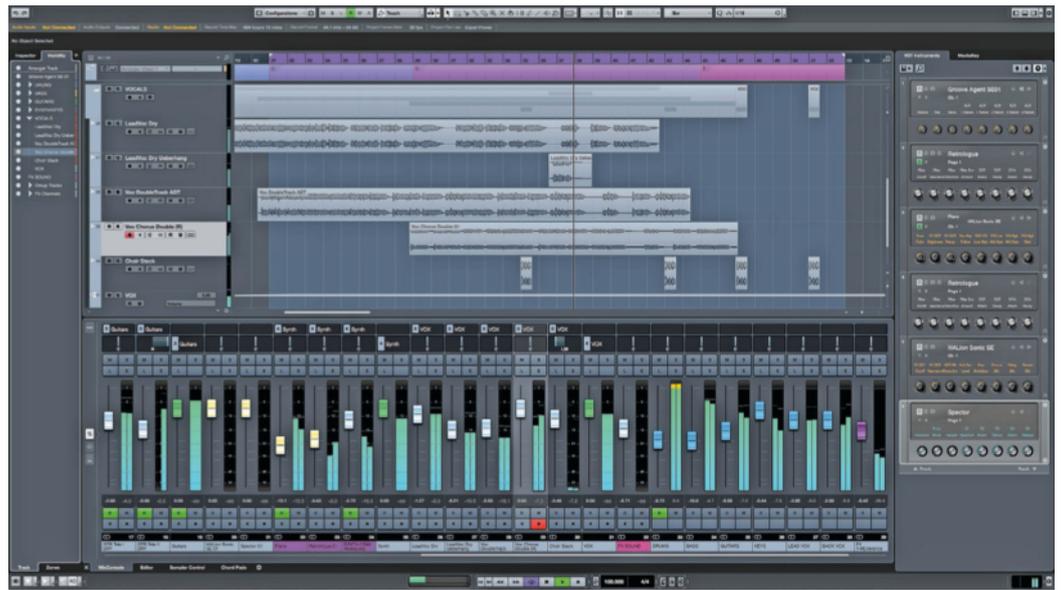
Collaborative tools get a polish, with the frustrating VST Connect SE login process nicely simplified and VST Transit now supporting third-party plug-ins.

With the move to a solely 64-bit third-party integration, the new Plug-in Sentinel blacklists 'problematic' plug-ins before they can cause problems. Taking plug-ins off this blacklist is now done from the comfort of Cubase – rather than the XML file editing fun of old.

For those who lust after more media content, C9 also comes with Production Grooves for Groove Agent and Kaleidoscope for Sampler Track.

Cloud 9?

I would like Steinberg to have addressed the long-standing shortcomings of MixConsole's full scalability (still there in both full and Lower Zone modes). Being able to zoom vertically and horizontally as well as resizing faders is useful, but



LOWER ZONE This new area of the Project window is linked to whatever you are editing. Click on audio, you'll get an Audio Editor. Click on MIDI and it will be the Key or Drum Editor. It will also squeeze in a MixConsole window.

SAMPLER TRACK A simple drag and drop sampler has been missing from Cubase, and with version 9 we get one linked to many areas of the Cubase environment. Each Sampler Track can only host one sample at a time, but it is both fun and useful.

MIXCONSOLE HISTORY A hallelujah moment. Every tweak in MixConsole is now tracked (including non-Steinberg plug-ins) and time-stamped. Great for comparing mixes, road-testing different settings and recovering from accidental knob tweaks and cock-ups.

AUTOPAN Not the most glamorous of new additions, but one that does its job very well. A cleaner interface, more parameters and with a neat sideline in chop/gate effects and sidechain style compression.

not when some settings end up with blank grey boxes (where buttons such as Solo and Mute are supposed to be). In many respects it would be better if there was less flexibility here, or at least a series of default zoom settings that reset what can, at times, be a visual mess. Global presets for saving mix layouts would also be very welcome, especially when using all three MixConsole windows. However, the new MixConsole History is excellent. It's not particularly sexy, but is most definitely useful.



In terms of the way I work, the Sampler Track is the most interesting creative feature on offer here. Is it worth the £80 upgrade fee? Yes – given the degree of integration it has with the overall DAW workflow. The Lower Zone is also useful – and for some will be their default way of mixing and editing – but for me, as a multi-monitor devotee, it has yet to prove its full worth.

All told, this update is broadly solid, if not ground-breaking – and in many respects that could be argued as a good thing. **FM**

FM VERDICT

8.9

There should be enough new elements in Cubase 9 to keep upgraders happy. New users should add Cubase to their 'must-try' list.