HOME
Get rid of everything but the Macros in this performance-focusing view

PRESET BROWSER
Good looking, highly functional and stuffed with patches

SETTINGS
An assortment of under-the-hood tweaks and controls

LAYER 2
Tweak the second multitimbral layer in the green tabs

LAYER 1
The three brown tabs access the first of two layers for stacking or splitting

OSCILLATORS
Two analogue oscillators with PWM and hard sync

DUAL PATHS
Route the oscillators through two filter/ amp signal paths

OUTPUT
Balance and pan the amps at the end of each path

LFO
Cyclically modulate the filters, oscillators and amps — no matrix required!

EXTRA CONTROLS
Click to pop out a panel of further parameters

FILTER
Two filters per layer, not including a phat Ladder option

Applied Acoustics Systems

PC **MAC**

Ultra Analog VA-3 $199

Now in its 14th year, the developers of this venerable virtual analogue synth have doubled down to come up with its biggest upgrade yet

> Canadian physical-modelling specialists Applied Acoustics aren't a company to rush things, and the third full version of their quietly successful virtual analogue synth comes five years after VA-2 (8/10, *cm*200), and over 13 years since the launch of the original Ultra Analog (7/10, *cm*81). The handsome new user interface makes a great first impression, but does all that style come with enough added substance?

Bigger and better

VA-2's workflow was quite hectic, thanks to the number of tabs and pages that had to be negotiated to program it – and Ultra Analog VA-3 (VST/AU/AAX/Standalone) has even more panels and modules to get to grips with. It's not a big issue, but with four tabs at the top switching between the performance-orientated Home view (showing just the keyboard and four macros – see *A la Modes*), the preset Browser, the Settings page and the main Editor, and the

Editor itself divided up into multiple tabs beyond that, you'll be pausing occasionally to work out exactly where you are. Very good news, though: the GUI is now freely resizable, from 75-200%.

Also welcome is the integration of a proper preset browser. This filters the library down by Packs, Sounds, Categories or Creators, and does a great job of making VA-3's 560 excellent new

> "VA-2's workflow was quite hectic... the handsome new user interface makes a great first impression"

presets – plus 648 reworked patches from VA-2 – eminently manageable.

Path finder

Ultra Analog VA-3 is a two-oscillator synth, with both oscillators feeding into two discrete signal paths, each comprising a filter and amplifier, and mixed at the final output stage. Actually, it's all that times two, as we'll return to shortly.

Each oscillator outputs a sine, square or saw wave, or noise, with PWM for the square; and features an onboard ramp modulator for sweeping up to 72 semitones up or down to the note pitch over 0.01-10 seconds. Very useful! An integrated sub oscillator tracks the pitch an octave below, and can be substituted for a punchy hard-sync function.

The two filters each have their own input gain knobs for both oscillators, and Filter 2 can also receive input from Filter 1, facilitating any imaginable blend of parallel and serial routing.

"The big architectural story with VA-3 is the implementation of true multitimbrality"

As well as the existing LP, HP, BP, Notch and Formant filter types, VA-3 boasts a new Ladder algorithm, for a colourful Moog-style alternative to the regular low-pass. Beyond that, each path hosts the same envelopes and flexible multi-destination LFOs as VA-2, all assigned and controlled directly from their modules, rather than in any kind of modulation matrix. What you no longer get, however, is VA-2's 'details' panel, which is a shame. This dedicated a section of the interface to viewing any one module from either signal path (VCO 1, Filter 2, etc), revealing extra controls that weren't visible in the main UI, but also, as a beneficial side effect, enabling that module to be kept in view while navigating the rest of the synth in the tabbed pages. The 'extra' controls are now kept in slightly awkward pop-out panels, and we preferred the old setup.

The big architectural story with VA-3, though, is the implementation of true multitimbrality, enabling two complete synth 'layers' to be stacked or split across the keyboard. To be clear, each layer is effectively an entire VA-3 in itself, complete with its own effects rack, mixed using the controls at the top of the Editor (which we reckon should also be accessible on the Home page, as they can be fundamental to the sound of a patch), and feeding into a third master effects rack. The presentation of all this in the Editor page couldn't be simpler: the two layers sit adjacent to each other, with the tabs and panel keyline for one coloured brown and the other green, although this colour-coding doesn't carry through to the modules themselves, which are consistently grey. For totally intuitive orientation, the two colours should really pervade the layers in their entirety.

Anyhoo, the two layers both range across the whole keyboard by default, but clicking the Split button (housed, weirdly, in the engines' Modes pages, despite being a single shared property) assigns layer 1 to the bottom of the keyboard and layer 2 to the top, with the dividing note selected via a menu. Easy.

Back to those effects, and each of VA-3's three racks (one per layer, and master) comprises EQ, Compressor, Reverb and two multi-effects modules, just as VA-2's single rack did.

Pile on the processing with layer and master effects, including new Guitar Amp and Tremolo modules

Once assigned in the Modes panel, the Macros are primarily used in the Home screen

A la Modes

Ultra Analog's Play panel is now, puzzlingly, called Modes, and it furnishes each layer with a variety of playback options, as well as an arpeggiator/sequencer, and VA-3's all-new Macro controls.

Glide time (fixed or interval-dependent, with Legato on/off) and vibrato (with fade-in and Delay) are adjustable, and you can activate two or four unison voices for detuning and per-voice delay.

The arpeggiator offers all the usual directional options plus a Chord mode, and three transposition styles. Rhythmic programming is enabled by the 16-step Pattern track, which simply allows steps to be turned on and off, with no pitch offset, velocity control or other sequencing niceties.

The four Macro knobs are named Modulation, Timbre, Envelope and Effect, but while the factory presets keep them within those described remits, they're really just suggestions, as each can be assigned to any four parameters from all modules in the layer. The Macros are easily linked to MIDI controllers in the Settings screen, and although the inability to change their arbitrary names is a niggle, they make it a snap to set up live patch editing schemes for use on the stripped-back Home page.

However, the menu of multi-effects processor choices now includes the other three modules, as well as new Guitar Amplifier and Tremolo options, on top of the incumbent Delay, Chorus, Flanger, etc. You can now drag modules to reorder them, too.

Age of Ultra

We've always loved Ultra Analog's focus and simplicity, and despite the addition of a whole second layer to the synth, those values remain very much at the core of VA-3. Yes, the interface is a bit fussy, and the 'details' view is missed, but the improvements far outweigh those issues.

The multitimbrality and per-layer effects literally double the sonic power and versatility on offer, and the ability to copy complete layers between patches encourages experimental mixing and matching. But most importantly of all, the whole thing just sounds awesome, from basses, leads, keys and plucks to pads, arps, FX and everything else you could ever ask of a high-end synth.

With elaborate wavetable and sample-based instruments increasingly dominant on the soft synth landscape, Ultra Analog VA-3 is a spectacular reminder that pure analogue emulation is still as relevant as ever. **cm**

Web applied-acoustics.com

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cm238 » 9/10 » £89
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Verdict

For Multitimbrality is a huge upgrade
Resizable GUI and slick new browser
More effects options
Superb and enormous preset library
Scala tuning support
Imports your VA-2 patches

Against Layer colours aren't pervasive
Home screen could offer mixing controls

Twice the synth it was, Ultra Analog VA-3 is an exemplar of virtual analogue synth design with some nifty tricks up its sleeve

9/10