

Ableton Live 11

£539

PC MAC

Following on from the public beta, Ableton Live 11 is here in all its full release glory. Is this an update to get excited about?

> It's been three years since Ableton Live 10 was released, although in some ways it feels longer. The world's cluttered with ever more hardware synths, beatboxes, samplers, and sequencers, we've got MPE (MIDI Polyphonic Expression) threatening to finally go mainstream, and Ableton's competitors haven't been idle. Logic Pro has got Live Loops, which provides a very familiar Live-like loop jamming experience, Bitwig Studio has beaten Ableton to embracing MPE, and the old favourite Reason can now run as a plugin, which makes it much easier to integrate into our projects. Now, after a public beta, already reviewed in *Computer Music*, we have the final release of Ableton Live 11, and there are still things to talk about.

When opening Live 11, the first obvious changes are in the Browser, with two new categories available. The Grooves category contains the .agr groove files from your library, while the Templates category represents Live projects saved using the new 'File/Save Live Set

As A Template' command - quite an improvement over the previous one-size-fits-all template, as is the new, easy-access, 'Save Live Set As Default Set' command. Audio effects are now organised into categorised folders, like Drive & Color, and Pitch & Modulation, and Max For Live instruments and effects are also now found in the standard Live content categories.

"Comping is the other contender for 'best new feature'; people have been asking for it for years"

The fun stuff

Looking beyond the thrills of file management, Live 11 can receive MPE messages from a suitable controller, but even if you don't have one of those, the Clip View has an expression tab, where MPE parameters can be entered manually, these being pitch, slide, pressure, velocity, and release. MPE support has also been added to racks, MIDI effects, Wavetable, Simpler, and Sampler. We're hoping it'll make it to Operator in due course. The addition of MPE to a popular DAW like Live is bound to help it gain wider popularity, and encourage more hardware developers to create controller products.

Comping is the other contender for 'best new feature', we'd say, given that people have been asking Ableton to add that for years. Comping is when you can record multiple passes of a MIDI or audio track, in a continuous cycle, without having to manually arm further tracks for each pass. Once recording's finished, you can highlight the best sections from each lane to

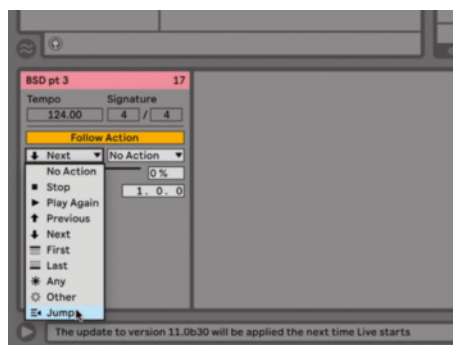
“Much as we’d like more stimulating upgrade candy, it can translate to ‘gimmicky’ or even ‘unreliable’”

build a new composite track. Anybody who works with a lot of tracks, and a lot of takes, will make use of this. Comping is most commonly used with vocals, but works equally well for experimental purposes, maybe cross cutting between different types of source material.

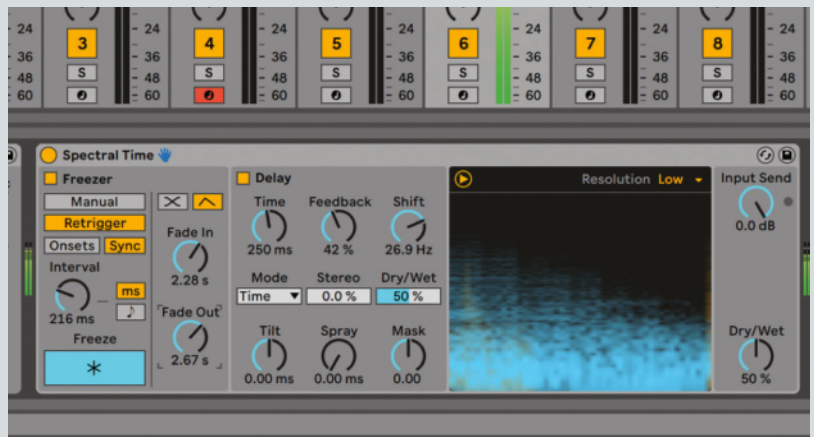
Racks get a major update, with up to 16 macros available, which is outstanding, as the original limit of eight was feeling a little bit restrictive, but the rack news doesn’t end there, as Live 11 introduces Macro Variations – recallable snapshots of the current settings of the macros. This will be great for performance situations in particular, although we’d love to see the ability to crossfade between snapshots, as we’ve seen at least one iOS app do previously. These new macro arrangements are supported by Ableton’s Push controller, which gets a firmware update that also allows us to toggle between monophonic and polyphonic aftertouch, bringing it closer to the full MPE experience as we described earlier.

If you’re working with MIDI clips, look below the MIDI Velocity Editor – there’s another row of markers for each note; this is the MIDI Probability Editor, which represents chance values – the likelihood of a note being played. Drag these up and down to increase/decrease values. There’s also a Randomize button which affects selected velocities or chance values. This is all good, but we would’ve liked a ‘populate clip’ command, inserting random notes into a clip (within user-defined boundaries) – it’s one of our favourite features on the Akai Force.

There are many other new features included in Live 11; see our original review of the beta in **cm289**. There’s the new Hybrid Reverb, which combines convolution reverb with an algorithmic approach; there’s Spectral Resonator, and Spectral Time, with its delicious Freeze function; there’s Tempo Follower, where Live can listen to an incoming audio track and set the project tempo from that. Redux has had an update, as have some other devices – Phaser/



Follow actions now include the Jump command, where clip playback can skip to any other clip in the track



Spectral Time’s Freeze function and Live’s Echo tape delay go so well together

Spectral time hypnosis

We can’t get away without mentioning Live 11’s new Spectral Time device. This is technically an audio effect device, and you’ll find it located in the Audio Effects/Delay & Loop folder, but it could be thought of more as a sample-based instrument. While it includes delay-based controls such as Time, Feedback, and Shift (pitch of the delay), it also includes a Freezer section, which can be used to freeze and hold a selection of the incoming audio, whether that’s from a software instrument or an audio sample. Enter Manual mode and the Freeze button can be used to capture

and hold a slice of the signal, or use Retrigger instead, in order to take fresh slices at regular intervals, either synced to note values, or set manually. If you like drones or other atmospheric sounds, this will draw you in, and simply by manipulating the Feedback and Shift controls, it’s possible to get a whole lot of sonic mileage from just one frozen sound. The next step (in our opinion anyway) would be to add the Echo effect after it, and by using just the two of those, you’ve then got the basis of a deep, immersive sound piece or live performance.

Flanger and Chorus-Ensemble are two devices that combine previous ones, and Max For Live has also received several updates, including the ability to route MIDI to and from MFL audio effect devices.

Conclusion

This update is typically Ableton. Much as we’d like to experience more stimulating upgrade candy, we know it can translate to ‘gimmicky’ or even ‘unreliable’, and nobody wants that. Ableton’s sensible approach is appealing in itself, but it doesn’t do so much to entice new customers. Long-term users will mostly see this release as a no-brainer, especially if they need something like comping, for example. We think the truth is that development has plateaued for DAWs in general, as has the demand for new features – they’re already so powerful.

Ableton Live has over 20 years of development behind it, and it’s still as good as it’s ever been... which is very, very, good. Any quibbles from newcomers might be more around pricing and feature bloat; Live can still be very easy to use, but there’s more digital undergrowth to cut through to stay on the right path. If you can accept that challenge, then now is a good time to start. **cm**

Web ableton.com

Alternatively

Bitwig Studio
cm275 » 10/10 » €379

All you need for sound design, arranging and live performance

Apple Logic Pro X
cm195 » 9/10 » £199.99

Another do-it-all (but Mac only) DAW, at a low price, and the recent addition of Live Loops, is equivalent to Live’s Session View

Verdict

For Improved macros
Reorganised Browser audio effects
MPE for hardware or automation envelopes
The much-requested comping feature

Against Nothing genuinely mind-blowing in here

Another solid Ableton update, as we’d expect. How about adding something to blow our minds next time, though?

9/10