

CUSTOMISABLE TOOLBAR
Choose the controls you want visible, and where you want them

FREEZE EASILY
Right-click a playlist track and choose Consolidate to freeze MIDI to audio

CHANGE ARRANGEMENTS
Add different playlist arrangements to compose variations of tracks

MULTIPLE TIME SIGNATURES
Add multiple time signatures within the same project

SNAP PER 100 CENTS
Main pitch knob and others such as those in the sampler snap every 100 cents

GROUP TRACKS
Group tracks in the playlist and hide/show them via the arrow

PDC ON ROUTING
Plugin Delay Compensation now works when sending channels with differing latencies

MORE MIXER TRACKS
Amount of tracks in the mixer has been increased to 125

WAVEFORM FEEDBACK
Waveform will show in the playlist as audio is recorded to it



Image-Line FL Studio 20 €289

It's skipped its teens, following version 12 with version 20 in a nod to its anniversary. Now in its 20th year, is the popular DAW reaching its prime?

> FL Studio consistently tops polls as the most popular music production software in the world, and it's not difficult to see why. 20 years ago, it was born as the humble MIDI drum sequencer, Fruity Loops, and it's certainly grown since. Over the course of its recent evolution, its reputation as an amateur choice has crumbled away as the number of professional fans skyrocketed. It now stands as a feature-rich, wholly capable production environment that allows for composing, mixing, mastering and performance. It's become a joy to use for those who like its unique workflow, and the last update saw a gorgeous vector-based interface introduced. However, there was room for improvement. What, then, have Image-Line brought to the table with this release?

Apple gets Fruity

FL Studio 20 is the first major release to provide a native Mac version, which supports both VST

and AU plugin formats. Not every Image-Line synthesiser and plugin has made the leap, but the DAW is all here. One FL license now includes both the Windows and Mac version, so if you're a multi-OS user, you're getting so much bang for buck you might be wondering what the catch is. The customer-friendly Lifetime Free Updates policy is still going strong, meaning existing

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users will get FL Studio 20 free of charge. It cannot be overstated what a phenomenal value proposition this is, considering users have to pay significant sums to upgrade to each new version of most other major DAWs.

This also means Image-Line release significant features between major releases, and the time since version 12 saw additions such as the impressive analogue-style Fruity Delay 3, the invaluable Clip Picker along the side of the playlist for quick selection of your patterns, a High Visibility setting to show some GUI elements more clearly, and new vector looks for synths like Sytrus and Harmor.

Pick and Mix

The top toolbar is now comprehensively customisable, and offers the ability to choose the buttons and displays you want. You can rearrange and resize many of the elements, which makes a very practical difference to your

“FL Studio is a fantastic production environment that continues to iterate in all the right ways”

day-to-day working. This flexible optimisation of the interface according to what you personally use ensures a tidier workspace, and the option of having the toolbar as a single line means minimalists and hotkey users can have less wasted screen real estate.

Modern productions can, of course, get pretty CPU intensive, with many high-quality plugins requiring a lot of processing power. Track freezing – rendering MIDI patterns in your track to audio so it doesn't have to be processed in real time – is an established way to work around this, yet it has not been adequately integrated in FL until now. This has been addressed with the new Consolidate feature, and this new method of freezing is achievable with a couple of clicks. By right-clicking the track in the playlist and selecting the Consolidate option, you can freeze your pattern from either the start of the pattern itself or the start of the song. You're then freed to disable CPU-hungry synths and effects plugins.

Variations on a theme

The playlist has a welcome new feature set. If you want to create alternative arrangements of your track, you can now do this by clicking Arrangement at the top of it and adding more. You can switch between your arrangements from this same drop-down menu.

Secondly, you'll now get to see the waveform as you record audio directly into the playlist, which is a helpful indicator that things are going OK with your recording.

Last but not least, projects can now have multiple time signatures. Adding markers to the timeline of the playlist or piano roll allows for sections or patterns to be in the time signature of your choosing. This is a quick and easy way to get creative with timing; even if you're not keen on having a long waltz in your track, it can be useful to make your fills and breakdowns a bit more interesting. In addition, the amount of tracks available in the playlist has more than doubled, to 500.

So where will they be going next? Well, we're still hoping to eventually see better audio editing capabilities implemented, particularly in



This is the first big release to include the updated vector look for the classic Sytrus synth and Fruity Delay 3



FL Studio 20 has made life a bit easier for those struggling with latency-based timing issues

Nearly on time

FL's Plugin Delay Compensation system operates automatically – with optional manual adjustment – to ensure your audio stays in time by correcting latency introduced by processing. This can be pronounced when using CPU-intensive plugins. Looptalk forum-members have been patiently waiting for an overhaul of PDC, and this is perhaps the most significant change in version 20. Are their prayers finally answered with this release? Almost. This under-the-hood improvement is a huge improvement for users, and the familiar problem with delayed audio arising from sending one mixer channels to another no longer requires tedious workarounds. A considerable

drawback that persists is that automation clips are still not delay compensated. Automation clips in FL Studio instruct changes to parameters over time, and can be placed in the playlist like MIDI or audio data. While the new PDC system is a noticeable leap, the absence of compensated automation leaves producers still having to manually move their automation clips in the playlist to correct timing discrepancies. This can be frustrating in uses such as when making rapid creative modulation, as it is very hard to place by ear. Thankfully, Image-Line assure us that this will be addressed in the future, but it's a shame it was left on the vine for this update.

terms of being able to warp audio in a marker-based fashion in the playlist akin to the ease and precision Ableton Live allows. This is somewhat achievable in FL through the NewTone plugin, but the playlist-based method of having to clone clips to cut to smaller segments and resize is quite unwieldy. When you're remixing a track, this can litter your project with copies of the same large sample. It would be much more desirable when working with audio to be able to cut the same sample and place warp markers on it within the playlist.

While the DAW perhaps hasn't taken quite the same leap as its version number, FL Studio is a fantastic production environment that continues to iterate in all the right ways. There isn't really a feature here that's quite as juicy as version 12's vector GUI overhaul, but key shortcomings are being chipped away at with every update, and the improvements are smart and welcome.

The bottom line is that Image-Line have made the world's most popular DAW better. If you own FL already, go ahead and download it for free. If you've been waiting to bite, then we're happy to say that the time is ripe. **cm**

Web www.image-line.com

Info Fruity Edition €89, Producer Edition €189, Signature Bundle €289

Alternatively

Ableton Live 10

cm255 » 9/10 » €349/599

Boasts superior audio editing, a great set of devices and a very different workflow

Propellerhead Reason 10

cm253 » 7/10 » €349

Reason has finally opened its gates to VST plugins, and boasts some great instruments of its own

Verdict

For Now Windows and Mac

Incredible value

Toolbar customisation is very welcome

PDC is finally overhauled...

Against ...but automation still isn't Delay Compensated!

Audio manipulation could be better

Full of pro features and bundled plugins, Image-Line's DAW continues to be one of the best value virtual studio packages

9/10