

Acoustica Mixcraft 5

This new version blurs the distinction between 'entry-level' and 'full-featured' DAWs

by John Rossi III

We took a Walking Tour of Acoustica's Mixcraft 4 in our September 2009 issue, and I was blown away by its capabilities and ease of use. I got my hands on Mixcraft 5 several months ago, and I am delighted to report that this version retains all that was great from its predecessor and adds a whole lot more, all for only \$10 more... \$5 more on the street.

The real beauty of Mixcraft, from its inception, lies in its elegant simplicity. Users who have even the remotest experience with multitrack editors can boot Mixcraft and accomplish the task they are contemplating, many times without even needing to consult a manual.

It almost seems inevitable that when new features are added to a program, the program grows in complexity and the learning curve generally will get correspondingly steeper. Remarkably, Acoustica has transitioned Version 4 to Version 5 without increasing the operational complexity of the program. Indeed, if anything, small changes in the GUI (graphical user interface—the 'front end') and program operation have actually improved Mixcraft's accessibility. Since Version 5 is a major upgrade with the addition of many more features, this is all the more remarkable. The features are many and my space is limited, so let's jump in.

Improved GUI

The GUI of Mixcraft 5 has been given a modest facelift, as shown in Figure 1. Two features will be immediately obvious to users of previous versions. First, Mixcraft now allows for working with a video track. Currently, that track supports only AVI and WMV video, and the editing of the video is limited to rearranging clips, trimming/cropping, and crossfade transitions. Mixcraft isn't a champion



Non-Linear Editor (NLE), but it does give the user more than enough tools to get audio tracks on a video intended for uploading to YouTube. It even allows syncing video to the audio tracks with millisecond accuracy. Even as they stand, the video features of Mixcraft are very easy to use, very fast (e.g., in rendering), and the easiest way I have found to accomplish those simple video editing chores that seem to involve laborious processes using my pro NLEs.



The second obvious change to the GUI is the mixer. The mixer is rather spartan, even in comparison to the most basic DAWs that include one. Level adjustment, pan, muting and soloing controls are provided, as are meters, and complete control of any effect processing is provided by an FX switch—an analogous virtual instrument control switch is also provided on MIDI tracks. The eq is limited to three bands, however; while it does provide some frequency contour control, you'll want a third-party VST channel strip plug-in for finer eq adjustment.

There's now undock detaching for the Details Tabs, allowing them to be freely moved around the monitor

environment, including off the main video monitor. This allows the user to view the details without cluttering the lower portion of the video display. Since almost all of the non-track oriented information that can be manipulated in Mixcraft is presented here (e.g., project summary, track information, sound details, the mixer, Mixcraft's sound library, and MIDI editors), being able to move it to a separate monitor greatly improves its utility. For example, full screen MIDI track editing would be possible.

A Musical Typing Keyboard is also provided (Figure 2). This applet effectively turns your QWERTY keyboard into a 1.5-octave polyphonic MIDI keyboard controller for Mixcraft, complete with pitch bend, modulation, velocity, transposition, octave position, and sustain control. While it looks a bit strange, once you get used to it, it's quite playable; it won't replace dedicated hardware but could be handy at times when a MIDI controller is not available or practical, e.g. on an airplane.

In addition to a fine piano roll editor for MIDI, Mixcraft now provides notation editing tools (Figure 3). What makes Mixcraft's editor so unique and powerful is its use of piano roll-style bars that appear behind each note representing its length. The edges of the bar can be dragged in order to finely adjust start position or length of the note. This greatly simplifies the notation editing process, especially for novices

who have not yet learned the subtle nuances of crotchet and quaver tools. I have to say that this is the fastest and easiest notation editor I have yet experienced in a DAW.

Automation

Mixcraft 5 now includes automation of any parameter of any audio track, as well as any virtual effect or virtual instrument that may be associated with a track. Each audio or MIDI (virtual instrument) track has an accompanying automation lane that can be opened below the track (Figure 4).

For audio tracks, any parameter of any effect can be automated with an envelope in its own lane. For virtual instrument tracks, every controllable parameter in the instrument can be automated in addition to all parameters of any effect on the resulting

track, or to apply the same effects to all or portions of any number of audio tracks—a powerful addition.

New plug-ins

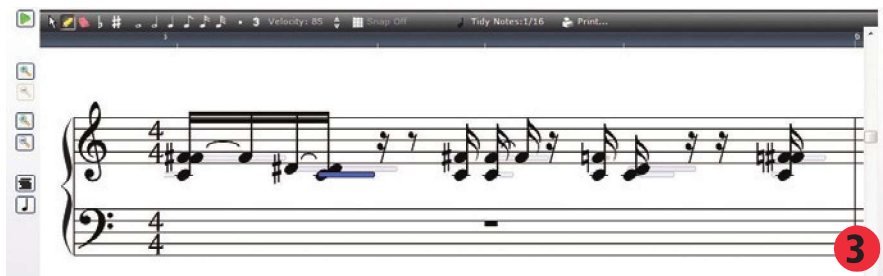
What version upgrade of any DAW would be complete without new plug-ins? Mixcraft's new offerings start with Lounge Lizard Session by AAS. Lounge Lizard has long been my favorite electric piano emulation; finding it in Mixcraft 5 was a surprise and a delight. Messiah, a Prophet-5 emulation by Gunnar Ekornas, in my opinion yields a more pleasing Prophet sound than some costly commercial plug-ins. The package rounds out with G-Sonique's Alien 303 Bass Synthesizer, a digital emulation of the Roland TB-303 Bass Synthesizer, and Pultronic Tube EQ, an emulation of a vintage Pultec equalizer; both emulations are quite passable.

excellent chance that Mixcraft will be able to use it, even in 64-bit Windows 7. Recently, I upgraded one of my studio computers to Win7/64. At the time I forgot that the audio interface in it was a Frontier Design Wavecenter PCI, which was orphaned in driver support after Vista. I was never able to get it to work with the last Frontier Design Vista drivers, but once I installed Mixcraft 5, I had full access to it with better than 5 ms latency. As far as I am aware, Mixcraft 5 is the only PC DAW that implements the WaveRT model to this extent, and I wish that such a comprehensive implementation was available in all Windows DAWs!

Summary

Mixcraft 5 is a very substantial upgrade from version 4. After working with it for a few months I can say that, apart from surround sound, there isn't anything that I haven't been able to accomplish to my complete satisfaction using Mixcraft 5 as a DAW.

How capable is Mixcraft 5? Well, when you run it for the first time, a project named "Blood Pressurize" opens, a complete studio mix of a track by Glenn Phillips of Toad the Wet Sprocket. You can hear the demo, along with many Mixcraft remixes, on



audio track. All of this is enabled, and simplified, through the use of stacked pull-down menus, so that any parameter can be automated independently in its own lane. While this automation capability is very tedious to apply using only a mouse, it's comprehensive and quite powerful.

Track improvements

Mixcraft now supports track and clip linking. Any part of any clip on any track can be linked to clips on other tracks, allowing them to be moved or manipulated together. Linking audio clips and video clips is also supported, greatly increasing the power of Mixcraft's audio/video editing.

A Master Track is now also available in Mixcraft. Basically, the Master Track is really a global parameter automation lane that allows you to assign and automate global effects, level, controls, etc. to the final mix via the stereo output bus.

Mixcraft 5 also now incorporates Send Tracks, automation lanes that control auxiliary buses. Defining a SendTrack automatically sets up an auxiliary bus without further involvement of the user. Once defined, a Send Track allows the user a simpler way to apply effects to just a portion of a given



WaveRT

Mixcraft provides a complete WaveRT audio model for sound device I/O. While WaveRT was available in previous Mixcraft incarnations, Mixcraft 5 now provides for use of WaveRT Exclusive Mode, where the audio device becomes exclusive to Mixcraft, and through which very low latencies can be obtained. In short, WaveRT will allow Mixcraft to communicate with most audio hardware without needing to install any special drivers.

What does this mean? Well, if you happen to have an audio interface that was orphaned with the release of Windows 7 (or Vista, even), there is an

YouTube. I found its inclusion with Mixcraft very illuminating. It definitely showcases how much power there is under the hood that can be tapped by even the most novice user. Anybody who dismisses Mixcraft as a viable DAW because of its price or the simplicity of its presentation is missing out on a real treat. ☺

Price: \$74.95

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