Music Studio (The)

General informations

Genre	Music / Sound	**Year**	1988
Language	1988	**Publisher**	Activision (USA)
Controls	Keyboard / MIDI-Device / Mouse	**Distributor**	
Players		**Developer**	Audio Light, Inc.
Resolution		**License**	Commercial
Programmer(s)	[unknown]	**Country**	
Graphic Artist(s)		**Software language**	English
Game Designer(s)		**Documentation language**	
Musician(s)		**License**	Commercial
Sfx		**Serial**	
Cover Artist(s)		**ST Type**	
MIDI		**Version**	
Protection		**Number of Disks**	

The Music Studio

by Audio Light, Inc.
ACTIVISION, INC.
P.O. Box 7287
Mountain View, CA 94039
(415) 940-6044
ST $59.95
XL/XE $34.95

by George R. Stepanenko

The Music Studio is the first commercially available sound-and-song-editing program for the ST, and it's a nice one. Activision released it for the XL/XE computers at the same time; except for the MIDI features, the two versions are very similar. For some unfathomable reason, the XL/XE also lacks the capacity for printing out the score—a significant exclusion, one which might discourage users from replacing their **Music Construction Set**, a very similar (but not identical) program.

The Music Studio is laid out a lot like **N-Vision**, with pull-down menus above and below the work area, and everything accessible via the mouse. The graphics are crisp, and the symbols logical, if not intuitive. It's almost too good, considering the limitations of the ST sound chip, so it's fitting that the program does support MIDI output. This also makes **The Music Studio** the first generally available MIDI program. Although it won't begin to satisfy the needs of professional musicians, since it's neither a sequencer nor a patch-editing program, it's quite good enough as a tool for basic composition and entertainment. A growing number of ST owners are picking up small synthesizers; for the non-professional, **Music Studio** is a workable compromise.

Whether one is using the internal chip or external devices, the process for laying down music is the same. An instrument palette (in sixteen colors) offers a choice of sounds, and similar menu boxes are used to pick durations, rests, key signatures, ties, triplets, keys, accents, dots, time signatures and the other elements which make up a piece of written music. It's all there, very easy to get at and almost easy to use. At the bottom, there's a song slider—a sort of gas gauge indicating the number of columns in a song and the current column number. Moving from any portion of the song to another is a simple matter of scrolling the song window. The bottom menu bar also sports an ear—for listening, of course—an eraser, a trash can, plus speed and volume controls.

For editing, a special menu in the upper right corner of the screen works with a section marker, to facilitate copying, moving and deleting blocks. This menu is also used to make large-scale changes through a specific range of columns, supporting transposition, changing the length of durations, adding repeats and replacing instruments. Marking off a section is as simple as pointing and clicking at either end of the range desired; this system offers to a musician all the flexibility a decent word processor gives to a writer.

While the mechanics of laying down sound elements are simple (point and click, click a second time to remove the element), conceptually it's a bit trickier, and the program betrays some shortcomings. It's impossible to put down a dot, accent, sharp or flat after having put down the note. Added to the fact that each voice is different—and that most music contains notes of a variety of durations—this becomes a bit of a problem in strategy. There is a way around it: by putting down the notes, then going back and replacing them with appropriate flatted, dotted, etc. equivalents, but this method significantly interferes with the flow. Also, two notes can be tied only if they are of the same key and duration; "sliding" is impossible. Combined with **The Music Studio**'s use of the concept of columns—as opposed to true measures—this can yield strange results, and it limits the program's potential as a true compositional tool.

Measure bars are optional. The user can plop them in for the sake of organization, or they can be left out—they make no difference at all. Nor do the time signatures appear to have any purpose, and the accent marks are strictly cosmetic. Again, because the program perceives each column as a complete event determined by the note of longest duration, keeping track of beats per measure becomes more of an exercise in fractions. This is not to say that the program doesn't work; it's simply that **The Music Studio** makes enough compromises with traditional concepts to frustrate anyone hoping to use standard compositional rules. Thus, the judgement that it's not for "professionals."

There are a few other problems in using **The Music Studio** for serious composition, arrangement and printing of a score. The low resolution mode supports sixteen colors. This is well in keeping with the sixteen channels available for MIDI information, but it does tend to clutter up the screen. Complex pieces become very hard to read; notes pile up on each other, and, in the mess of flags, a note of one duration can easily be mistaken for another. The key symbols appear to belong to notes one step above them, though they print in the right position. The print function is

Review *continued*

single-purpose; there's no option to modify the driver or obtain selective printing. Also, the program prints the repeat bar, rather than actually repeating the measures, and treats the end of a printed line as the end of a measure.

Whenever a formal system like that of musical notation and scoring is adapted to the computer environment, problems are bound to arise. Taken as a flexible creative environment, **The Music Studio** is a very decent piece of work. Professional musicians, composers and arrangers hoping to "computerize" their work will have to look to programs far larger, more expensive and complex. Anyone who's adapted to computer graphics processes, or even to word processing, is familiar with the relearning which comes before increased productivity. Activision claims too much for the program, but, at the price, it can't be everything to everyone.

The Music Studio offers some interesting innovations, like the "Paintbox." Click the right button, and a completely different screen appears. The voices are lined up like a color palette in a painting progam, and the durations are represented by little boxes of different sizes—we can literally paint with music. There seems to be potential in this approach—the idea that music is not static, the insight that notes can and do flow like paint or words. Except for generating potential patterns, this option has no usefulness for the composer, but it is fun.

The "Design Instrument" screen is another welcome feature. **The Music Studio** comes with sixteen preprogrammed internal sounds, but any or all can be modified to suit the user, and saved as a sound file. Modifying a sound is as simple as pulling sliders around on-screen. We're given one set of controls for the volume of the ADSR, another to set the length. While we have only two waveforms, tone and noise, there's a lot of flexibility in this method of changing the envelope. Another slider sets the octave in which the voice will play, and, as the sound is modified, we can hear the changes, as well as watch a graph representing the envelope. Again, this is a secondary feature which could almost stand alone.

For those with MIDI-compatible keyboards, there is an equivalent submenu. While the sixteen channels are defaulted to a specific set of Casio **CZ-101** preset sounds, the user has the option of resetting any of those channels to activate any sixteen (of up to eighty) presets on whatever keyboard might be attached. The user can also specify the range of that sound, effectively determining where Middle C will be represented on the keyboard. Since a lot of keyboards offer only one voice at a time, some have four (as do the Casios) and very few have as many as six, setting the MIDI parameters screen becomes a matter of choosing sixteen favorite instruments and saving them as a sort of orchestra, which would be used over and over—like a favorite color palette.

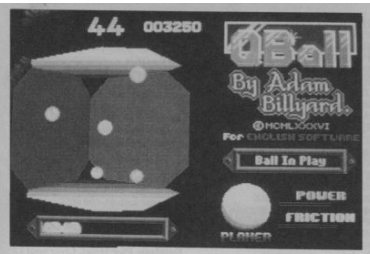
An alternative method for music entry also exists for those with a MIDI keyboard. It wouldn't be correct to call this function a sequencer, but it does allow for direct entry and recording of notes from the keyboard. A color (voice) is chosen, along with a note duration; MIDI input is turned on from the menu; and the computer is prepared to accept data. This function pays no attention to "system" data. Fast or slow, the music appears in one duration; play softly or with a hammer, punch in violins or guitars—there's no effect on what's being recorded.

The strength of this function is that it does let you compose on a tool of composition—the MIDI keyboard. The recorded results can all be edited and the output determined by other functions of the program. It's a workable and acceptable compromise between full-blown MIDI packages and the limitations of the internal sound system. For many, **The Music Studio** might very well be the only music-and-MIDI program necessary.

*Thanks to Alan Isley for his comments and suggestions on **The Music Studio**.*

George G. Stepanenko has been an Atari enthusiast since 1981. Having sold computers in a department store, he's been with an Atari-only store for over two years now. He's an original member of Calgary Atari ST user's group and a contributor to their newsletter.

Q-BALL



We've all seen plenty of snooker and pool computer games — in fact there's already a pool game for the ST entitled *Electric Pool* from Microdeal. But *QBall* takes this gendre of game literally into another dimension!

Quite simply, *QBall* is a kind of 3D snooker played in a cube that can be viewed from any conceivable angle (well 262,144 anyway). In both the single and two player versions of *QBall*, the object of the game, as in normal snooker, is to pot all the balls in the cube. There six reds and one colour, the yellow. Each time a red is potted you can have a go at the yellow and, if successful, its time for another red . . . and so on. Each time the yellow is potted it is replaced in the centre of the cube.

The trditional pocket has been replaced by holes cut out of each of the eight corners of the cube. You have 60 seconds in which to play a shot and, until you get used to the aiming in three dimensions, you'll need every second you can get. Just hitting a ball of the correct colour scores one point for every second remaining on the counter. For potting a red you get 10 points for every second left and a bonus of 500 points. A second red potted by the same shot scores double and a third scores treble — and so on. Potting a yellow is similar to red except the bonus os 2000 points. If you miss altogether or hole the cueball or a red or yellow out of order, you lose 500 points. With eight pockets, this happens all too often.

In linking the player's scores to the timer and by penalising them if they take too long programmer Adam Billyard has clerverly added another dimension (as if there weren't enough already!) to *QBall*, that of the arcade game where increased speed and skill in decision making and aiming are rewarded by higher scores. When playing a shot you can alter the air friction within the cube which determines how quickly the balls slow down and stop.

Although difficult to master at first, *QBall* is well worth sticking with.

PINBALL FACTORY

It was bound to happen sooner or later, and Microdeal have released an ST pinball game sooner. Pinball Factory, the game, puts you in charge of engineering in the factory. Your sole responsibility is the completion and play testing of the boards produced in the workshop.

As an employee of the PF you have various "state of the art" tools at your disposal including Edit Game menu, Edit board Edit Logo-Alter Rules, Test Game and Exit.

EDIT BOARD

This is the central core of the program and has two main functions. Firstly it allows you to customise graphics of the table using a rudimentary graphics package. Then its time to build up your game using the "Bumpers" sub-menu.

While using the drawing program you can flag 14 of the 16 available colours as either visible of invisible. Invisible colours are treated as part of the graphic design of the table and do not interfere with the movement of the ball. Anything drawn in a visible colour can be thought of as a kind of "designer" bumper that can be any shape or size.

Features include brushes (there are ten different ones), Line, Rays, Frame, Box, Circle, Disk, Clear, Undo, Detail (for the engineer who likes things pixel perfect), Fill, and Pattern which is used with the Disk, Box, and Fill commands. You can also select any 16 from 512 colours using the RGB selector.

EDIT LOGO

Using similar graphic tools to those on the EDIT BOARD (with added airbrush, text, and shadow functions), you can design a logo for your table. Logos are purely superficial and have no bearing on the game itself, being positioned to the right of the table, away from all the action.

ALTER RULES

Here you can get one up on Newton by tweaking gravity to see what it would be like playing pinball on the Moon — or even Jupiter. You can also change the elasticity of the ball making it bounce faster off bumpers etc. The number and speed of your balls can also be set together with the "free ball" score threshold which depends on how generous you're feeling. Next you can set the strength and value of the various bumpers you have used in your design.

Pinball Factory will go down well with all pinball freaks.

THE MUSIC STUDIO

The Music Studio was very well received when it was launched on the Commodore 64 because it was one of only a handful of programs — along with others like Rainbird's *Music System* and Broderbund's *Music Shop* — that combined ease of use with a comprehensive range of functions and features allowing even the musically naive to get started immediately.

While there are undoubtedly a number of more sophisticated music packages available for the ST, these, though, tend to be targeted towards the more musically inclined amongst us who already know a quaver is not just a cheese snack.

Still other ST music progs turn your keyboard into an editing/mixing boad (a kind of musical terminal) making use of the Atari's in built MIDI ports to talk a common language with many other MIDI compatible keyboards. For all *Hitchhiker* freaks out there, think of a MIDI port as a kind of musical babel fish!

Activision's ST version of *The Music Studio* certainly makes good use of the Atari's midi compatibility but never forgets that many of us don't have a Yamaha DX7 or a Casio CZ-101 synthesiser sitting around. This then is a program that can be used in a number of different ways by people of varying musical competence and talent.

Each instrument is represented by a different colour so it is easy to see which notes will be played by which instruments by their colour on the stave.

MS comes with 5 pre-programmed instruments but you can create and store your own or tweak existing ones to get the effects you want.

Music Studio was one of the first music packages for the ST and is till one of the best and easiest to use. For the musically innocent, it serves as a perfect introduction, while still offering enough depth to please all but the professional musician.

ST SPECTACULAR