Live! goes Platinum

Steven Helstrip is impressed with the latest Sound Blaster Live!, an all-in-one beginner's bundle.

I've just spent the past three days reinstalling and optimising my system following a fatal, and very untimely disk crash. Here at *PCW* we're always going on about the importance of backing up your data. But did I? No, of course not, because it always happens to someone else. Or so I thought.

My audio drive remains intact, but all my documents, along with your emails, have disappeared into hyperspace. So if I haven't replied to any of your queries, please re-send them to the usual address. And while you're at it, why not spend some time backing up your data? I wish I had.

■ Creative expands family

Creative has announced a new addition to its SoundBlaster Live! family, called the Live! Platinum. Although based on the original card, Creative says this one's better equipped for high-end audio production. Similar to E-mu's APS, the Platinum comes with a front panel module to provide easy access to audio connectors, including inputs and outputs for MIDI and SPDIF, headphones and a microphone. As well as a few hardware modifications, the package is bundled with 'Lite' versions of Steinberg's Cubase VST, WaveLab and ReCycle. And if that's not enough to tempt you, it also comes with Mixman Studio, Sound Forge XP and an MP3 encoder.

CREATIVE'S LIVE! IS NOW EVEN BETTER FOR MAKING MUSIC

The Platinum is built around the same EMU10K processor as existing Live! sound cards. Although over a year old now, its versatile design means there's still plenty of mileage to be had out of it. In this configuration it is capable of handling up to 1,024 sampled voices, decoding surround sound and applying numerous effects to multiple audio sources. With some serious games thrown into the sub-£200 deal (Half-Life: Day One, Descent 3 and others) I'm even thinking of buying one myself.

If you already have a Live! sound card, you should also note that Creative has released version 3 of its Liveware software. This adds hundreds of new functions to the card, including new effects, applications and Internet audio utilities. It's quite a hefty download at 27MB, but it's well worth getting hold of. For more info about the Platinum and Liveware 3, point your browser to www.sblive.com.

Liveware 3 adds hundreds of functions, including new effects and Internet audio utilities

■ Free VST 2.0 instruments

In last month's column I mentioned the imminent release of Steinberg's LM4 drum machine for the VST 2.0 plug-in format. Although I haven't got my hands on a copy yet, I have been sent the very first two shareware instruments. The first is a twin oscillator, analog-style synth called Mono One. Each oscillator has selectable wave shapes and there's a simple envelope offering attack, decay and release parameters.

The second instrument is a virtual plug-in sampler, which looks like an Akai S series. The shareware version is limited to playing back just one sample, but it's very useful all the same. For example, it allows you to try out sounds within a mix before going to the effort of making a SoundFont bank. Both instruments are available free from www.multimania.com/scdevelop/indexa.html.

HERE ARE THE FIRST BATCH OF VST 2.0 PLUG-INS: GET 'EM WHILE THEY'RE HOT

So, how do you go about using these instruments? At present, only Cubase VST 3.7 supports VST 2.0 plug-ins, although there are plans for Logic Audio to support the format in the near future.

To install the plug-ins, simply copy or extract the .dlls to your Cubase plug-ins directory. The next time Cubase starts up, they'll be ready for use.

From the Audio menu, select VST instruments to display the Instrument Rack. Next, choose one of the instruments from the pop-up menu in the same way you would load an effect plug-in. To play the instrument, click on the output port of any MIDI track and select the instrument device.

Depending on your sound card, the amount of latency (the time it takes for sound to arrive at your speakers after pressing a key) may vary anywhere between five and 800ms. You can check the exact latency by looking in the Audio System dialog (Audio menu). For true real-time playback, ideally your card should have a latency less than 40ms.

If you're using a Sound Blaster Live! with MME drivers, the latency at 48KHz is a whopping 750ms. This can be reduced by changing to the DirectX driver in Audio System, although this will prevent you from recording audio. This shouldn't be the case for much longer, though, as I've heard ASIO drivers are in the pipeline. This should significantly improve the latency, probably to around 20ms.

In the meantime, if latency is preventing you from playing real-time, first record a part with a hardware synth, then output the part via the VST instrument. You can then offset the latency by entering a negative value in the delay parameter box.

■ **Evolution Music Creator 61**
All-in-one music packages for the PC are

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Questions & *answers*

Q Following numerous recommendations, I recently bought myself a copy of VAZ plus, the software synthesiser. Although the program is happy to run on its own using its built-in sequencer, I'm not having much luck using it with Cubasis.

I have installed the HLB virtual MIDI driver, but when I select this port from Cubasis and play a few notes, my PC comes to a standstill. I'd really like to solve this one, can you shed any light?

JAMES NICOLSON

a *It sounds as though you're creating a MIDI feedback loop with the virtual MIDI driver. When you press a key on your keyboard, the note events are sent into*

Cubasis, and back out via the virtual MIDI port. From the symptoms you describe, it's possible the output from HLB is arriving back at the input of Cubasis and being sent on a never-ending loop, hence the system halt. To stop this you need to disable the HLB MIDI input inside Cubasis. Simply run the Setup MME utility, select the HLB input driver and click Inactive. That should do the trick.

something of a rarity, so when Evolution's Music Creator came my way I felt obligated to give it a mention here. Although this isn't the first bundle Evolution has put together, my first impressions tell me it's going to be one of the better ones. For a start it includes a well-featured

audio/MIDI sequencer, a MIDI interface cable and some music tuition software. For many, though, it will be the keyboard itself that is of most interest.

In the past, Evolution hasn't quite got its keyboard designs right. The keys on the MK-149 were too light and flimsy, while the Dance Station package had solid keys, but only one octave. The keyboard included here, the MK-261, has all the right credentials: five octaves of full-size keys, set buttons for program/bank select, pitch bend and modulation wheels and a MIDI volume slider. And as far as the action, or touch, of the keys is concerned, there are no complaints there, either.

The keyboard takes its power directly from your sound card via the MIDI interface. This plugs in around the back, where you can also find connectors for a sustain pedal and a Mac-type serial port.

One really useful feature of the MK-261 is
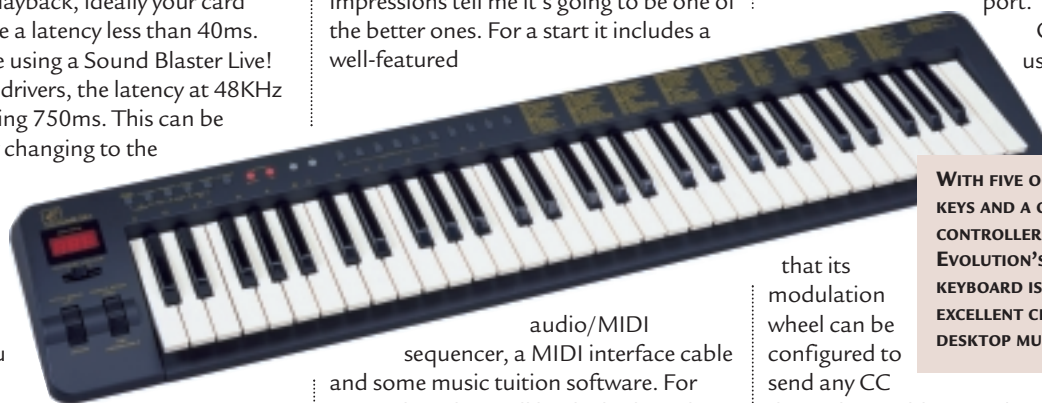
WITH FIVE OCTAVES OF KEYS AND A CONFIGURABLE CONTROLLER WHEEL, EVOLUTION'S MK-261 KEYBOARD IS AN EXCELLENT CHOICE FOR DESKTOP MUSIC

that its modulation wheel can be configured to send any CC data. This enables you, for example, to control the filter cut-off of an instrument in real time. Similar to the keys, the control wheels feel solid and should therefore stand up to some serious abuse.

Unless you're buying second hand, you'd be hard pushed to find a better keyboard for less than £200. And if you're just starting out with a computer music set-up, then the included software will be an added bonus.

PCW CONTACTS

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