Christmas chords

Here's something to keep you amused over the festive season. Steven Helstrip presents a selection of the finest shareware virtual studios for making music with your PC.

[FIG 1]

Over the past year we have seen some exciting developments in sound technology, perhaps most notably the virtual studio. Cubase VST certainly started something big; within 12 months of its release there were around 100 virtual effects which could connect to your virtual sound studio with virtual leads. Then came the wave of virtual synthesisers and virtual samplers. It came as no big surprise that these could connect to your virtual studio with virtual MIDI interfaces.

Five years from now, professional studios will exist purely to record orchestral, folk and rock music. Pop, dance and the remaining electronic genres will be recorded at home or, at best, in project studios driven by software. There simply won't be the need for expensive DSP and valve hardware; it will all be modelled in software.
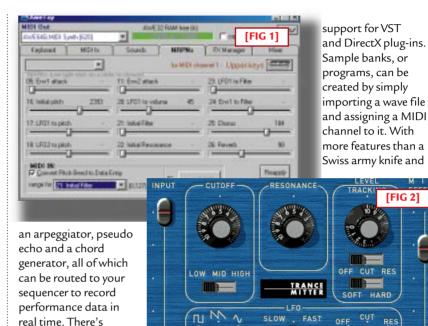
Even the sound engineer is under threat. On page 286 we take a look at a new plug-in from Steinberg that can learn the sonic characteristics of a platinum-selling album and apply it to your own bedroom recordings. Whatever next?

Festive fun

As it is coming up to Christmas, we are going to look at the five best shareware virtual studios for making music with your PC. It's a mixed bag of synths, samplers and utilities so there should be something here to keep you entertained over the festive season.

☞ AWE Toy

If you've got an AWE sound card, you can't afford to be without AWE Toy [Fig 1]. It provides access to all the card's synth, SoundFont and audio parameters via nine panels. MIDI processors include

an arpeggiator, pseudo echo and a chord generator, all of which can be routed to your sequencer to record performance data in real time. There's support for virtual SoundFonts and setups can be saved on a per-song basis. Available for free download at www.maz-sound.com.

☞ Hubi's LoopBack Device

If you want to control software-based MIDI applications from your sequencer, you're going to need a virtual MIDI interface. Hubi's LoopBack Device provides up to four MIDI ins and outs.

[FIG 2]

[FIG 3]

It's a doddle to set up and rates highly as one of my most useful utilities. It's available for free download at www.maz-sound.com.

☞ Signum 1100DX

Here's an Akai S1100 sampler in software [Fig 2]. The entire operating system has been implemented, right down to sample editing, and there's even

support for VST and DirectX plug-ins. Sample banks, or programs, can be created by simply importing a wave file and assigning a MIDI channel to it. With more features than a Swiss army knife and

support for multiple sound cards, we'll be seeing a lot more of this in 1999. www.signum.it/1100/1100.htm.

☞ Trancemitter

Trancemitter [Fig 3] is a free VST filter module. What makes it interesting is that its frequency cut-off parameter can be triggered by the level of the input signal, making it similar to an auto-wah effect. There are parameters for resonance, LFO rate and level tracking. As more applications are supporting VST plugs, everyone should have a copy. www.steinberg.de.

☞ VAZ

VAZ [Fig 4, p286] is a virtual analogue synth based on the classic Arp Odyssey. It comes with over 180 synth patches to start you off and has very low latency (typically 20-40ms). The noises that emanate from this software are massive,

Questions
& *answers*

Q Thanks for the great Sound pages in *PCW*. I have a question regarding PC-based recording and would be grateful if you could help, as I've been given a lot of conflicting advice and need someone with a similar perspective. I'm a

...two 4.0Gb SCSI drives and an Adaptec controller card. Am I wasting my money?

keyboard player looking to purchase a new PC for recording and sequencing work. I need to be able to record and simultaneously playback eight audio tracks through an Event Gina sound card. I've been given to understand (by a PC supplier) that with this level

of recording, SCSI data storage is the only way to go. Is this true? The new Ultra DMA drives also offer fast data transfer. I have budgeted for the extra cost of two 4.0Gb SCSI drives and an Adaptec controller card. Can you tell me if I'm wasting my money? The additional cost is approximately £650 over

an equivalent UDMA-equipped PC, which could pay for some quality mics and a pre-amp instead. I would also be using software effects on a number of tracks. The basic system is a PII400MHz with 128Mb of RAM.

GEORGE BRITTON

a *I'm happily running Cubase VST on a 266MHz PII equipped with a Gina card. With my UDMA hard disk I can playback 12 tracks simultaneously without a hint of glitching. This leaves plenty of headroom for software-based effects: I usually have a couple of compressors, a delay and a reverb on hand. SCSI drives generally outperform IDE drives, providing faster access and transfer rates. However, playback of eight audio tracks only requires 1.2Mb of data to be read from the disk per second. Under perfect conditions, UDMA drives can deliver up to 33Mb per second. If you're able to dedicate two UDMA drives to audio files, you're unlikely to encounter any problems.*

Q I use a lot of samples in my music and recently got hold of a copy of CD-DA

to allow me to digitally extract audio from CDs. My problem is that whenever I put an audio CD into the drive, the disc starts to play automatically. This is quite irritating, as I have to stop and close the Media Player before I can carry on. I know there's a way to turn off this feature but I don't know how. Can you help?

ANDREW HUNDLEY

a *There are two ways around this problem. You can either hold down shift when closing the CD tray, or a more permanent solution is to disable Windows' Auto Insert Notification. To do this, open the Control Panel and load System. In the Device Manager section, select the CD-ROM setting and double-click on your drive to open the Properties dialog. Auto Insert Notification can be found in the Settings tab.*

[FIG 4]

ranging from Prophet-like pads to faithful 303 basses. You've got to try this to believe it. Available for free download at www.software-technology.com.

Steinberg FreeFilter

If you want your music to sound as good as the CDs you buy, FreeFilter could help you on your way. It's a DirectX plug-in that can learn the sound of one piece of music, then cunningly apply it to another. So, for example, you can take a song that you feel has been well mixed and EQ'ed, let FreeFilter analyse its frequency content, then adapt its EQ settings to
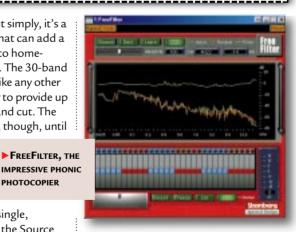
your own mix. Put simply, it's a virtual engineer that can add a touch of sparkle to home-made recordings. The 30-band EQ can operate like any other graphic equaliser to provide up to 15dB of gain and cut. The fun doesn't start, though, until you have a two-track mix of a tune that needs a hint of spice. To

▶ **FREEFILTER, THE IMPRESSIVE PHONIC PHOTOCOPIER**

analyse a platinum-selling single, all you have to do is enable the Source button and play the wav file from your audio editor. FreeFilter then creates a "fingerprint" of its frequency content [Fig 5]. Before applying the settings to the destination file, you must first allow the plug-in to learn its frequency content, which is effectively the same process.

Then comes the fun bit: click the Match button and allow your track to be transformed. All this happens in real time and you can set the strength of the modification from zero to 200 percent. Of course, there's a great deal more to a

good mix than just EQ, but given the right source material with which to work, FreeFilter can work magic. It's a bit pricey at £299 (inc VAT) but this is a product that delivers professional results.
• Arbiter Audio is on 0181 207 5050.

PCW CONTACTS

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