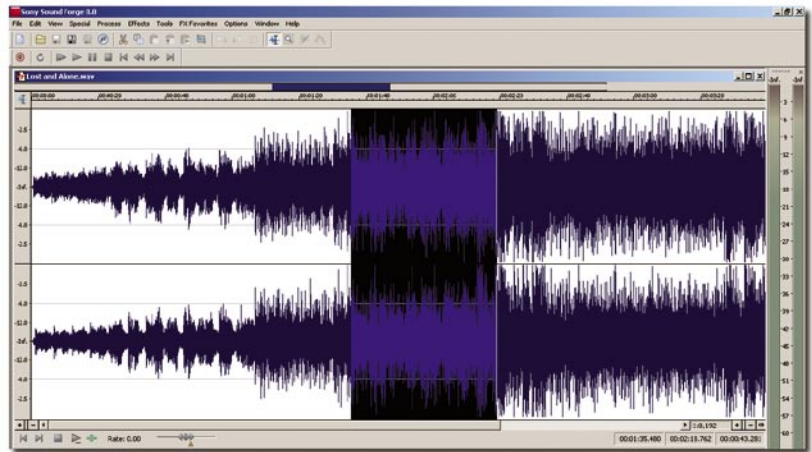


Reviews In Brief

Sony Sound Forge 8

Plenty of software products claim to be 'leading the industry' or 'setting the standard' – all the usual hype that makes it hard to believe almost anything these days. Sound Forge, however, can simply point to its longevity, which says more about the quality of its code than any advertising campaign could possibly suggest. The fact that the program's survived long enough for this to be its eighth incarnation is testament to its consistency, high quality and reliability.

There is a down side to this 'maturity' though. When you're upgrading something like Sound Forge and you got it pretty right in the first place, it's not easy to offer significant new features without re-inventing the whole thing, and who wants to mess with a perfectly good program? The best you can do is keep up-to-date with the latest format requirements, add a few more tools here and there and maybe



improve the software's compatibility with the more reputable third-party developers.

This is basically what Sony has done here, integrating ASIO driver support and also VST plug-in effects capabilities, which opens more doors than a second-hand car yard when it comes to extra tweaks and effects to try. But before you start importing third-party plug-ins, have a good look at Sound Forge's own tools and functions first. The Effects section offers a clever mix of extensive parameters and serviceable presets for people who haven't got time to fiddle.

For editing, the standard tools are all there, with the addition of a new scrubbing tool. You can also now customise the keyboard for hotkeys and there's a Batch Converter function and Script Editing facility. In fact, like a lot of software developers the emphasis seems to be turning more towards improving 'workflow' by streamlining the efficiency of the interactive process between the program and the user, rather than simply offering more functions.

Sound Forge includes the excellent Wave Hammer compressor and volume maximiser. Understanding compressors, as we all know, is a bit of a black art. When you just want to press the 'make it sound good' button instead, Wave Hammer's presets can do a great job. If compressors bamboozle you, maybe you should stay away from Sound Forge's intriguing Acoustic Mirror, which the company describes as an 'environment simulator'. It's a neat bit of software that lets you sample the reverb (for example) of a particular room and create an effect preset with it. You can also do the same with the sonic characteristics of a piece of equipment, like a tube preamp for instance. The learning curve of this software is a bit steep, but the end results can be impressive.

There's also a very useful two-track editor – there's still a

place in your software arsenal for one of these I reckon. And while no one should opt for a home-grown solution to mastering if they can afford the real thing, for tight budgets Sound Forge 8 can certainly render your mixdowns into high quality, finished tracks. You can then use the separate, packaged CD Architect software to make a Red Book standard master. Just about everything can burn a CD these days, but CD Architect gives you all the nitty-gritty options as well. There's also Noise Reduction 2.0 included, which works very well, if you take the time to learn the software. It should also be noted that v8 is Windows 2000 & XP exclusive.

I guess in a dozen years or so we'll be checking out Sound Forge 20. What will *that* do I wonder? Debate the structure of your song with you and suggest alternative lyrics? Actually that's not a bad idea, I must write that down...

Price: \$499

Intelliware: (08) 8277 1722 or info@intelliware.com.au

Phonic Helix

Phonic often comes up with very useful bits of gear that won't have you hiding your Mastercard statements from your significant other. Their recent Helix range of small, affordable USB mixing consoles is one such product group. Phonic, it seems, has taken a leaf out of Mackie's book and seen the merits of combining a simple and universal computer connection with a versatile analogue mixer. These 'digitally enabled' boards offer mixing, monitoring, microphone preamps and an audio interface to your computer all in one neat and tidy unit.



The nice thing about the Helix 17 is there's no great learning curve between banging some signals into the board, connecting it to your PC or Mac and commencing recording. No drivers are necessary to get the unit talking to your computer – it's truly a plug 'n' play setup procedure. Record quality is locked at 16-bit/44.1k and monitoring latency problems are avoidable due to the live input monitoring nature of these units.

The Helix 17 comes with a strangely generous input configuration – 17 inputs in total! But who can argue with five mic or line level inputs, each with TRS insert points and a low cut filter, and three stereo input channels with individual +4/-10 switching. These eight fader channels include a three-band EQ section with semi-parametric midrange, an analogue auxiliary send plus a send to the unit's internal 24-bit effects section. Sends can be pre or post fader. Further inputs to the desk can come via the three stereo auxiliary returns, each with level controls. Monitoring and recording controls include control room level, two-track return and an adjustable two-track send. The two-track I/O is thoughtfully provided as RCA and mini-jack plugs for interfacing with devices such as MiniDisc players and iPods. There's even a real set of subgroups. Out the back you'll find dedicated outputs for control room monitors, XLR main outputs, the group outputs and a coaxial S/PDIF digital output. Up top there are TRS balanced main outputs and footswitch jacks for bypassing the internal effects and tap tempo setting for delay times. Metering is provided by 13-segment LED bars, phantom power is set via a global switch and power is provided via a standard IEC input.

Phonic likes to stick to sound audio industry practices and allow all connections to operate in balanced configurations. The build quality is superior to the many other budget mixer contenders. It's small enough to sit on your desktop and light enough to use alongside a laptop for portable recording situations. I jumped the Helix through a few hoops, primarily to see how well the USB interfacing functioned and was pleased

with how simple it can be these days. Driving these things is really as painless as it gets – pull up a sound and hit record. Noise specs are commensurate with 16-bit devices, but combined with a cheap laptop, it's a good alternative to the reams of portastudio-style recorders. Far more versatile and so much easier to run.

Price: Helix 12: \$550; Helix 17: \$799

CMC Music: (02) 9905 2511 or cmcmusic@cmcmusic.com.au

Formula Blue Workstations

Most of the studio purchases that have really got me excited in recent years have done something to improve my sound or, at the very least, dazzled me with a bunch of flashing LEDs and buttons. I'd hardly put furniture up there in the Big Kev category. But when I look back, the purchase of one of these Formula Blue Workstations has done a hellavu lot more for me over the last couple of years than some of the more expensive gear I've got collecting dust.

Like many people in their 20s and 30s I've moved house numerous times – over the period I've maintained a home studio, I calculate 14 moves all up. During that time I bodged a lot of studio setups. I went from a 'broad acreage' approach of having my gear strewn willy-nilly over large areas of desk space; to making my own vertical rack space courtesy of two stacks of Besser blocks. I've had my nearfields on milk crates or more Besser blocks; I've had my gear in an enormous arc; I've had my favourite synth on the other side of the room...

It took another house move combined with the prospect of a newborn baby to galvanise me into action. I did my research into getting some ready-made studio furniture that would consolidate my gear into a neat ziggurat of audio fun, but soon discovered that this wasn't as easy as I anticipated. I'm guessing Omnirax is probably the biggest kid on the block when it comes to this stuff, but it's imported and it's expensive.

It actually took a chance encounter with another studio compadre to find out about this Formula Blue studio furniture. It's built locally, there are a good number of options, it doesn't take two weeks to arrive, it's easy to assemble, and it's well priced.

I quickly ordered myself a unit. My configuration has rack space either side, draws on one side, a computer monitor bridge on the top – perfect. It arrived flat packed and took an hour or so to erect. It's solid – MDF, reinforced with steel struts where appropriate – and doesn't need to be totally disassembled when you go to move rooms. It can even be on castors.

I guess home studios are increasingly less reliant on outboard processors and synths, and there may not always be a case for purpose-built furniture, but if, like me, you've acquired a multifarious panoply of paraphernalia *but* you've got your gear all over the shop, then there's absolutely no reason not to check this stuff out.

Best of all – and I know there are loads of chaps out there with home studios who will relate to this – my wife *loves* it. In fact, she loved it so much when it arrived she sewed me a calico cover for the whole enchilada – 'out of sight out of mind' for her; dust free and low maintenance for me. It took me a while to convince her to take the bows off... but I'll spare you that story.

Christopher Holder

Electric Factory: (03) 9474 1000 or sales@elfa.com.au

Price: starts from \$299

