

Steinberg Virtual Bassist

Steinberg releases the latest piece in its Virtual puzzle.
Anthony Tuoma contemplates big bottom.

As I beat my fist on the desk and screamed: 'freakin' bass! Sit in the mix, damn you!', Virtual Bassist landed on my desk – a strange, but welcome coincidence. After a fair degree of fiddling with the dongle key (which requires your PC to be on-line in order to access the registration key – a big no-no for me and my dedicated audio computer which is resolutely *offline*), it didn't take me long to load her up. In minutes I had a bangin' four on the floor, and my bass problems were solved. The Steinberg crew has released one of their most comprehensive virtual instruments yet and it may very well change the way many of us see (and hear) bass. With its sonically excellent, comprehensive sound and fantastic flexibility, Virtual Bassist is a very competent player in Steinberg's virtual instrument suite.

Much like the Virtual Guitarist editions, the plug-in has the ability to switch between creating your own lines and/or using the sampled lines available... So let's take a look at what's on offer.

Flagging Features

Virtual Bassist sports a colourful and very simple-to-use interface. Steinberg really has its user interface methodology down pat – everything has space, nothing is crammed in, and everything is labelled in great detail. Loading a preset instrument will get you going, and turning effects on and off is as simple as a click here and there.

Ease of use, however, does not infer a lack of options. There are over 25 styles of bass on offer within Virtual Bassist. Each style packs its own variations – on the

actual bass lines as well as intro lines and a selection of fills. The sampled grooves themselves vary in complexity, moving from simple lines to very melodic and complicated phrases.

Virtual Bassist packs in a number of features that set it apart, and they all aim to imbue the performance with realism and variation.

For example, Groove Match is an awesome feature that allows the bass grooves to match a drum track. Virtual Bassist will 'learn' the pattern of your drums with one click and mould a sampled bass line to/around it. This is great for working with drum tracks that aren't clinically perfect and allow you to maintain that loose groove while keeping things 'tight'. On a similar point, those using Steinberg's Virtual Guitarist Electric Edition or Groove Agent will be happy to learn that Virtual Bassist's lines are matched with the guitar lines and drum patterns in these programs. Any producer/programmer worth his or her salt will be wanting to tailor these virtual loops and patterns and make them their own; regardless, it's nice to know that a strong drum, bass and guitar foundation is only a click away.

Stomp

Speaking of tailoring sounds, the range of effects aboard Virtual Bassist are well worth investigating. The six different stomp boxes are all optimised for the bass and offer many possibilities for adding that spritzing of harmonic distortion, chorus, delay and the like. To add even more flexibility, there are emulations of a variety of famous bass cabinets, as well as a number of microphone



positions, all of which work very well.

It's possible to play Virtual Bassist via a Midi keyboard too. Be a little careful though; I found my humble two-octave controller somewhat lacking when it came to capturing the nuances of a real bassist. The modulation and pitch wheels cause particular 'additions of character' to occur (such as slides and slaps) but it didn't quite have the realism needed to make it sound believable. Maybe I needed a little more practice but I figure it's a little like trying to play piano on a Midi guitar... there's only so much you can achieve. Which illustrates the point about 'virtual instruments' in general: don't expect all the expression of the real thing. In spite of this, however, the quality of the bass sounds and the engine's expressiveness definitely sounded superior to Bornemark's Broomstick Bass, which seemed to fail miserably on all counts as a practical, performance bass instrument.

Big Bottoms?

As for the 'sound' of Virtual Bassist? I must say it's excellent in the genres it targets, but a little lacking in others. VB excels at providing those sounds that sit proudly in the centre of the mix, but not so much in the sounds that lurk subsonically underneath it. The bass sounds have a classy top end to them which makes them cut through very effectively. The rock and metal bass sounds have the right amount of punch without too much 'clanking' or bottom end. For a track that's leaning towards a reliance on real instruments, Virtual Bassist would be ideal for some quality bass sounds and expressive playing. Conversely, if you're after that super 'phatt' real bass sub sound that many of today's modern genres embrace, then you'll probably be scratching around a bit more. Even when browsing through VB's Hip Hop sounds I didn't find any of those huge and 'expensive' bass sounds that are characteristic of so many 'urban' genres. With the judicious use of some EQ and the not-so-judicious use of some heavy

compression you'll get close... but that sort of reverse engineering is going against the 'ready now' philosophy of Steinberg's Virtual studio. Personally, I look forward to future additions to the sound set to hear what Steinberg can wheel out when it comes to genuine 'big bottom'.

Rate Me Rate Me

Being a creator of electronic music, I didn't quite get the exact sound I was craving from Virtual Bassist; however, I'm well aware that there will be plenty of studio folk who will have all their bass requirements met when they call up the presets. The more rock-inclined bass styles work incredibly well for those lacking a bassist or even a high quality bass sound. Saying that, producers of hip hop and electronica shouldn't ignore Virtual Bassist. I found it worked exceptionally well when layered over a synthesized bass playing the same line or phrase – VB gave the synth bass more mid and top end, keeping the bass sounding relatively realistic, while simultaneously allowing the bottom to stay immensely chunky in the mix. And, finally, at its core Virtual Bassist packs the most expressive engine I've yet seen in a bass plug-in. The interface and architecture are all very well conceived and act as a great platform for new sounds and patterns as they (inevitably) come on-line. For many, there are plenty of reasons to jump all over Virtual Bassist, and for the rest there are plenty of reasons to keep a close eye on it. Check it out and find out which camp you fall into.

AT

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