

Steinberg Cubase VST v4.1

Derek Johnson and Debbie Poyser look at the latest VST update.

Cubase VST is one of the world's most widely used Midi+Audio sequencers, benefiting from active and imaginative development by its manufacturer, Steinberg. The latest Mac version, v4.1 (and v3.7 on the PC), has some fabulous new features which maintain its position as a market-leading program and further integrates cutting-edge software tools from other manufacturers.

More than 20 audio and Midi enhancements have been made to VST for v4.1, and while they're all very welcome, there are a number that deserve special note.

Right up there at the top of the list has to be v2.0 of the VST plug-in standard. This allows for Midi control of plug-in effects, and introduces an even closer relationship

with third-party software-based synths, samplers and drum machines than Steinberg's existing ReWire inter-application technology. These so-called 'VST Instruments' can now be chosen as a destination for Midi tracks in the Arrange window, just as if they were external instruments attached to a Midi interface. VST Instruments have their own mixer tracks, and can access the same processing plug-ins and global effects as normal audio tracks.

Steinberg are planning instruments of their own, and are whetting our appetites with Neon, a graphically stunning, simple but nice-sounding polyphonic 'analogue' synth. Third-party software which already integrates with VST 2 includes Kablo's Vibra monosynth, Stella sample player, and Gamma drum machine.

Also reaching v2.0 in this version of VST is Steinberg's audio in/out protocol, ASIO. The major development here is the implementation of 'direct monitoring' with sound-cards which support ASIO. Monitoring is now handled by the audio hardware, so the monitored signal doesn't pass through Cubase VST. The result is the eradication of latency-induced delays in monitoring while overdubbing, for example. An elegant solution to an irritating problem.

When Cubase went VST it came as a surprise that the free bundle of effects and processors didn't include dynamics processors. Such studio essentials are of course available on the healthy internet shareware plug-in scene and from commercial developers, but now, finally, Steinberg has built some into the program. A gate, compressor, limiter and 'soft clipper' are available for each audio channel, in addition to the channel's four standard inserts. The modules are sourced from Spectral Dynamics, their implementations are quite comprehensive (although there's no side-chain access), and all four processors work well.

A few welcome operational changes have been made too. The new Mixer Views feature makes the program's Channel and Group Mixers more flexible by allowing

users to set up their own channel configurations, showing only desired channel strips – helping to keep edit windows as uncluttered as possible, especially when working with large numbers of audio channels. Editing the values of certain parameters has been improved by allowing more direct access to value fields. The VST user interface is wonderfully graphic, with many on-screen knobs designed to be tweaked with the mouse. But, this can also be a frustrating way of changing parameters, especially since the knobs don't have end-stops and can be quite easily overshot, resulting in a sudden (and mostly unwelcome) change from one extreme to the other of a parameter's range. Also it's still not always possible to simply type in the required values for all parameters. Those small niggles aside, it's now much easier to change many parameters.

Another neat new improvement is in the way the VST mixer can now be remotely controlled by the likes of a Yamaha 01V. Most of the parameter controllers in the VST mixer can be controlled by the equivalent pot or fader on the 01V (other digital control surfaces are supported). Furthermore if you're running Yamaha's DSP Factory you'll be pleased to learn that v4.1 VST/24 is now very compatible. A mixing controller window for the DSP Factory can now be called upon.

Thanks to the new Midi Retrospective Record feature, there's now no need to accidentally play something fab while idly poking at the keyboard, think 'that was good!' and then curse the fact the sequencer was not in record mode. Retrospective Record means VST is always listening and capturing Midi input, which it will save if asked to. The facility has its limitations (the amount of material the buffer will record is restricted), but it's a bonus nonetheless.

We haven't the space to mention all of v4.1's enhancements, but it should be clear that this is a worthwhile upgrade. Once more, Steinberg is demonstrating its commitment to the continuous improvement of what is already a powerful sequencer, as well as the forward-looking qualities which makes them among the hippest of software developers. Steinberg is eagerly embracing the approaching reality of software instruments running alongside Midi+Audio sequencers, and their particular talent for setting standards and getting other software houses to come on board assures VST a sound future.



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