

CAKEWALK SONAR 6 PRODUCER EDITION

Christmas comes but once a year and when it does it brings... a Sonar update.

Text: Calum Orr

► Well it's Christmas for Sonar users again, with a yo ho ho and a bunch more plug-ins and advancements. Cakewalk's yearly update regime keeps its users on their toes and their purse strings loose. This year the program hits version 6 and the upgrade from v5 Producer Edition to v6 Producer Edition includes some new workflow enhancements, plug-ins and synths that I am sure will be tempting for many – stocking-fillers, you might say.

The veritable barrage of new information in v6 will probably take most Sonar-ists the whole summer to integrate into their working environment, or I guess you could upgrade and slowly digest the features over the year before Santa arrives on his 64-bit sleigh again next Christmas with version 7 in tow!

JINGLE BELLS, JINGLE BELLS

Cakewalk has been busy developing its new Active Controller Technology (ACT), which allows plug-and-play operation for a host of Midi controllers. The cool thing about it is that you can control the parameters of whatever window is in focus: be it synth, plug-in or track pane/mixer. If you're like me and your controller (in my case, the G-media Phat-boy) isn't on the Cakewalk's list of preconfigured controller devices, then you'll have to manually assign the parameters to individual controller knobs and get your head around the Controller/Surface Properties window, which is a tad confusing. This confusion is due, in part, to the poor explanation of its role in both the online and hard cover manual (something I'm told is being remedied). Through trial and error I managed to get the Phat-boy happily controlling my mixer functions (like volume, pan, mute, solo, record and automation arm and send levels), but then I couldn't get it to control synths and plugs when their windows were in focus without my Phat-boy simultaneously moving Sonar's mixer controls. Eventually I gave up and decided that I would rather use my antiquated controller for adjusting synths, EQs and filters, so I configured it that way instead. Thankfully, once you've gone through the process of manually setting up a controller your initial setup can then be saved as a preset so you don't have to go through the pain twice. Of course, if you have a controller that has a preset within Cakewalk's Active Controller Technology, setting it up is relatively simple, so check the Cakewalk site for your controller's status.

Next up, is the new Audio Snap feature, which is in many ways similar to ProTools' 'Beat Detective'. Unlike Beat Detective, however, Audio Snap is a non-destructive

process and has the ability to time stretch audio clips or remap the tempo of already-recorded material. It's easily implemented via the Shift-A key command or via a new button at the top of the track pane. The whole idea of the Audio Snap feature is to tighten up sloppy playing and/or fit tracks (like drum loops) to existing material. I strongly advise people to watch some tutorials on this function – if you just dive in, you may not get the results you'd expect. During the review I encountered a few crashes using Audio Snap but I did manage to mix together some disparate passages of music that would never have gelled if it weren't for some 'Snap'. I've been thinking about going back to the multitracks of my old band to see if I can make the epitome of loose 'Shab' into 'Snappy Fab', but I need to spend more time with this feature to really 'milk it', so to speak.

I enjoyed the new-look track mixer with its freshly rendered graphics and I made good use of the customisable plug-in menus that, in the past, had infuriated me with their lack of 'tree' functionality. Cakewalk has also implemented a new Crash Recovery system that aims to protect users from rogue plug-ins or files 'bringing the house down'. I'm not sure if this feature is fully operational yet as on the couple of occasions my machine did come to grief I didn't see a dialog box prompting me to save. Admittedly, it may have been my machine's specific configuration that was the root of the problem. Nonetheless, it would have been good if Crash Recovery had come to the rescue, whether it was due to a rogue plug-in or a system incompatibility.

KEYS & PLUG-INS

There were two items in this update that I really liked the sound of: the New Session Drummer 2 softsynth, and the VC64 'Vintage Channel' EQ and dynamics plug-in.

Session Drummer II is like FXpansion's BFD or NI Battery but without the tweakability. It comes with some good sounds and has the ability to playback audio files in the Way, AIFF, Soundfont and even Ogg Vorbis format. Midi loops are loadable from within the GUI to facilitate quick selection of parts for song construction or to jam to. It's very easy to use but it takes up some pretty serious screen real estate that I believe could easily have been condensed. The Vintage Channel is the result of collaboration with Kjaerhus Audio, which is a Danish plug-in developer of some repute. The algorithms seem to be of a high quality and it was easy to dial in some vintage-sounding crunch on drums and guitars, or softly



Sonar's new ergonomic and graphically improved channel strip.



(Top) The new Transport window in Sonar 6 is a vast improvement on what existed before. (Middle) Session Drummer II is an easy-to-use virtual drummer. (Above) Vintage Channel 64 puts vintage tones at your fingertips – a welcome addition in Sonar 6.

address the sibilance and dynamics of vocalists. The EQ is a four-band affair that allows for plenty of sculpting, and there is a unique (yet preset and non-adjustable) ‘Routings’ section that enables a variety of different configurations of the various VC64 modules (i.e.: de-esser, gate, compression and each individual band of EQ).

In my opinion, Cakewalk should be commended for the way it endeavours to get new features and plug-ins into each new annual release. However, I also think it’s time for them to sort out the overall useability of Sonar. It now has an enormous host of useful features yet many of them can feel clunky in their implementation or at times frustrating. Small things like the ability to assign channels to multiple groups or getting the channel faders to adjust the channel selections made with ‘quick groups’ is more important to me than any new carrots or shiny plug-ins under the Christmas tree.

For some users it will be worth upgrading to Sonar 6, particularly if you’ve been waiting to get a control surface working for you. The Audio Snap function is pretty cool too and I can see myself getting mileage out of that when I dig up my ‘loose’ past or come across some ‘green’ musicians. If you don’t fall into those two camps then Sonar 6 isn’t as compelling as last year’s upgrade.

I gather Cakewalk will release v6.2 shortly (in time for the Winter NAMM show, I’m told) and I’ve no doubt that update will address many of the v6 teething problems. Don’t get me wrong, Sonar still sounds fantastic – there’s no doubt about that – but maybe some more time will have to be spent before next Christmas on operational refinements of the program overall.

Merry Christmas! ■



NEED TO KNOW

Price
Sonar 6 Producer Edition: \$999
Sonar 6 Studio Edition: \$599

Contact
Intelliware
(02) 9981 8088
sales@intelliware.com.au
www.intelliware.com.au

Pros
Control surface support.
Audio Snap feature very useful.
Vintage Channel has great tone.
Improved Transport window.

Cons
Certain workflow processes still feel convoluted.
New plug-ins take up lots of screen real estate.

Summary
Some very good new features in v6 but it’s time to streamline all of Sonar’s fabulous features to make it the professional powerhouse that it can be.