

Plug-ins

Steinberg Plex

Plex – yet another new direction in synthesis? Or is it simply an easier way to program a sound? A little bit of both really. Plex is a VST instrument designed by Wolfgang Palm, the man behind the original PPG synths. Plex uses a modelling system to arrange and combine timbres into real and very unreal textures. You can do things like combine the sound of a cymbal with the envelope of a guitar, then apply the filter model of a harmonica to it. Most of this



mixing and matching (or un-matching) is carried out via a simple-to-use graphic palette – it's remarkably easy to use while still adhering to recognised synthesis practices.

Wolfgang likes to refer to the system as 'Restructuring Synthesis'.

Constructing a patch involves selecting a low and high component. These two components (or models or waveforms or whatever you want to call them) are combined to create a new timbre. The third component sets the character of the filter. Selecting which models you use is accomplished by dragging and dropping icons that represent each component onto the sound palette. This can be done in real time and changes are immediate. Say you choose a cymbal model as your filter component, then the filter will allow more high frequencies through. Each component can then have its own ADSR envelope and LFO applied. This final group of parameters is referred to as the 'fourth component'. It's all quite easy and greatly simplifies the process of creating sounds. All LFOs can be synced to tempo. Plex also houses its own delay and pitch modulation effects section – which, again, are syncable to tempo. Furthermore, all the Plex parameters are controllable via Midi for real-time tweaking.

The package's CD includes installs for Windows 2000 and XP. If you're a Mac person it happily installs for both Mac OS9.1 and OSX 10.2. Steinberg recommends a PC of at least 600MHz and Cubase 5 or later, or a Macintosh G4 400. You'll also need 180MB of drive space to contain the folder of data files that make up Plex's sound data.

So who would want Plex in their arsenal of VST instruments? Its ease of use makes it an obvious candidate for those with little experience of tradition programming. It's also good for developing long evolving pads that are reminiscent of FM modulation and synths of yesteryear. I wouldn't be using Plex for recreating 'real' sounds – that's not its forte. In fact, Plex actually reminded me very much of the original PPG – odd that! Not exactly VSTi of the year, but worth a look. *Brad Watts.*

Price Guide: US\$249

Steinberg: www.steinberg.net

Native Instruments Kontakt

Kontakt is Native Instruments' answer to VSTi sampling. Kontakt can load Akai CD-Roms as well as Halion, EXS24 and SDII file import. By the time you're reading this, NI should have their direct-from-disk update available online as a free addition. The good thing about Kontakt is its low resource drain.

Minimum system requirements for both Mac and Windows is surprisingly low. Macs require a minimum of 128MB of RAM and a G3 300 running OS 8.6. PC folk can get away with a PII of 300MHz and 128MB of RAM – Windows 98, ME and 2000 are all supported. You can run Kontakt via any VST2, MAS, DXi or Direct Connect compatible host. You can even revert to the stand-alone version of the software and dedicate a single machine to running Kontakt. Basically anyone can run this sampler.



Kontakt's interface involves two main elements. The right of the interface is laid out as a rack-style setup offering access to the various editors. The left of the interface is for browsing files. Depending on your machine's grunt factor, up to 256 stereo voices per instance are possible. What sets Kontakt apart from conventional samplers, both soft and hard, is the various playback modes: Classic mode, Time Machine mode, and Tone Machine mode. Time Machine allows real-time manipulation of length, pitch, and formant. The Tone Machine imprints the pitch onto a sample and maintains the same length across the entire note range. Pitch and time can be manipulated independently. No other sampler does this.

The incredible filter section offers 17 variations of filter. From analogue low- and high-pass through to esoteric sound-design manglers. Insert and send effects are all part of the plug-in and include EQs, waveshapers, delays, reverbs and time modulation effects. If you're a sucker for phase modulation like me, you'll appreciate the brilliant phaser.

All of Kontakt's parameters are controllable via internal LFOs, envelope generators and the nifty step modulator. Or you can go for real-time control via Midi controller messages. Editing of sampled waveforms happens within the plug via the built-in interface with support for up to eight loops per sample – much like the early Akai and Casio samplers. Kontakt supports a vast array of formats including Akai S-1000/S-3000, Gigasampler, SF2, Halion, EXS, SDII, Battery, Reaktor, LM4, AIFF and WAV files up to 32-bit. Support for E-mu formats such as EIII, ESI, and EIV is under development. It's worth grabbing the demo of this extraordinary program to see what you're missing out on using other soft samplers. *Brad Watts.*

Price Guide: US\$399

Native Instruments: www.native-instruments.com