

ABLETON LIVE 6

Another no-holds-barred update to this popular arrangement and performance application.

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► Just on six years after Ableton Live's initial release, version 6 has been unleashed. As the lines between DJ, producer, musician and live performer become more and more blurred, using Live as an instrument as well as a compositional application has become very popular. Each new version of Live has thus far been packed with a great number of improvements and enhancements, all of them steering the program inexorably in the right direction. Version 5 of the program, in particular, boasted some excellent new functionality along with rock-solid stability, making it Ableton's best release yet. Which inevitably begs the question: 'How does v6 stack up?'

Given the maturity of the v5 release, in some ways it was hard to see where Live 6 would take us. But, sure enough, Ableton has dug deep and come up with another impressive iteration. What's particularly gratifying is that many of the improvements haven't been drawn from the 'usual suspects' barrel, making this instalment of the program all the more impressive (and comprehensive).

SIX LIVES

With notebooks of today travelling at unprecedented speeds thanks to multiple 'core' CPUs and hyper threading systems etc., Live 6 has been coded with multi-core and multi-processor support deep within its audio engine. The new Intel Mac and Intel Duo Core system technologies are thoroughly utilised by Live 6 now that the application can distribute processing loads to any number of internal 'cores' or hyper-threaded components available on the CPU. This effectively leads to better handling of larger projects and a higher processing rate of effects. Ironically, amidst the chat rooms and forums, Live has always had a good reputation in relation to speed and has never been known to misbehave or 'snail' on performance; and this is regardless of users' system specs. Of course, this was all *before* the new feature set in Live 6, some aspects of which may well consume a fair load of CPU grunt...

ANYONE CARE TO COMPOSE A FILM SCORE?

In Live 6 you can now import movies, making it possible to drag and drop QuickTime format video into a Live Project and compose audio over video in the traditional Live 'performance' fashion (which would explain the additional CPU utilisation enhancements). What's more, the audio file of the video itself can be stripped away and isolated onto its own Live audio channel so that it can be manipulated using Live's effects and processors. If you're a Live user with a dual monitor setup, you can dedicate a single screen to the video clip and work with your Live composition on the other. Otherwise viewing a video while



editing can only be achieved in the Arrangement window. Composing to video runs exceptionally smoothly, with seamless operation between the video playback and Live audio (even on my two-year-old Dell Pentium M 2.0GHz, 1GB DDR400 RAM notebook).

Live treats video in much the same way as it does audio, making use of timeline markers and audio/video 'blocks' which can be moved around the timeline's channels. Given this is the first release with video support, it may not be time just yet to start mixing video on-the-fly as you perform using Live, however, the potential for this soon to become commonplace appears likely. Ableton may make a move into engulfing the VJ (Video DJ) audience, as well as its existing Live producer/DJ crowd, and performing an audible and visual act all from a single application and a notebook could become the musical future of the club scene. The reality at this stage, however, is that Live 6 only supports the QuickTime format of video, a little frustrating and very limiting for those using PCs, as QuickTime is one of the least common formats of video. In addition, you have to install QuickTime player to import files into Ableton as the decoding and re-coding of video is not done within the program. Finally, for those who don't know, the QuickTime format has never been renowned for high-quality video, so composing audio to a serious film piece would take some work simply to compress and re-compress the video component alone, in order for it to function within Live. I suspect this will be amended in a software update in the near future if Ableton is to keep PC users happy.

DEEP FREEZE

The Deep Freeze feature is yet another enhancement added to Live 6 in order to free up computer resources. Deep Freeze is obviously reminiscent of Cubase's (and others) 'Freeze' feature (the name's almost identical, as is the function). With Deep Freeze you can retain most editable functions (cut, copy, paste, automation etc.), however, the real-time time stretching and/or MIDI information is temporarily committed to audio so that you're not carrying out additional MIDI to audio or time stretching processing each time you play the clip or MIDI part. You can also 'flatten' your clips so that the audible result of an effected clip or virtual instrument can be saved as it is, without having to bounce the clip as a mix.

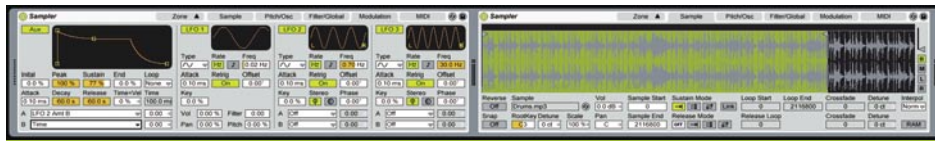
SIX RACK

Another very clever addition is the ability to 'rack' your virtual gear and save any combination of Live effects, instruments or VST instruments and effects into racked

Video: Nifty preview window lets you see everything as you compose audio to any kind of QuickTime video. Film clips aplenty.



Impulse+Saturator+EQ Eight = Instrument Rack: Big drums onto gritty and fuzzy tape then into classy EQ.



Sampler: Clear, spacious layout with all the controls you need to mash up and mix.

presets (Instrument Rack). 'Racking' an instrument retains all the Midi information that you set for it; you can even go as far as to map different instruments (VST included) in the same rack to particular parts of a Midi controller. (By way of example, you could map a Pro 53 to one octave, and Live's 'Impulse' drum machine to another.) Loading your favourite custom 'racks' across multiple projects is a breeze. Racks can be loaded in groups when a project is opened and will remain unallocated to any audio channel, giving you the flexibility to assign any part of a rack or group to any channel, any number of times; all with the familiar drag-and-drop manoeuvre.

Midi can also now be mapped in a multi-target fashion – a much-requested feature that has finally been implemented in Live 6. What this means is that it's now possible to have multiple knobs/switches/faders, etc mapped to a single Midi button, knob or fader on your Midi controller. What's more, Ableton has already mapped many of the more popular Midi controllers for you – loading up a mapping preset can save you hours of manual configuration. Panning, fading, filtering and delaying at the turn of a single knob is thus well within Live 6's capacity, and having this innate ability to command several actions with the touch of a single Midi controller dial is downright spooky.

Group Instruments and improved Midi mapping are excellent additions, especially for those performing live with the program, as it's now easier than ever to load a 'go to' rack of plug-ins and instruments in real-time that assigns itself to your Midi controller regardless of how you've configured it. Simultaneously, the effects are loaded and remain on call ready for you to allocate them across your project as you see fit.

Live 6 also now includes some very cool project management tools that allow you to pack audio clips, video clips, racks, effect presets, and composition settings into a totally self-contained folder, which Live can then automatically compress for easy transfer between computers (great for collaborating online) or simple and efficient backup and/or archiving purposes. This is very handy when complex combinations of custom effects tweaks, Midi parts, several audio clips, and now video clips all comprise a single project (which is more often than not).

NEW TOYS

As I was catching my breath and ready to say, 'Live, what else you got for me?'; I collided into a few new plug-ins which caused me to lose about four hours to some serious tinkering... I love limbo.

Sampler – the big brother of Live's old 'Simpler' instrument – packs plenty of key mapping features, and

the general run of filters (three LFO, five Multimode), effectors and mashers are all present and quite straight forward. Sampler reads the usual run of formats, including Akai, EXS, Giga, Kontakt and Soundfont. The line up of instruments included with the boxed version of Live 6 (Essential Instrument Collection) comprise gigabytes of high-quality multi-sampled pianos, keys, strings, brass, woodwind, guitars, mallets and voices – worth the price of the upgrade alone.

EQ Eight is a fantastic eight-band EQ, which replaces the old EQ Four. Ableton call it a 'studio' sounding EQ – whatever that might mean. Regardless, EQ Eight sounds great.

Dynamic Tube is a vacuum tube compressor allowing for classic vacuum grit, 'warmth' (dangerous word) and distortion. The Dynamic Tube has a typical 'would-be valve' bite to it, often heard with most software emulators; but the compressor does a solid job and pushing the compressor hard over some synth lead lines yielded some 'phatt' [another dangerous word – Ed.] results.

Note Length is a very interesting Midi quantiser/arpeggiator. Incoming Midi notes can be quantised to any length as they're being recorded into Live and varying Midi notes and/or phrases can be generated based on the Midi input received. This also allows for more 'complex' Midi data to be entered into Live to emulate real-world piano sustain and release behaviour. On this front Note Length seemed a little simplistic, but as a creative Midi arpeggiator it was quite fun and clever.

TRUE GRIT

One of the best things about Live is that Ableton has remained true to its original design. A great feature set has been added without compromising ease of use or more importantly, stability. Everything is still as it was in earlier versions (including the minimal 2D graphics), however, the increased functionality is there for those who demand it. The 'crunchiness' of Live's time stretching is still present and the internal audio engine that processes the sounds appears to be a little louder than in version 5, but otherwise very much the same (a great thing for those partial to the grittiness of Live's low frequency processing and 'colouring'). Every upgrade seems full of up-sides and potential uses for Live become broadened with each release. For less than \$1000 you can get your hands on a very complete piece of software that allows you to compose audio for video, edit, record, perform, loop, mash, bash and collaborate. For those purchasing the boxed version of Live 6, a suite of very high quality instruments comes included for use with Sampler as well; more than enough 'gear' to keep you busy for months. ■



NEED TO KNOW

Price

\$949

Upgrade from 5 to 6: \$349

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Pros

Video editing functionality now provided.
Perform and compose using the same application.
Ease of use retained.
Bundled Instrument Collection for Sampler.

Cons

Currently only supports QuickTime video.

Summary

Another strong version update from Ableton. Version 6 strengthens Live's one-stop-shop credentials without compromising ease of use or performance.