

# Propellerhead Reason V3.0

Derek Johnson discovers several good reasons to applaud V3.0.

Take a look back through your collection of Audio-Technology mags – you *know* you hoard them(!) – and in Issue 13 you'll spot a review of one of the world's favourite virtual studio software programs – Propellerhead's Reason.

You've read the headline to this review, so it's obvious that we'll be examining V3.0 of this fabulous package. But a lot of water's passed under the bridge since that first review, and we'd do well to have a little recap to start us off. The Swedish sorcerers have already taken the software through a couple of version upgrades, adding new devices and facilities before we even get to the *new* new stuff. So let's recap.

## Time Travel

Anyone who keeps themselves abreast of music software can hardly be unfamiliar with Reason: its impact was immediate on its first release, and the software has grown in stature ever since. The

accessed by flipping the rack round to show jack socket-laden rear panels for installed devices. All this patching is achieved with a mouse – I know, it shouldn't work, but it does... and brilliantly. Throw in a pretty capable linear sequencer and comprehensive Midi remote control (not to mention inter-device modulation via the aforementioned patch cables) and you've got nearly everything you need to massage basic two-bar loops into full blown works of art.

In other words, when released, Reason was everything the modern electronic music studio, with an eye to history, could want. Only two things were (and still are) missing: audio input and Midi output. It's not possible to route audio into the software, and note and performance data can't be transmitted from the software to other soft or hard instruments. The solution to the audio input issue is to host Reason in compatible audio software using Propellerhead's ReWire protocol (this covers all the major DAW choices), and to create your sample externally. Meanwhile, the only way a Reason performance can trigger other devices is if a song is converted into a Midi file and loaded into a different sequencer entirely.

Central to Reason's rack is the ReMix 14-channel mixer: stereo inputs, four aux sends, two-band EQ, standard controls and expandability are core features. The original Reason effects complement consisted of eight 'half rack' processors that ranged from average to pretty good (especially for the money and CPU overhead): basic delay, reverb, chorus, flanging, compression, distortion and EQ are amongst the batch.

Now to the stuff that set Reason apart when it was released: SubTractor is the virtual analogue synth of choice for my studio, with two oscillators, two filters, two LFOs, three EGs and more internal and external modulation options, via rear panel jacks, that subvert the fixed front panel signal path. Samples can be brought into the game via the NN19 sample player (great for multi-samples) which features a post-sample signal path that's rather SubTractor-like; and Dr:Rex, which plays transposable and tempo-matchable REX loops produced by Propellerhead's ReCycle software.

Beatbox fans can import all their favourite percussion samples into the pattern-based ReDrum, 10 at a time. The vibe is very Roland TR-Series, with bells on. More pattern composition comes courtesy of the Matrix sequencer, up to 32 steps at a variety of resolutions, and linkable to sound makers in the rack. It works as a monophonic device, of course, but is a great composition tool.



framework is rather elegant: your Mac or PC is provided with an on-screen representation of a studio rack which you can populate with virtual mixers, effects, synths, drum machines, sample players and pattern sequencers to the limit of your CPU.

These devices are then interconnected, both in terms of audio and control 'signals', by virtual patch cables,

## The Next Step

V2.0 and V2.5 of Reason took things to another level. Synth-wise, it added the magnificent Malström 'grainable' synth. A fixed collection of specially analysed sampled waveforms provide the source audio for this module. Played back, the waveforms are read like a wavetable but feel rather 'granular' in their sonic output. The ability to focus in on single cycles of a waveform provides far more sonic raw material than the basic waveforms might indicate. The approach to modulation and filtering is also different here, and Malström can function as a processor since it's the only playback device on board that has audio inputs (albeit not external audio inputs).

Enhanced sample handling hit the scene via the NNXT advanced sampler – a super device that offers all the sample layering, key splitting or velocity splitting that you could want. The signal patch goes much further than any other device, synth or sampler, too. Every sample, if you wish, can have its own set of synth parameters, including comprehensive analogue-style signal path and sample playback offset parameters (pan, tuning, level and so on). A nod to the wide world of sample libraries is evident thanks to the free (to registered users) ReLoad application: it converts Akai's S-Series CDs into something NNXT can load.

Effects in v2.x were not left alone either. The RV7000 advanced reverb made users the envy of their mates – it's a Reason-only device and outperforms the majority of processors on the market. RV7000 effects range from big and small spaces (all customisable with the help of an excellent display), to funky and weird delay options. And make your guitar samples beg for mercy with Scream 4 distortion – if anything in Reason's rack begs for an audio input it's this device. Start with an amp and speaker simulation, add feedback and analogue tape effects, and move even further. Subtlety can also be extracted from Scream 4, making it a bit of a mastering 'secret weapon'. Finally, go all Mr Blue Sky with the BV512 vocoder/filter bank; an audio input would be really welcome here too, but a flexible approach to the carrier/modulator inputs means that any audio produced by the Reason rack can take on either role. The filter bank option is also worth exploring: surgically slice out frequency ranges for serious sonic control. V2.5 also introduced the Spider Audio and CV merger/splitter devices, which added plenty of creative potential to an already jumping rack.

## Modern Times – V3.0

That's the potted history of Reason thus far, and now V3.0 is here. The enhancements may not be what many users will be expecting or hoping for – given that there are no new sound generators and audio input is still the stuff of dreams – but V3.0 marks a welcome move forward, nonetheless.

The most visible (and potentially most powerful) V3.0 addition is the Combinator; it's a 'utility' that allows any other Reason device to be linked, layered and in other ways combined as a stand-alone patch – a Combi. It's like a workstation synth of sorts, but limited only by what your computer can handle. In previous versions you could achieve similar results manually, but Combinator does it all for you without the faffing about. As a performance or serious sound design tool, Combinator moves Reason into a completely different class of musical environment.

And when I say any device can be integrated, I mean it. Not just synths and sample players can be combined, but effects, ReDrums and Matrix pattern sequencers can become part of the mix. Just play, and analyse, a few of the more left-field preset Combis to get a feel for the textural, performance and 'one-finger track' potential on offer. Combinator is equipped with audio ins as well as outs, so a Combi could just as easily be a chain of effects only, giving Reason proper multi-effects processing capabilities.

The Combinator device can potentially be the biggest in the rack, and in fact is a mini rack in its own right, and expands to show all the devices combined therein. Luckily, this part of the window can be folded away and tucked out of sight. Another large window can also be folded away – the Programmer. Here, you keep track of your Combi devices, and arrange key and velocity ranges for the sound generators. It's also possible to make modulation assignments to the Combinator's global \* knobs and buttons.



The new M-Class suite of mastering processors.

### Mmm, M-Class

For those of you who've wished you could apply some mastering processing-based sheen to your mixes before departing Reason, Propellerhead has the answer. Four new effects – collectively known as the M-Class suite – have arrived to do the job properly for you.

I'm one of those who has attempted to push the existing effects as far as possible to get mixes nice and hyped, but I'm very glad I don't have to any more. For example, the new M-Class Compressor and Equaliser are as much in advance of their half-rack forebears as Scream 4 and RV7000 are of the original distortion and reverb effects. Both are as well specified as many mid-range third-party products; the compressor benefits from a soft-knee option, plenty of gain and decent enveloping. The four-band (plus low cut) EQ has a massive graphic display that provides ample visual feedback of the EQ process, and has individually switchable bands (two shelving and two parametric).

I was surprised at the inclusion of the M-Class Stereo Imager, but I guess this means I wasn't the only one playing with stereo width via delays and other effects: it offers 'mono' to 'wide' control over high and low bands, plus crossover. The final new entry, M-Class Maximizer, will ensure that no-one will ever again think that Reason's output isn't loud enough: it's a top notch, look-ahead, limiter with brick-wall capabilities.

And M-Class processors are such a sure fit for a Combinator effects patch that Propellerhead has already provided a special M-Class version of the device, loaded with one of each and supplied with its own patch library.

### Best of the Rest

There's just one other new device to talk about, with the remaining enhancements being mainly operational. The MicroMix stereo six-channel line mixer works equally well as a low-impact audio merging tool in the main rack or Combinator, with just enough features: level, pan, solo, mute, one aux send and scribble strip per channel.

As for the new operational novelties, they include an

enhanced patch browsing system that offers pre-load audition of all patches, not just samples and REX files. It's even possible to audition effect patches for those advanced devices with patch saving options.

### Linking Controllers

Reason has always been controller-friendly – offering a straightforward method of linking an external controller's knobs, sliders and buttons to on-screen parameters. V3.0, however, really gives this idea a shake with the new Remote protocol. Remote is a built-in support mechanism for many third-party controllers with ready-to-go controller-to-parameter mapping. Midi preferences have been modified to reflect this situation. When selecting a controller, Reason can now offer feedback to controllers that need it (such as those with motorised faders). You might suggest that this facility implies some sort of Midi output when none has been previously offered. Fair point. But it's worth noting that apart from this controller support, Midi output remains resolutely off the menu.

One element that hasn't been beefed up much is the linear sequencer, though it benefits from the new ability to record automation on more than one track. It also now has a tidier track list, with proper mute and solo buttons, and modified Midi input and record ready icons. There are no apparent additions to the ReFill collection either, though it has been very much expanded, most noticeably with the extra Combinator patches.

More subtle changes include the phasing out of support for older Mac and PC operating systems. Traditionally the rule of thumb with Reason is: 'fast CPU, loads of RAM'. Predictably, V3.0 is far more voracious with the processing power than earlier versions, and you'd be well advised to at least ensure your system has as much RAM as you can afford if you'd like to really exploit the layering facilities of Combinator, the power of the RS7000, etc.

### Bottom Line

If you use Reason, you've doubtlessly bought the update already. If you're still shopping, you won't find a better virtual studio anywhere. If you have a hit list of features, you may be disappointed by the lack of audio recording or input, but the software links so well with many popular and budget packages that this shouldn't deter you. Reason could easily be the best workstation synth you never owned, nestled in the warm innards of your Mac or PC.

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### Price

• \$ 749