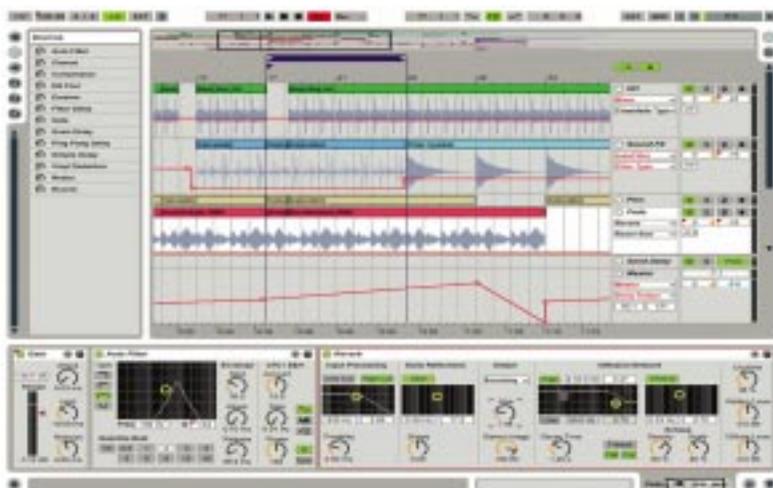


Ableton Live 2

It's a music production program that has earned a reputation as something of a specialist DJ's tool. **GEORGE SHILLING** says there is more to Live than that, as it can crossover quite comfortably.



ABLETON LIVE IS A UNIQUE piece of software that has matured with the latest version into a fully-fledged music production tool. The emphasis is on its ability to manipulate loops. It is a great way to work with pre-existing samples that have already been trimmed to a set length, as the program's Warp feature will incorporate such samples into the current track's tempo by time-stretching, very often without the user having to do anything other than drag the sample into the main arrange window using the file browser.

However, it is also possible to record in a conventional linear way, or to incorporate odd-length samples and make sense of them quickly. The screen layout is excellent, with no floating windows to clutter things. Individual display components can easily be 'folded' out of view, and there is a full-screen mode to maximise visibility. The program looks virtually identical in versions for Mac OS9, OSX and Windows 98/2000/XP due to its own unique buttons, symbols and icons, which means little time is needed for familiarisation. Most functions are very logical and easily learned.

The largest window can be toggled between an Arrangement view and a Session view, the former much like the main edit/arrange screen in Pro Tools or Logic. The Session view includes comprehensive mixer controls but also exists to offer a novel method of arranging or jamming with 'Clips'. Clips are derived from recorded audio or samples (which are left intact), and the Session page uses a grid system where vertical strips are channels or tracks, and clips on the same horizontal line in a particular combination might represent, for example, the chorus or middle eight section of the arrangement, which is represented in a scrolling micro-display at the top.

Usually the master section on the right represents the normal song arrangement from top to bottom, with keyboard shortcuts for each line. You can then improvise by turning on and off individual parts or skipping to a different line. When doing any of those things, Live will 'wait' until the next division set in the

Quantize parameter before changing, so that everything stays in time. Upon departing from the arrangement, a 'return to arrangement' button lights up in pink, and you can click to get back to the normal arrangement.

This is a great live DJ-style tool, and also inspires arrangement manipulation in the studio. The area below the Arrange window displays Clip settings and a graphic of the sample it is derived from when in the Arrange window. The sample graphic allows setting of points during the loop for variable warping to enable groove manipulation as well as simple stretching.

In the Session window this lower area is used to display effects controls. There is an excellent selection of internal effects, including a good filter and a great bit-reduction plug-in called Redux. It is also possible to specify a folder containing VST plug-ins that appear with all their parameter controls available but without their original graphics. Live can record and automate all moves, mutes, manipulations, etc. It is also possible to 'Render' the results of all the fun as an audio file.

Functions can also be MIDI-mapped, and learning the program is fairly easy, helped by the Information window, which can be displayed on the bottom left corner, with full descriptions of functions when the mouse is hovered over any feature. The other main area on the screen at the top left is used for lists, as a file browser for samples, saved arrangements and sets, or for effects lists.

The Warp function time-stretches audio to fit tempos or even just individual beats to make them fit the current groove. There are four excellent algorithms for different types of material. As well as the Recycle-style manipulations using the Warpmaker, the Clip window sets the loop parameters. Changing Clips' lengths in the Arrange window easily sets how long they will loop, but down in the Clip window you use the sample display and Loop parameters to set the loop. And the main tempo can be dynamically changed over quite a wide range and everything stays in time and doesn't glitch.

There is also another killer DJ-style feature – the

Crossfader. This allows assignment of tracks to A or B buses for level control and provides a DJ mixer style crossfader enabling creative fading between two arrangement selections.

You might assume Live is a tool only for dance music, but I found a good description of its use when working in unusual time signatures such as 5/4 in a link from the ableton.com website. And I can't dance to that (*That's not what I've heard. Ed*).

The whole concept of Live revolves around improvising arrangements, but it is also possible to record audio much like any other DAW program, then manipulate it spontaneously. Professional features such as sophisticated latency compensation tools and ReWire support have been included.

Within a few hours the basics can be mastered, and the excellent graphical design keeps the look very clean despite the large amount of information presented to the user. It's fun in the studio, and, as having a laptop onstage becomes more common, software like this provides a more spontaneous form of entertainment than miming along to a DAT ever did. ■

PROS Unique way of manipulating loops; professional features; excellent graphical design.

CONS Another new system and set of shortcuts/functions to learn!

EXTRAS Ableton and online sound resource PowerFX have bundled together LIVE 2 with three (New World, Funk Master, and Extreme Rock Funk Rage) PowerFX Sample CDs for €449.



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