

Audio Ease Altiverb

Not so long ago, the concept of a sampling reverb was about as farfetched as you could get in audio. When it did eventually arrive it remained the preserve of a lucky few. **GEORGE SHILLING** retires to his sampled basement to tell you that it is now within reach of all.

THE SONY DRE S777 sampling reverb unit has been available for several years, but this type of technology has become accessible to many more studio people thanks to Dutch company Audio Ease. While the Sony is the price of a small car, Altiverb costs about half the price of a CD-ROM of sampled spaces for the Sony, and it includes its own sampling system enabling you to create Impulse Responses (IRs) very easily.

I was very impressed when I first heard Altiverb demonstrated a couple of years ago but at that time it was only available as a MAS plug-in to interface with MOTU's Digital Performer. Since then it has been developed additionally for Pro Tools HTDM and RTAS, and VST for Logic, Cubase and Nuendo. However, Altiverb will only work on Macintosh G4-based systems, as it uses the Altivec processor that exists in G4s. I tried the RTAS version with Pro Tools LE 5.2.1 on a dual processor 1.25GHz PowerMac.

The package consists of a 64-page booklet and the CD. Installation of the software was fiddly, involving separate installations of the reverb program and the Impulse Response (IR) preprocessor and the included Impulse Responses (IRs). Authorisation involves a challenge and response system, requiring the user to send and receive strings of digits across the Internet to Audio Ease.

Only a small selection of IRs is included; you have to download around 100Mb from the website to collect the set. Organising these into folders takes some thought. Altiverb will allow files to be organised within one layer of folders for keeping together multiple IRs from a particular location, but it will not 'see' any IRs stored in subfolders of these, preventing the organising of, say, your own IRs separately from those downloaded.

Inserting Altiverb on a channel brings up the Altiverb window with the controls and a small picture viewing window. Opening presets involves selecting them from a scroll-down list, with the settings appearing under alphabetically ordered headings of the folders that contain them.

The main control is a large virtual knob for reverb time. Adjusting this will reduce decay time of the sampled space, by applying an exponentially decaying envelope to the response. For me it generally seemed to take around 20s for the program to recalculate when moving the knob – the pointer flashes red/green until done. However, changes happen smoothly and without artefacts of any kind.

Under the knob, the time is displayed as a percentage of the full IR time. Two modes are available depending on your particular setup and needs. 'Lo latency, high processor load' provides near-instant (about 12ms later) reverberation. The other mode, 'high latency, low processor load' seems to use only about half the processor power, but results in a delay of around 0.7s to the reverb. It is not often that you require 700ms predelay, so in this instance you can record the reverb back to the computer and shift the files earlier, or perhaps delay the dry audio monitoring separately from the undelayed reverb send.

I managed to have ten mono to stereo instances running in high latency mode, and five in low latency

mode, but this was on a session set up with only those respective numbers of mono aux inputs to test this.

The first two smaller 'knobs' control wet and dry levels and there is also a button to mute direct sound. The other small knob sets Predelay, which ranges from -200ms to +200ms. Negative values delay the dry sound rather than the delay, merging the signal quite nicely with its reverb in some situations. However, I generally used Altiverb on an aux input sourced from a bus send. With this RTAS version you can select 'mono to mono', 'mono to stereo' or 'stereo mix to stereo' modes, although with other versions four-channel (quadraphonic) output is possible from either mono or stereo input.

The other area is for pictures that come with the supplied IRs and include plans of how the spaces were miked, photos of the exteriors and interiors of the building, along with information about the sampling, including which microphones, preamps and converters were used. These can all be opened in a picture viewing window to see the full size image. However, I couldn't adjust Altiverb or access Pro Tools while the window was open, although playback continued happily.

A number of the supplied and available IRs feature churches, cathedrals and concert halls. Dialling up these is a revelation. Such warmth, smoothness and sense of real space will be unfamiliar to engineers who regularly use digital reverb or even plates and springs. And there are some very convincing IRs of plates and springs available too. However, some of the most impressive IRs are the ones of small spaces, where you can really believe you are in a classroom, or in the basement of a former brothel in one instance (*I've stayed in hotels like that too. Ed*).

And IRs do not have to be reverbs. Others include vehicle interiors, and IRs taken from small radio speakers – Altiverb is a fantastic speaker simulator. Of course, there are IRs taken from other digital reverbs. One set includes settings from a Midiverb II, and these are pretty convincing clones. With more sophisticated digital reverbs, you will lack the fine control of all the settings available with, say, a high-end Lexicon unit, but I rarely missed this.

Altiverb is undoubtedly the most stunning 'artificial' reverb I have ever heard, and (at US\$795) for the price of a budget hardware unit. ■



Creating your own IRs

Impulse creation is made simple by the inclusion of the necessary tools on the CD. There are three possible methods of capture provided: a shotgun, a full frequency sweep, or a single digital pulse. The first two methods are the most commonly used. When sampling large rooms you will need reproduction equipment, not to mention good quality microphones and the rest. But sampling from other devices is far easier, simply by sending the sweep and recording the results.

Files have to be named to follow a certain



convention, then run through the preprocessor application, which will even automatically chop the recordings up and get rid of any noise at the end. I sampled my Orban Spring reverb and was sending signals to its very convincing clone within minutes. All that was missing was the rattle when I wobbled the monitor.

PROS

Best reverb ever!; cheap; easy to use; sampling software is straightforward; compatible with all common plug-in systems.

CONS

Fiddly installation; high processor load; few IRs included on CD.

Contact

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