DigiDesign Pro Tools HD 7

While it hasn't enjoyed quite as much fanfare as some of the earlier revisions, PT7 still delivers some significant progress in a number of key areas. GEORGE SHILLING says it's all important stuff even though someone's rearranged his CD collection.

THIS UPGRADE REPRESENTS an 'evolutionary leap' according to Digidesign, which perhaps means that it should work pretty much the same, only better... Well, following the new splash screen and logo icons, things certainly look entirely familiar to 6.x users. The screen layout and shortcuts remain unchanged. But like when your partner takes it upon themselves to tidy your messy pile of CDs, Digidesign has undertaken a radical revamp of the top-screen menu structures, leading to a far more logical grouping of items with sub-menus where appropriate. And just like the partner scenario, this is a big source of irritation for users familiar with the original menu item positions, which hadn't previously moved for a long time. For example, Delete Tracks was previously on the File menu, but now resides under the new Track heading. Strip Silence moves to the Edit menu, while Beat Detective moves to the Event menu. So it's exactly like those CDs that were lying around — you knew where each was, roughly, even though they were untidy. And if you were going to tidy them up, you'd have catalogued them alphabetically by ARTIST! You'll find them again of course, with a bit of rooting around… *(Glad you're taking it so very well. Ed)*.

Perhaps mirroring Logic 7's much improved audio editing, PT7's greatest improvement is arguably in the MIDI editing department, albeit mostly to cover functions found on dedicated MIDI sequencing software for decades. All MIDI editing dialogues seem to have been enhanced with extra parameters, randomise functions, and so on. Furthermore, playback parameters can now be specified for Quantize, Duration, Delay, Velocity and Transpose for MIDI Regions or Tracks, with the option to make these permanent by writing them to the original. Sure, all these things are mostly the stuff you used to do on Atari Cubase or Notator *(Some people still do. Ed)*, but it is certainly possible the enhan00ced MIDI operation will lure away one or two prospective Logic customers, even without all the bundled instruments.

The cumbersome method of instantiating virtual instruments on audio channels then creating a controlling MIDI track is no longer necessary with the introduction of Instrument tracks, much like those found in Logic. These add an additional display section on the channel for the necessary extra parameters, and this is certainly a more elegant working method, although it doesn't preclude the old-fashioned way of doing things. Apart from the menu changes, there is little to stop 6.x users from immediately using PT7 in a familiar way.

For general editing a fairly major new feature is Region Grouping, this can be done across tracks to include MIDI and audio regions. Groups can even be nested, and Multitrack Region Groups create nested groups by track before grouping across tracks, this is useful when working with edited drum tracks. Another use for Region Groups is when you've created a pattern on Tick-based tracks with, say, short percussion samples –- grouping allows overall editing and processing of the parts.

REX and ACID formats now claim support, but importing REX files had me puzzled at first as using the Import commands simply converted them to the session's file format. Dragging a mono Recycle file from the desktop had the desired effect, changing the loop's length to match the session tempo, and creating a Region Group of the individual files. Even the TC/E tool worked to change the duration of the loop — fab! However, although MIDI and audio files can also now be dragged in, I couldn't seem to drag stereo Recycle files.

For mixing, things are improved in a number of areas. RTAS plug-ins can make full and proper use of dual-processor Macs, with even more efficient processing possibilities for plug-in developers who code for the new RTAS environment. However, Digidesign admits that some plug-ins presently perform worse with single processor Macs and Windows machines running LE. RTAS plug-ins can now be inserted on Aux Inputs and Master Faders, which is useful. There are now a possible 10 sends per channel and these can now be copied or moved using drag and drop, similarly to inserts. I still wish they could be instantiated on-the-fly (they cannot), and there are still only five possible inserts per channel, which is not disastrous but certainly inferior to some competing DAWs. Automation data can thankfully now be cut, copied and pasted using the additional Special menu functions.

All the additional features have led to the inevitable change in the session save format — remarkably this is the first change since version 5.1. Saving to older formats is easily achieved using the 'Save Copy In…' dialogue, even all the way back to version 3.2.

Pro Tools is possibly the closest DAW to an industry standard for music production and is popular with the post fraternity. This major re-tweak mostly leaves the familiar stuff we know and love well alone. The most obvious improvements are the MIDI and compositional features to lure away Logic users, while new tool tips make the interface even friendlier for new users. But for music and post, mixing and editing is also significantly improved. The new Separate At Transients (or on Grid) feature is fantastic, and will certainly save time. But although you can automatically create fades, I'd still love Logic's snap to waveforms' zero crossing feature for editing seamlessly, or why not even improve on that and apply the principle to punch-ins?

Other improvements include claimed additional software optimisations for faster and more powerful operation — this is more difficult to assess without having identical 'before and after' systems side-by-side, but most program functions seem pretty snappy. So although visually things haven't changed immensely, it seems that under the bonnet this is a bigger change than the update from 5 to 6, even though that went from OS9 to OSX. And that is probably why, irritatingly, HTDM has been abolished, and Logic 7.1.1's ESB/DAE operation does not presently work with PTHD7 installed. But on balance, it's all very impressive. And at the end of the list of improvements comes news that the software now supports the traditional Chinese language — now there's a sign of the times. ■

PROS Essentially familiar operation; upgrade price nominal; vastly improved MIDI/Compositional functions; more efficient native processing; LE and M-Powered users also get most of the improvements.

CONS Mousers will initially curse the re-jigged menus; HTDM plug-ins obsolete; some other plug-ins need updating; Logic ESB/DAE incompatible.

EXTRAS MIDI improvements: Instrument Tracks; real-time MIDI processing; mirrored

MIDI editing mode; Remove Duplicate Notes; sample-based MIDI tracks; enhanced Groove Quantization features; Zoom Toggle between two user-defined settings; enhanced functions for Select/Split Notes, Change Duration and Transpose windows.

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