Presonus Studio One Pro

GEORGE SHILLING bravely switches from the big boys to try out Presonus' first foray into complete music creation and production software, a streamlined and loveable affair.

*P*resonus, the hardware manufacturer, has moved into software with this brand new DAW for Mac or PC. It was born from the company's dissatisfaction with the established offerings it was bundling with its hardware; it felt many long-established DAWs had become bloated with features rarely used by customers, and Presonus was probably also fed up with technical support calls relating to third-party product. In order to streamline the recording experience, Presonus teamed up with developers who had previously been involved in the development of Nuendo, and, while developing the Capture software to partner with its StudioLive console, it also hatched Studio One. The cheaper 'Artist' version will be bundled or sold for UK£173.04 (+ VAT); upgrading to 'Pro' costs the same amount, or to purchase from scratch is £303.48 (+ VAT).

Following installation of my early review copy, the included Sound Sets didn't end up on my hard drive — possibly my fault, but I soon worked out how to copy them and make Studio One recognise them in its browser. Also bundled are NI's Guitar Rig and Kore Player, with a great library of sounds, and ToonTrack EZLite. However, as well as a large collection of WAV loops in various styles, Studio One includes four useful virtual instruments of its own, an MPC-style drum sampler, a monosynth, sample and synth keyboard, and a sampler. These are perhaps not as refined or complex as offerings from Apple or Avid, but are great for inspiration and instant gratification.

On launch, the software runs through a number of routines, detecting and configuring hardware, finding ReWire applications; scanning AU, VST2, and VST3 plug-ins, etc. However, rather than launching straight into an arrange page, a novel start page is loaded, which enables access to Projects and Songs on your computer, tutorial videos, help, support and updates, external device configuration, and a 'News Feed' with links to relevant web pages. Songs are akin to normal Session files, with a familiar-looking arrange/edit page, while Projects comprise the mastering section of the program. The overall appearance is rather dark, grey and foreboding — more akin to Logic than, say, Propellerheads' shiny, happy, colourful gaudiness.

The audio engine has been designed from scratch and features 64-bit double-precision floating-point architecture, which equals or betters any rival product. The application happily flips to 32-bit operation as necessary when using 32-bit plug-ins. Real-time time-stretching and pitch-shifting is standard; the three algorithms sound great, and operation is simple. Multiple processors are fully used, and everything feels very snappy.

Templates are provided that relate to Presonus hardware, but the software works perfectly happily with other audio hardware. The main page of a Song is broadly similar in layout and appearance to Logic — indeed, a number of windows, features and functions apparently take the best of their rivals' ideas and make them just slightly more user friendly and logical. For example, the I-O setup is broadly similar to Pro Tools with its matrix, but in this window's Input setup page there are little meters to see when an

assigned input is receiving audio — great for confirming the correct configuration. In the Song page, configurable mixer and editor windows pop up from the bottom (sample editor for audio and piano roll for MIDI), and can be detached and dragged to a second monitor, so the browser for sounds, plug-ins, and instruments appears on the right as necessary.

The Browser window has series of buttons for displaying effect plug-ins, virtual instruments, sounds, files and Pool, which draws together the audio used in the current song, with mini waveforms shown. Another row of buttons rationalises the way the list is viewed, and information on the selected object is shown at the bottom. Here there are no unfathomable icons, merely text-labels. Dragging and dropping works intuitively, and just about every function seemed obvious, although perhaps that was, in some measure, thanks to my familiarity with other DAW software.

On launch, my HD hardware was found automatically. If you own a Presonus FireStudio interface then the onboard cue mixer can be controlled from within Studio One for setting up zero-latency mixes. The I-O setup window is easily accessed directly from the Console channels' Input and Output buttons. I easily added a Mackie Control (directly addressing a port on the MIDI interface and bypassing AudioMIDI Setup). Adding a MIDI keyboard is similarly straightforward. MIDI Learn capabilities enable easy control of any plug-in parameter from any control surface or a knob on a keyboard; a Global mode enables plug-in parameters to be changed even when the window has been closed. This works with VST or AU plug-ins, as well as the included set of Presonus effects, and automation is comprehensive. Twenty five 64-bit effects are included, and appear in a browser list along with the third-party plugs. Any can be dragged from here into a signal path. Additionally, the native Pipeline plug-in (in Mono and Stereo variants) enables integration of outboard

hardware into the path, with trims, Phase Invert, and even a Wet/Dry parameter. Furthermore, Offset enables positive or negative delay values in samples, to compensate for latency.

Editing audio and MIDI in the main and editor windows is achieved easily using intuitive tools, and a handy optional crosshair cursor is superimposed to make locating exact spots easy. Keyboard shortcuts are comprehensive, and there are alternative setups that mirror key commands found in Logic, Pro Tools, and Cubase. One unique feature is the handy Trash Bin. As well as unlimited Undo steps, everything you ditch at any stage ends up here, enabling Undo in a non-sequential manner, or grabbing odd rejected ideas at any later stage.

Projects comprise collections of Songs, where albums or EPs are brought together; as Studio One includes an intelligent management system along with full mastering capabilities. Tweaking a Song that is part of a Project results in the mastered album automatically updating to reflect the changed version if required. The Project window includes extremely comprehensive metering and spectrum analysis. Projects can be exported to WAV, AIFF, MP3 and Ogg Vorbis, and proper Red Book CDs can be generated.

Obviously my prior knowledge of other DAWs stood me in good stead for finding functions in Studio One, but operation seems about as logical and intuitive as could be imagined. Version 1.0.3 seemed completely stable, although I cannot claim to have been pushing its limits. But everything I wanted to do, I could do — with minimal fuss. The included PDF manual is clearly written.

At the time of writing, V1.5 was announced — indeed, it should be available by the time you read this, which almost entirely demolished my list of 'Cons' with a host of new features including video support, better drag-and-drop capabilities, customisable key-commands, plug-in improvements, and REX support, etc. There's still no notation editor, and I missed 'tab-to-transient', but I would not bet against this being implemented.

This is an excellent DAW that works in an ergonomic and logical way without treating the user like a child. It's highly recommended for newcomers to the art. And even a seasoned old git like me loved using it. ∎

PROS — Intuitive, comprehensive DAW; new code; ReWire/AU/VST support; promised V1.5 improvements look terrific.

CONS — Who is brave enough to switch from the big boys?

EXTRAS — Version 1.5 of Studio One is a free update that adds so many features and enhancements that the company decided to skip the previously planned version 1.1. Key additions include support for video playback and sync, the ability to draw your own automation waveforms, automation points that are locked to events, changing tempos within an event without slicing the event into separate events, and support for song and album art. A built-in SoundCloud client enables you to upload audio files from Studio One directly to the Web.