



Sonar V-Studio 700

After a time when the constituent parts of a digital production system became increasingly disparate and disconnected the mood has been returning to more integrated and single-brand solutions. **ROB JAMES** looks at a studio-in-a-box.

Wonderful and liberating though DAWs are, or at any rate can be, there has always been a problem — compatibility. First there is the obvious question of what PC (or Mac) will work best with your chosen DAW software at any point in time (and this is a shifting target) then there is the rest of the gubbins to consider, the hardware that turns PC and software into a complete audio and maybe video system. Of course, there are plenty of vendors vying for your custom when it comes to audio interfaces and control surfaces, but then, sooner or later, you are likely to find yourself in the middle of arguments as to whose fault it is when something doesn't work as it should.

Therefore there is a considerable attraction to buying a complete system from one vendor; there is just one butt to kick if something goes pear-shaped. Some while ago Cakewalk, author of the well regarded Sonar DAW family, became part of the Roland empire. Now billed as 'Cakewalk by Roland' a significant result of this alliance is the Sonar V Studio 700 which addresses the studio-in-a-box issue with very serious intent.

Not only do you get the full Producer version of Sonar V8 and the full version of the Rapture wavetable soft synth, but also the VS-700C dedicated control console and the VS-700R rackmount interface box. That isn't the end of the story though because

the 700R is also home to a full-blown Roland Fantom VS hardware synthesiser with expansion slot. This is not optional but an integral part of the system. So, for a non-musician, you could argue that this is adding to the not insignificant cost for no obvious benefit. However, although I have no pretensions to musicianship I still value hardware synthesis — muso or not I've been using synths for a very long time to produce 'doom tones', stings, effects and the odd attempt at 'music' for picture.

The manufacturer does not maintain a list of tested PCs but the requirements are not unduly onerous. Stick with an Intel-based box of recent vintage with a Core2Duo or Core2Quad, at least 2Gb of RAM, 7200RPM hard drives and a decent USB2 implementation and you shouldn't go far wrong. Sonar supports 32-bit Windows XP or Vista and 64-bit Vista only. I used an i7-based box with 6Gb of RAM running 64-bit Vista Ultimate. To be honest, despite the increased memory addressing capability of 64-bit Vista, there are still too many limitations in terms of plug-ins that have yet to be rewritten and other bits of hardware and software lacking in rewrites or drivers to make it truly worthwhile.

Installation from scratch is lengthy, due to the sheer quantity of goodies, but not unduly onerous. Roland has elected to use USB2 for the audio and control interface. I for one applaud this since I have had far fewer problems with USB2 than with FireWire. The downside is capacity. You won't get the 48 I-Os claimed by some FireWire interfaces but the VS-700R gives you a respectable total of 19 inputs and 24 outputs at 44.1kHz/48kHz, reducing to 15 and 20 respectively at 88.2kHz/96kHz, and further reduction at 192kHz; it's more than adequate for most purposes. While we're in the area, changing sampling rates is a bit of a faff. Although there is a nice friendly knob on the front marked Sample Rate the actual procedure is quite involved. First close Sonar, turn off the power to the rack unit and console then use the knob to select the required rate. This is followed by switching back on again, starting Sonar and ignoring any Audio Driver Error messages, then selecting the required rate within the application. I feel sure this could be simplified.

The 2u VS-700R rack unit looks smart in black and silver. The console end-cheeks, like the silver surround, are plastic rather than alloy despite the

On the surface The clear console surface is divided logically by function. Actual layout is somewhat unusual as are some of the controls. Three LCD screens in the mini upstand provide information about the controls beneath. The right-hand side is occupied by the red LED time display which also has USB, I-O indicator LEDs and the Timecode button that switches between SMPTE and bars and beats.

Each of the eight channel identical strips, arranged in two blocks of four, has a rotary encoder with a switch at the top followed by Mute, Solo Arm and Select buttons. The LED level meter has a mere five segments but is still extremely useful since it draws attention to things that need looking at on the much more comprehensive on-screen meters. Faders are 100mm throw touch-sensitive motorised devices. Not the nicest I've ever encountered but reasonably smooth and quiet in operation with adjustable touch-sense. To the left of the fader strips a column of buttons relate to the strips. Assign determines which parameter is controlled by the strip encoders. Functions available vary according to which Fader View mode is active — Track, Bus, Main or I-O control — selected on the bottom three buttons. Below Assign are so-called 'Rude' Mute, Solo and Arm buttons. These light whenever a strip has one of these functions selected, while pressing the button cancels the function globally. This is especially useful where channels with these functions selected may no longer be on the surface.

Next down are the automation buttons, Write/Off and Offset. Used with the Shift and Command modifier keys these give access to a range of other useful automation commands. Fader bank plus and minus buttons move the current view up or down in 8-fader blocks or one at a time when used with the Shift key. To the right of the eight

channel strips the Master Fader has global Flip and I-O Control buttons above it.

Since the surface falls into the 'assignable strip controls' category, at top left you get 12 rotary encoders with push switches arranged in four columns of three plus 10 buttons. Display determines which row's parameters are displayed on the LCD. The four 'On' EQ/Send buttons enable EQ or Sends for the column depending on whether the EQ button is currently active. EQ used with the Command modifier opens the EQ property page. ACT enables ACT mode for the window with focus. Page left and right step through the selected track's EQ Send or ACT parameters. Below the Channel Strip Control Section, five rows of four buttons comprise the Access section. It is here that Views can be opened and closed, focus can be shifted and utility functions invoked. The bottom row contains the modifier keys, Shift, Control, Alt and Command. The top 16 keys are assignable to user functions.

To the right of the faders the transport section has decent, internally illuminated transport keys and the jog/shuttle wheel, which also controls Zoom level and scroll. It can be used for editing and there are cursor keys around the periphery. Above you will find the Record/Edit section and to the right, the Project Section. Above these are the T-Bar and Joystick sections with LFE send pot and View button and finally, top right, the Audio output section with Phone 1 and 2 and Monitor level pots, a Mute button and two Sub buttons to route the Sub outputs to the headphones. On the front of the arm rest there are two headphone sockets with a volume pot and an Aux jack input with Normal/hi-Z switch for instruments and a gain pot. Around the back there is just the LCD contrast knob, on/off switch and two sockets for footswitches used, for example, to control Play and Record. Two further sockets connect the VS-700R or go direct to the PC in standalone mode.

countersunk hex bolts attaching them to the console. The console surface is a steel plate in familiar Roland blue and the whole air is that of a professional and well thought-out workspace and a cut above most other control surfaces. There are internally illuminated buttons that make you want to press them and the shaft encoders and other controls are equally sensuous, with the possible exception of the jog-wheel. It's not that it's bad, just that it could be better. Having been spoilt by perfectly weighted chunks of metal, this plastic number is OK but doesn't win any cigars. On the same basis, the faders are fine but not exceptional. The T-Bar, on the other

hand, is delicious. More commonly found on vision switchers/mixers the T-Bar is a much underestimated control in audio circles. Here it performs multiple duties as a front/rear fader, alpha adjustment for Sonar's X-ray window function or, by default, control of the first usable ACT (Active Controller Technology) parameter. There is another reason for its presence. The VS-700C can also be used in conjunction with an Edirol video editing system, such as the DV-7DL, whereupon audio channels 5-8 and the master fader, transport controls, including the jog/shuttle wheel, Record/Edit tool section and, of course, the T-Bar itself can be used to control

the editor. Alternatively, the VS-700C also supports V-Link over MIDI for audio video performance.

Software development has a little way to go. There are some inconsistencies in the console to Sonar interface. For example, some but not all of the Access Panel View buttons toggle the windows they relate to. Others require you to use the Close button and I could only close Audiosnap with the mouse. I may well be missing the way to do it from the console but it is still inconsistent.

In Sonar the Track and Console views use colour-coding to indicate which tracks and buses are currently controlled by the VS-700C. Dubbed WAMI (Where Am I?) this is neat and clever. When used in conjunction with the strip locking facility WAMI really helps to keep track of what is going on in complex situations. The Fantom is inserted just like any other VSTi, but with the huge bonus of very low CPU overhead.

The V-Studio 700 is largely successful in its aim to be a complete studio in a box. The converters are subjectively excellent and the ability to control analogue input gain and the compressors from the console is just the way it should be. The console is workmanlike in the best sense and I can easily envisage working with it on a daily basis. All this would count for nothing if the workstation software was not up to the job. Fortunately Sonar in version 8 has developed into a top flight DAW with plug-ins that stand comparison with the very best available. Building on this estimable Cakewalk Sonar software base the Roland elements are exactly what you would expect, i.e. good looking, robust and effective. A dedicated control surface is always going to be a better long-term proposition than a 'one size fits all'. The evidence is already clear to see and I have no doubt that, as user feedback rolls in, the synergy will increase still further. ■

Behind the scenes

It almost seems a shame to hide the VS-700R in a rack. The front panel is informative, with LED indicators for USB connection to the host PC, Console connection, MIDI In and OUT, and Digital Audio In and Out, Sync Status, Monitor, Monitor Sub and Main Output, Outputs 1-10 and 8-segment bargraphs for Inputs 1-8 and Aux. A big Power switch is on the far right. Around the back you will find a plethora of connections. First up is a dedicated socket for the Console control connection with IEC power inlet below. MIDI in and out are followed by the USB2 connector to the host PC. Digital 2 In and out optical ADAT format Toslink sockets are followed by Digital 1 AES-EBU XLRs and SPDIF phonos. Word clock in and out are BNCs.

Two rows of five jacks carry the ten outputs and a pair of XLRs deal with balanced Monitor Main with two jacks for Monitor Sub. Along the bottom eight mutually exclusive jacks and XLRs cater for the analogue inputs. There is a digitally controlled mic preamp and compressor for all eight channels. These are controlled directly from the surface or from Sonar. On the top surface a flap secured by two screws give access to the ARX Fantom synthesiser expansion board socket and a DIP switch used for configuration. You need to power up in a specific order. Computer first, then the console followed by the rack, finally the monitor speaker amp(s).

If the I-O capacity really is too limited for your needs, then no problem. You can simply connect a second VS-700R to double the ASIO I-O capacity and give you a second Fantom. The extra unit connects to the host PC (on the same USB controller or via a USB2 hub) with a BNC Word clock cable linking the two units.



PROS An over-used word but the V Studio 700 is unique; versatile in application; looks and feels professional.

CONS A few logical inconsistencies; changing sample rate is a pain; jog wheel could be better.

Contact

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