Steinberg Wavelab 6

It plays second fiddle to Steinberg's flagship Nuendo, yet Wavelab enjoys a strong reputation as a powerful and accessible audio editing and mastering suite. Uncovering a hot rodder's approach to DAW evolution, ROB JAMES comments on the latest nips and tucks.

WHEEL ARCH EXTENSIONS, go faster stripes, a loud exhaust and fluffy dice don't make a boring car go faster or handle any better. A stage two head (or these days a new chip) and some suspension and brake mods will do the trick and, if you've any sense, you'll leave it looking innocent… Many incremental releases of DAW software have a lot more in common with the former approach. Driven *(sic)* by the exigencies of marketing, manufacturers are under a lot of pressure to add features for the sake of it. So it comes as a nice surprise when an update arrives with a turbocharger bolted under the hood and a load of other genuinely useful stuff to improve the handling.

As our illustrious editor pointed out in the last issue, despite all the ingenious and difficult to implement features that have appeared in DAWs over the years, one highly desirable function has been unaccountably missed. I refer, of course, to convenient and transparent integration of external physical processors, in other words outboard. No matter how many plug-ins you have or how accurate the modelling becomes, there is no substitute for the real thing. The premium prices on original Neve modules, Fairchild compressors, etc. make the point better than I can.

Wavelab 6 includes an 'External Gear' plug-in that goes a long way towards remedying the deficiency. Using ASIO this can accommodate from 1 to 8 input and output channels. Wavelab automatically compensates for the ASIO driver latency and the external latency in render mode but you still have to set latency compensation for the external processor(s) manually for real-time auditioning.

Time stretch and pitch shift have been upgraded with the inclusion of Stephan Bernsee's DIRAC engine. This is very good but, since there is no such thing as a free lunch, rather slow. The original algorithms remain available if you are in a hurry. The almost obligatory pitch quantise processor function has also arrived for people who can't sing or play in tune. The Wavelab implementation isn't great. Sample rate conversion benefits from the inclusion of the Crystal Resampler plug-in.

Nicely mirroring the current debate about loudness, especially in relation to CDs, Wavelab has acquired a Loudness Normalizer and Bob Katz's K-System VU meter modes. Insert Silence also enables you to insert an ambience file, great for dialogue editing. The wave window and overview can be set to display the loudness envelope of the sound.

On the housekeeping front there is a new rename function that can automatically update all file references in other documents such as montages. Files clips and markers can be batch renamed. There is a long list of smaller but nonetheless useful changes that aid productivity and general usability.

One change with no obvious user benefits has a whiff of inevitability about it. Copy protection now comes courtesy of a USB dongle rather than the former occasional CD insertion. While I can appreciate the necessity for this it means one more dongle to lose and, in commercial environments, theft can be a problem.

The most spectacular innovation is the Spectrum Editor. Based on 'powerful linear-phase filters' with slopes tending to infinity, the Spectrum Editor is primarily aimed at restoration, although I have no doubt it has creative possibilities as well. It can be used in real time in the Master Section to enable a specific frequency range to receive different processing to the rest. Used in 'surgical processing' (offline) mode, the Spectrum Editor is a temporal and frequency domain editor. Putting that into English, once you've switched to Spectrum display mode, you can define a region in the 'normal', horizontal, time editing sense and also in the vertical, frequency dimension. Once defined, a region can be processed, i.e. gain cut or boosted, it can be filtered or it can be cut, copied and pasted as you would with an audio clip but with the additional frequency parameter. You can also copy a region exactly or copy the ambience. This is the equivalent of copying with dispersion applied (see below).

Apart from the usual Band-pass, Low-pass and High-pass filters, the Spectrum Editor has two further options, Blur Peaks and Dispersion. Blur Peaks analyses the region to find the frequencies with the highest peaks then reduces the level of these frequencies. Dispersion 'smears' dynamics and pitch while retaining the same average frequency spectrum. This is most useful at lower frequencies. If by now you are getting a strange feeling of *déja vu*, well I'm not surprised. The Spectrum Editor offers a lot of tweaks but, even if you stick with the defaults, the results are almost scary.

As regular readers will be aware I am something of a Wavelab aficionado. I've been evaluating and writing about DAWs for many years and spent a lot of time doing pretty much the same thing as a facility manager for some years before that. In any one year I

get to look at half a dozen or so new or heavily updated DAWs and that puts me in a rather privileged position. You can be pretty sure that anything I'm still using on a regular basis must have something special going for it. Principally it is this: I can return to Wavelab after weeks or months using other applications and produce a quick CD in ten minutes. If I need to do something more complex it doesn't take hours to remember how it's done and many of the built-in tools are world class. The Spectrum Editor is such a stunningly useful audio restoration tool for music and post that it could easily justify the UK£400 plus VAT asking price of the whole Wavelab package.

My only real gripe is the less than comprehensive video file handling and video functions in general. This is a shame since Wavelab would seem to be an obvious candidate for mastering audio for video. Perhaps this area is next on the list?

Phillippe Goutier and his team have done it again by adding immense value and genuinely useful features to an already excellent package. For existing users, upgrading from previous versions is a complete no-brainer and everyone else would be well advised to take a look. ■

PROS Builds on the firm foundations of previous versions; Spectrum Editor alone will sell it to many new users; still the quickest and one of the most comprehensive.

CONS Needs a fast machine to get the best out of some features; still no way to add AVIs complete with audio in one operation or replace audio in an AVI.

Contact