Book reviews

Simon Millward, *Fast Guide to Cubase VST*. PC Publishing, Tonbridge, UK. 1998, 352 pp. ISBN 1-870775057-0 (Paperback). RRP £19.95.

The very existence of this book is proof of something all users of music technology know: online manuals are almost no use at all. It must be satisfying for Steinberg and similar software companies to be able to despatch their manuals along with the application on CD-ROM and feel that they have done their job. But for the user to flick back and forth between Cubase and a .pdf browser onscreen is immensely laborious, especially when one is confronted with a dialogue box. So what's the solution? Have a dedicated 'reader' PC? Print out the manual? Most people turn instead to the flourishing market in user-friendly desktop guides, written by people like themselves, in language they can understand, and with a reasonable 'hit-rate' in terms of identifiably similar situations and requirements one is likely to encounter.

Fast Guide to Cubase VST is an agreeable, readable and informative example of this genre and I will be recommending it to my students. As an Apple Mac user, I was particularly keen to see if this book (which is aimed at the PC) discriminated against me, but no – all instructions have their Mac equivalents included. My only serious concern about the book is its physical construction: for it to lie open flat on the desk for long periods the spine must be broken, something which I am reluctant to do and which shortens the book's life.

The textual content is well written and clear, with helpful and well-placed illustrations and highlighted information boxes. To give an example: I used the book to prepare a class on the complicated M-Points procedure for synchronising audio with MIDI. I found the explanation both lucid and balanced, with just enough explanation to hint at the reasons why one has to perform certain actions without 'bogging you down' with useless information. I was able to distil the book still further for my handout, but only because I could demonstrate the process onscreen.

The book is, inevitably, weighted towards audio handling (the VST aspect, in fact). This is fair enough, but I would have welcomed a more detailed explanation of MIDI. MIDI mixing, for example, which continues to develop in recent versions of Cubase, is barely dealt with, and the sections on MIDI seem to lack the same sense of overall musicality that the audio chapters possess. There are also some omissions (again in the MIDI sections), for example, the wonderfully wacky Interactive Phrase Synthesizer, and there is also no discussion of the Groove Box, although this might be because this is a feature of VST version 4.x – books like this can be very quickly outdated.

Such omissions are not major shortcomings of the book: some editorial decisions have to be taken to avoid the text becoming as long as the old Cubase manuals. Taken as a whole, *Fast Guide to Cubase VST* does what the title suggests – provides a speedy, easy-to-use introduction to the software in a way which avoids jargon except where it is essential to understanding.

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