

PRO AUDIO REVIEW



The Click Five
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Gear & Software Reviews For The End-User

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10th Anniversary Issue



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Oram Al Schmitt Pro-Channel

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BY STEPHEN MURPHY

Media merger madness continues! Just as Steinberg was getting comfortable in its new home after being purchased by consumer video software giant Pinnacle, the company changed hands once again, landing on the doorstep of the Yamaha empire earlier this year. (Pinnacle is now being subsequently purchased by pro video giant Avid, parent company of Steinberg's primary competition, Digidesign).

Despite the obvious upheaval inherent in such transitions, Steinberg kept its chin up throughout, showing very little downtime and actually improving its customer support as evidenced on its user forums. More importantly, Steinberg released its most ambitious and stable version of its flagship digital audio workstation platform, Nuendo 3 (\$2,499). Steinberg upped the ante at the beginning of September with an impressive free update (version 3.1) that not only fixes bugs, but also adds over 50 new enhancements on top of those featured in the initial 3.0 release.

FEATURES

Since Nuendo has been previously reviewed in *Pro Audio Review* (PAR 10/03), and it is impossible to cover all the operations and features of the program in an article of this length (the 3.0 Operation Manual is over 700 pages, and the 3.1 addendum adds another 85), I will

► Frontier from page 12

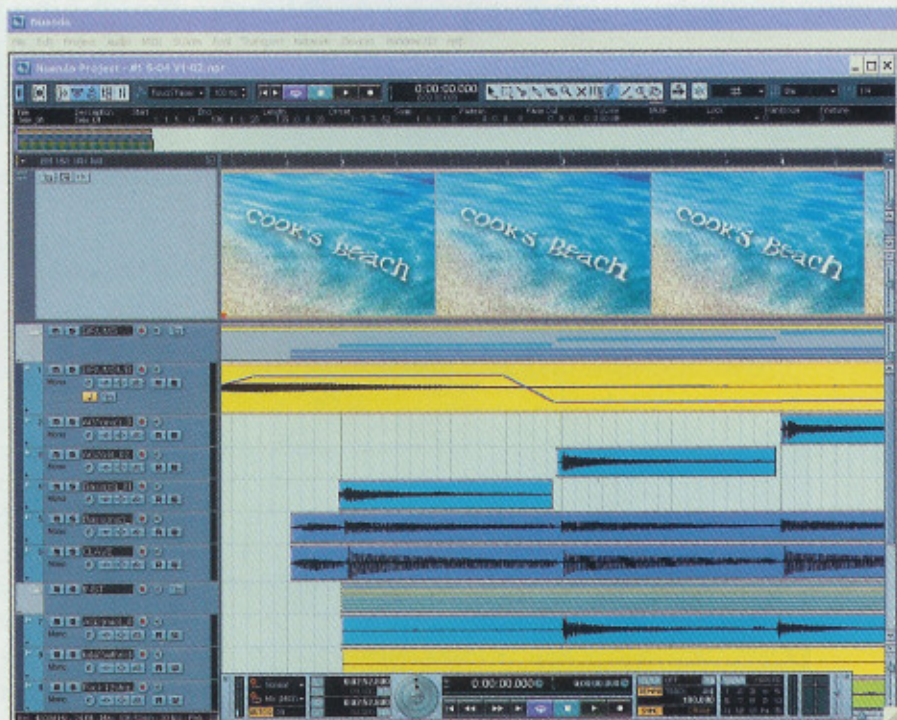
into sleep mode. The manual claims that the power draw is so small that a new set of alkaline batteries would last for several years if the TranzPort was left in sleep mode.

IN USE

I initially put the TranzPort to work running Nuendo 3 on my Windows XP based Sony Vaio and it worked like a charm. The instructions are well-written and the driver installation was a breeze. Next I took the TranzPort to my studio and got it up and running on my Pro Tools HD equipped Mac G5. Again, the installation was a breeze and I was up and running wire-free in a matter of minutes.

The more I use it, the more I like it. The TranzPort simply makes studio life easier. In the control room it makes work more relaxing allowing the engineer to break free from the chain that typically keeps him bound to the computer. My favorite use for the

Steinberg Nuendo 3.1 Media Production System



focus on some basic operating functions and new features.

First, the basics: Steinberg's Nuendo Media

TranzPort is taking it into the studio so I can actually engineer and play at the same time. I love the fact that when I'm working alone, I can take the remote into the studio and simultaneously be a musician and an engineer. When you are sitting in front of the drum kit ready to rock, the last thing you want to have to do is go into the control room to hit play and record.

Frontier Designs claims that with the backlight off, the TranzPort will provide about 100 hours of active use with one set of alkaline batteries. With the backlight on, that time is obviously reduced. I'm curious to see how much use I will get from a set of AA batteries. I don't use the TranzPort all the time but I do use it regularly and have for over two months now and I'm amazingly still on my first set of batteries.

After extensive use, my only complaint with the TranzPort is that its key commands vary depending on the software that it is controlling. Switching back

Production System is a full-featured Mac and PC-compatible media production platform
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and forth between Nuendo and ProTools takes a bit of getting used to at first. I realize that this problem is because of the DAW's software, not the TranzPort's but perhaps some sort of template that could easily be switched on the TranzPort's faceplate would solve the problem.

SUMMARY

The TranzPort is the perfect solution for anyone who needs a simple hardware transport controller. Its remote capabilities make it much more useful than a simple desktop controller and it has the exact right key features required for general control and overdubbing, without being too complicated or expensive.

Anytime I can drastically improve the performance of my studio and only spend 200 bucks, I'm game. This is definitely the case with the Frontier Designs TranzPort wireless DAW controller.

Russ Long is a Nashville-based engineer.

► *Steinberg from page 14*

geared towards high-end post production, surround mixing, music for picture and studio recording. In short, Nuendo is positioned head-on against Digidesign's Pro Tools software interface, and on many fronts, Nuendo bests the reigning king of DAWs. Nuendo is also a comprehensive MIDI sequencer and scoring editor, with all the capabilities of Steinberg's well-established Cubase application.

Since Nuendo is an open-platform, native software application, users can configure their systems using the full range of computer system, audio interface and DSP add-on options available. Minimum system requirements are reasonable, though as always: the better the system, the better the performance. For Macs, a dual 1 GHz G4 running OS X 10.3 or higher is required (dual 2 GHz G5 recommended), and for PCs a 1.6 GHz Pentium/Athlon CPU and Windows XP is required (2 GHz or higher CPU and ASIO-compatible hardware recommended).

Nuendo is capable of recording at sample rates up to 192 kHz at 16, 24 or 32 (floating point) bit depths; all internal processing by the Nuendo audio engine is performed at 32-bit floating point. The number of tracks and I/O channels available is limited only by the system configuration. File types supported are WAV, WAV64, B WAV and AIFF among others. A number of project-exchange formats are supported in Nuendo to facilitate compatibility with other audio and video editing platforms including AAF (Advanced Authoring Format), OMFI (Open Media Framework

Interchange), AES31 and OpenTL.

For audio-for-video projects, synchronized video is played back on the PC using the DirectShow, DirectX or QuickTime engines; QuickTime is always used for Macs. Video can be displayed directly on a computer monitor, or via FireWire/DV (Mac only), a dedicated video output of a multi-

Fast Facts

■ **Applications:**

Studio, post production

■ **Key Features:**

Mac, Windows; native-processor based; sample rates up to 192 kHz at 16, 24 or 32 (floating point) bit depths; VST, DirectX compatible; OMF, AAF, OpenTL, AES31 import/export; Audio Warp/Warp-to-Picture realtime time stretch and pitch change; surround formats up to 10.2; full and automatic plug-in delay compensation (PDC); Euphonix EuCon connectivity.

■ **Price:**

\$2,499

■ **Contact:**

Steinberg at 877-253-3900, www.steinberg.de.

head graphics card, or a Blackmagic DeckLink (Mac/PC) or Pinnacle Targa 3000 (PC) video card.

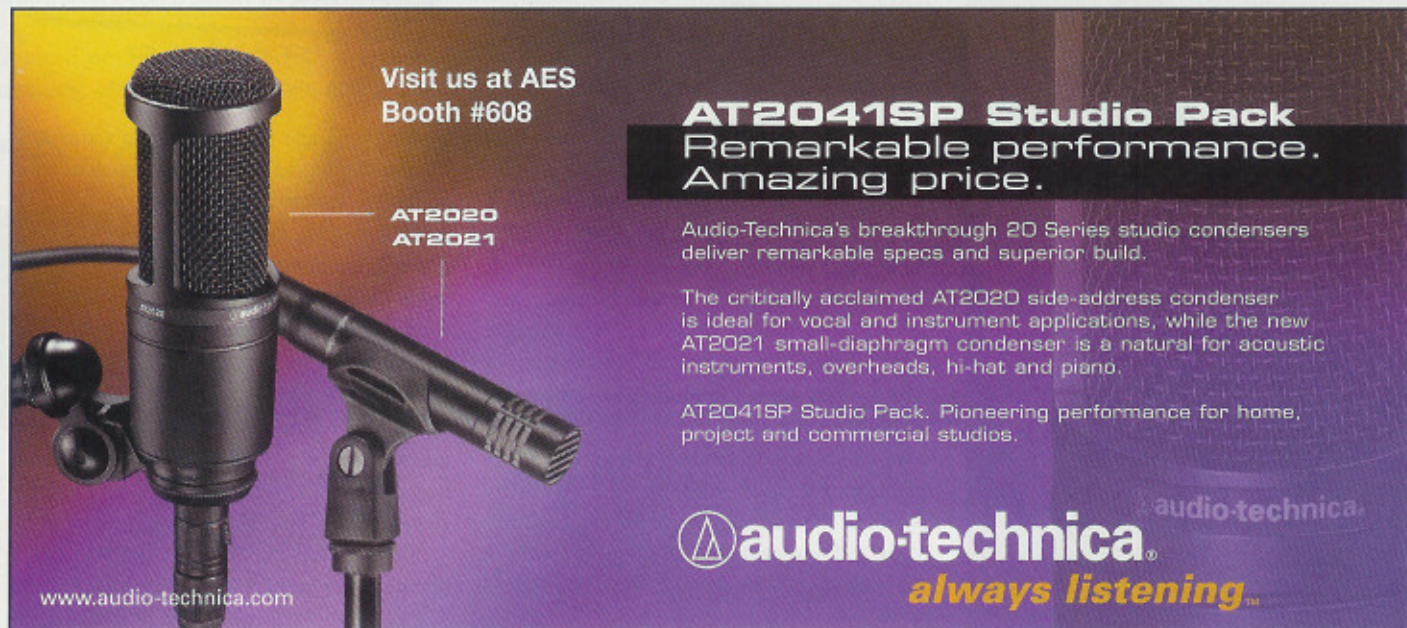
The Nuendo platform follows the same operating paradigm as other popular multi-track software applications, with one window for the horizontal display and editing of audio

and MIDI data (called the project window), and another window that emulates the channels of a traditional mixer. These two main windows are highly customizable and, in conjunction with the floating transport bar, contain the tools and displays needed for most recording, editing and mixing/automation operations. Nuendo also provides a number of other interfaces for the detailed editing of audio, MIDI, tempo and other data.

Nuendo uses the Steinberg-developed VST format for plug-ins and virtual instruments; DirectX plug-ins are also supported on the PC. Plug-in delay compensation is provided throughout the entire audio path, automatically compensating for the inherent delay of all plug-ins, whether inserted on audio, group or input/output channels. One new feature allows outboard gear to be connected to available hardware I/O channels for send or insert use (including adjustable delay compensation for each outboard processor) and selected from a drop-down list as easily as software plug-ins. External processors and instruments now have a "freeze" function to free up valuable hardware resources.

Nuendo 3 includes greatly expanded functionality for audio-to-picture and surround projects. The program supports surround formats to 10.2 channels, and maintains multichannel status throughout its audio path (meaning audio inputs, tracks, sends, groups, outputs etc. can be up to 12 channels wide). Child busses can be easily created, named and selected for routing tracks, groups and FX channels to specific

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Studio

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pairs or groups of channels within the chosen surround format. Nuendo 3 includes multichannel downmix, matrix encode/decode and dither plug-ins, and supports Dolby Digital and DTS encoding through optional purchase.

Nuendo 3 provides numerous tools for working to picture including 9-pin and MTC machine control (with user-defined master transport control options), audio and video playback pull-up/down, HDTV frame rates, sample-accurate ASIO Positioning Protocol (APP) support, online recording, film-format timeline display and several timecode-based editing/pool functions. Nuendo can also extract and replace audio from video files as well as perform simple cut, copy, paste and trim operations on video events placed on the timeline. In addition to supporting popular and generic surface control, version 3.1 adds Euphonix EuCon connectivity.

One of Nuendo's centerpieces for post production and audio-only production alike is "audio warp," the general term Steinberg uses for the program's real-time pitch and time shifting functions. These tools are useful for quick and easy audio event length and/or pitch changes directly from the timeline, or for more complex operations such as conforming audio tracks to fluctuating tempo maps.

Additional features include VST System Link (for harnessing the power of several computers in one large system), network collaboration (including online merge), several pan law modes (including equal power), full ReWire2 compatibility, and support for Sony Acid-formatted loops on the Nuendo timeline.

IN USE

I installed Nuendo 3 (and the 3.1 update) on an Intel-based 3.2 GHz HT computer running Windows XP and outfitted with 1.5 GB of RAM, two Universal Audio UAD-1 DSP cards, two TC Electronics PowerCore DSP cards, RME 9652 and Fireface 800 audio interfaces and a Blackmagic DeckLink HD Pro video card. Installation of the program was straightforward and went without a hitch.

A big part of Nuendo's strength is in its customizable user interface. Nearly every aspect of the various interfaces can be fluidly resized or rearranged in real time (without interrupting playback, mind you) or recalled in window-specific and global templates,

and nearly every operational function of the program can be executed by keyboard commands, mapped to MIDI controllers or strung together to form basic or complex macros (which in turn can be assigned to the keyboard or controller). Items can be easily added or removed from menus and toolbars, and endless lists of plug-ins and virtual instruments can be tamed in no time by creating folders and dragging and dropping.

One example of its flexible interface is the new "divide track list" function, which splits the project window into two parts, allowing independent scroll and zoom/resizing control for each section. This allows, for instance, a video thumbnail track to be placed in the upper division and remain visible while scrolling through the audio tracks in the lower division. This has proved useful for quickly displaying and fine tuning a specific audio track against the video track, or lining up and cutting instruments against drums without moving tracks around.



Another large part of Nuendo's appeal is its intuitive workflow. Features such as folder tracks, quick zooming (by clicking the ruler bar and moving the mouse up or down), mouse-wheel zooming/scrolling, lanes-mode recording/editing (for quickly comping multiple takes), event-based fades and volume envelopes, and an info bar for real-time feedback and adjustment (including pitch-shifting and time-stretching) make quick work of typical project window editing chores. Other handy features include custom user panels (for streamlined plug-in, synth and channel strip adjustments), a notepad for each channel, a project track-

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Some of the ergonomics of the unit seemed a bit counterintuitive, and took a little while to get used to. For example, the meter select knob doesn't follow the logical signal flow order, but instead is ordered: Mic Source, Gain Reduction, Main Output, Compressor Input, Compressor Output. In another example, I would have preferred to have the two shelving EQ bands at the extreme outsides of the section, and the four peaking bands in the middle. I also would have found the EQ more useful if the frequency ranges of the four peaking bands were reigned in a bit, and with more band overlap. But hey, that's why it's named after Al Schmitt and not me...

SUMMARY

After extensive tracking use, I found the Oram Al Schmitt Pro-Channel GMS to be one of the best high-end recording channels I have had the pleasure of using. Despite my few ergonomic quibbles, using its many thoughtful features and exploring possible variations eventually became second nature, and the Pro-Channel quickly became my go-to box of choice for tracking vocals.

Overall, the Pro-Channel sounds fantastic – especially on vocals and lyrical instruments – and the convenience of its three mic inputs, dual-preamp paths, and built-in compressor and EQ sections makes this “channel strip” a top consideration for high-end vocal recording applications.

PAR *Studio Editor Stephen Murphy has over 20 years production and engineering experience, including Grammy-winning and Gold/Platinum-selling releases. His website is www.smurphco.com*

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sheet, and a media pool with top-notch management and searching tools.

For working to picture, one of my favorite Nuendo features is the transport “Edit Mode.” This mode makes quick work of spotting effects and aligning ADR events by providing continuous visual feedback on the video display during typical audio editing operations. In most programs, the video display only updates during play, scrub or when the play cursor is moved. With edit mode, I can get precise audio-video alignment while moving, resizing or time stretching audio events, selecting a time range, adjusting event fades or fine tuning any automation parameter (volume, pan, sends, EQ, plug-in parameters etc.) – absolutely fantastic! My one quibble with the edit mode is that there is no visual feedback when changing the per-event volume envelopes (another new feature) or when using the pencil tool to draw automation, though the pointer and line tool work just fine.

Another favorite new feature in Nuendo 3 is the addition of a mixer audition bus. The audition bus is intended for dedicated control room monitoring and allows non-destructive AFL/PFL monitoring in the control room without affecting the main bus outputs (or, in my case, without disrupting playback to the headphone system).

The addition of AAF import/export and the expansion of OMF support are welcome enhancements and continue to improve the free exchange of projects between studios using disparate audio and video applications.

The program does have a few shortcomings (especially noticeable for those coming from Pro Tools) that I hope will be

addressed. For instance, Nuendo can do linked fader groups, but does not support overlapping groups (e.g., an overheads group and a full drum kit group that includes overheads), the ability to turn specific groups on and off at will, or the ability to add a fader to (or subtract one from) an existing group – the whole group must be dissolved and recreated. The current VST spec does not allow plug-in sidechaining, though there are a few workarounds. Nuendo also does not have the ability to rearrange or copy plug-ins by drag/drop.

Those complaints aside, after a decade of using Pro Tools and a year with Nuendo, I found the operational and architectural features and general workflow of Nuendo to be superior. No software is perfect, nor is any one application perfect for all uses – but Nuendo comes closest to satisfying the technical requirements of my audio and post work. In general, it is a pleasure to use and it only keeps getting better.

SUMMARY

Nuendo's strength is in its refreshingly open nature. – a phrase that can be loosely defined as the sum of several factors: it's a native-based platform allowing the freedom to configure your system any way you like (and the ability to use the same program on the road with a laptop or in the studio on a dual 64-bit system); Nuendo enjoys lively and professional forums with responsive moderators; Steinberg welcomes user feedback and can move relatively quickly to adopt logical feature requests; support for VST plug-ins and virtual instruments is huge and gaining universality as more major software developers adopt the format; VST plug-ins are comparatively inexpensive, and there is a thriving internet community devoted to developing free VST tools; and the Nuendo interface is incredibly flexible, facilitating customized workflows for a variety of professional uses.

This latest update continues the innovation and responsiveness that Steinberg has shown throughout the development of Nuendo, and is definitely worth serious consideration for professional production and postproduction applications.

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