

Apple Soundtrack Pro 2

At NAB Apple announced the new version of Final Cut Studio. FCS2 is a major upgrade with Final Cut Pro getting some new HD features, a new version of Motion 2, Compressor 3, a completely new grading package called Color, and the long awaited upgrade of Soundtrack Pro to Version 2.

ANDY DAY

I WROTE A REVIEW of Soundtrack Pro well over a year ago (V4.8) and despite a few shortcomings, I was quite impressed. At that time it was part of FCS, but also available separately at an amazing price. Apple seems to have cottoned on to this and, at the time of writing, it's only available as part of the FCS2 suite (US\$1299). The good news is that this is one hell of an upgrade!

The basic user interface is very similar, so getting stuck in is quite easy for existing STP users, but there have been some nice developments with the addition of the lower pane that allows several tabs to be accessed from one window. This means that all the functions of STP can be displayed in one display, plus a layout preset function allows any one area to be focussed on, say for file editing or mixing.

File editing has vastly improved, especially using the lower pane display, as you can see the clips position in the timeline and the expanded waveform at the same time. A Spot to Timeline feature allows you to easily return the edited file to anywhere on the timeline. As before all clip-based effects and processing can be removed or even re-ordered at any time. Another clever function for clip-based processing is the ability to 'lift' processing from an existing clip and 'stamp' it onto any other clips in the timeline simply by clicking with the mouse. Even more useful is the option to 'lift' the natural EQ from a clip and 'stamp' it to other clips using the same method. Ideal for EQ-matching ADR, which is another major enhancement for STP.

Multi-take clips allow multiple loop recordings to be displayed in the form of several sub tracks and then cut into individual lines. You can then switch between each line/take by simply clicking the clips. A comp track is automatically created as you do it with fully adjustable cross-fades between each take. The comp appears in the main timeline as one clip, but can easily be edited again by accessing the Multi-take editor. Try doing that with other DAWs. This is the best tool I've found for ADR, making it easier for everyone (including the actors!)

Spotting effects is vastly improved too by using a new 'HUD' that shows the video frame at the in point, the out point and the mouse click point on the effect. This is great for spotting effects that have a sync point between the in/out points, for example a door slam. By clicking on the slam part, displaying the HUD you can see exactly where the door closes, without having to place the effect and nudge it into place. STP also includes thousands of new effects, including some



really useful 5.1 atmos fx.

Yes, you guessed it; 5.1 is now supported in STP. Although it would appear at first glance to be a bit gimmicky, with some strange looking surround panning displays, it is actually quite powerful. The panners are automatable and easily accessed by right clicking the track pan. You can switch any track to 5.1, record pan moves, and switch back to stereo to make adjustments for a stereo mix, without affecting the 5.1 panning. By having a stereo submix track and a 5.1 submix track you can create multiformat mixes simultaneously. But by far the most interesting feature is the 5.1 version of Space Designer, which is an IR reverb. There are loads of new 5.1 presets for all kinds of natural (and unnatural) spaces, you even have the option to record your own impulses on location, to create your own presets. Other IR-based reverb plug-ins like this cost a fortune, so this makes STP worthwhile on its own. There are several other 5.1 plug-ins included too, such as EQs and Dynamics.

When I reviewed the previous version, the big limitation was the lack of import/export — locking you into a FCP workflow. This has all changed with OMF/AAF import and AAF export giving Pro Tools/Avid compatibility. Now you can use STP to tracklay, sounddesign and ADR, then export as AAF into Pro Tools for mixing. Another option is to export files of either tracks or submixes and import into Pro Tools for mixing.

For FCP workflows, things are even better. If a FCP sequence gets changed after you've done your prep and mix in STP then you can resend the new sequence from FCP and use the conform feature in STP to compare the two sequences and create a

new sequence using your original clips and mix where possible. You can audition changes and decide whether to change the audio or not — for example if just cutaway shots are inserted. This is like having an integrated Virtual Katy for FCP workflows.

I used FCP to digitise some video (a nice added bonus to have the ability to digitise video with FCP) using a DV codec. Because STP uses QuickTime, virtually any QuickTime codec is supported, even MPEG 2, making it ideal for DVD menu design. By dropping the video on the FCP timeline and using the 'send to soundtrack pro' command, audio and video are transferred to STP ready for editing. This part of the workflow can also be used for projects coming from an Avid if video is exported in

QuickTime format.

I then imported an OMF from the Avid and phased up the OMF with the guide. There did seem to be a bug, which meant the imported OMF was shifted on the timeline. The source audio was very poorly recorded, so I used noise reduction on one clip and Lift and Stamp to apply to all the other clips that needed it. After noise reduction and some EQ I replaced some atmos tracks and added a couple of spot effects. Then I got my Mackie MCU to connect to STP using Mackie control, giving me transport, fader and pan control. I could mix this simple project easily with this setup, but for more complex projects I would prefer to export an AAF or files, and import into Pro Tools.

I only really scratched the surface of what STP can do with this example, but when you consider that I could create a finished TV mix from a laptop (using PPM metering with the excellent PPMulator plug-in), this is a major step towards cost-effective TV audio postproduction. ■

PROS

Amazing value especially with FCS; useful 5.1 implementation; excellent 5.1 Space Designer reverb; better integration into Avid workflows.

CONS

Quite a few bugs in the first release; no support for Rewire (would be ideal for Pro Tools remixes); no plug-in automation.

Contact

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