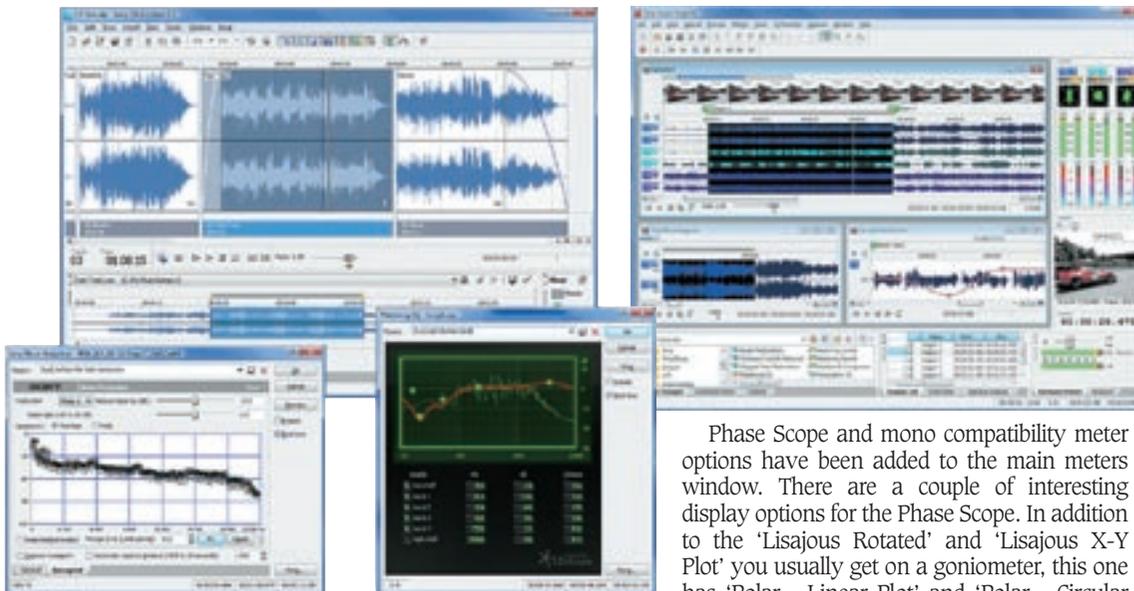# SCS Sound Forge 9 Professional

It's one of the longest lived software products and has spanned back through changes of company ownership, yet Sony Creative Software's Version 9 package of the venerable Sound Forge includes CD Architect 5, Noise Reduction 2 plug-ins, and a Mastering Effects Bundle. ROB JAMES recaptures his youth.

BY THE STANDARDS applied to digital audio software go and as the V9 suffix indicates, Sound Forge has been around for a long time. For more than ten years it has been an essential toolbox for PC audio professionals. When I last auditioned Sound Forge its creators, Sonic Foundry, were still in charge. Since the Sony Creative Software (formerly Sony Media Software) takeover a number of rough edges have disappeared and the program feels a lot more polished. For UK£204 (+ VAT) you get not only SF 9 but also CD Architect 5.2, Noise Reduction 2 plug-ins and the Mastering Effects Bundle powered by iZotope.

Wavelab and Sound Forge are often seen as direct rivals. I'm not so sure this is the case. Sound Forge is a great toolkit for operating on individual files with up to 8 channels while Wavelab is arguably better for more creative activities, especially thanks to the 'Montage' feature. If truth be told I would be very sorry to part with either of them as I use them for different purposes. For example, extracting the audio from an AVI is easy enough in most DAWs but the ability to put it back again is less common and often fiddly. Sound Forge can do this with comparative ease.

I don't propose to list every item in Sound Forge's extensive features locker since most of it will already be familiar. V9 is a substantial upgrade and brings more than enough new features for a single article.

The first thing to endear me to this version was the familiar (at least in video circles) JKL keyboard scrub control. This follows the usual conventions in that a single press on J and L play forwards and backwards respectively (hurrah!), K stops and multiple presses on J or L increase the play speed to 2X, 4X or 8X nominal. If you've never had this facility you won't believe just how easy it makes editing and navigation. Process and Effects dialogs have been given a makeover and seem more logical than I remember from earlier versions. A new Hardware Meters window makes adjusting preview monitoring levels much simpler.

Phase Scope and mono compatibility meter options have been added to the main meters window. There are a couple of interesting display options for the Phase Scope. In addition to the 'Lisajous Rotated' and 'Lisajous X-Y Plot' you usually get on a goniometer, this one has 'Polar - Linear Plot' and 'Polar - Circular Plot'. The latter proved to be very useful and a lot more intuitive than the more common display.

At long last Sound Forge supports multichannel files with up to 8 channels for 7.1 surround. These files can be edited just as you would mono or stereo. Of course, with suitable hardware you can also make multichannel recordings. Sony correctly makes the point that Sound Forge is not intended as a full-blown multichannel editor in the same vein as Vegas or Acid so, while you can alter levels of the individual channels, there are no conveniences such as surround panners or divergence controls. A channel convertor is provided to enable simple channel reassignment, downmixing, etc. but so far as I could discover there is no way of combining a group of individual channel source files into a single multichannel file except by copying and pasting the elements into an empty multichannel file. Files can be AC3-encoded with fixed parameters only, but then the full version would cost a lot more than Sound Forge 9.

The Noise Reduction 2 plug-ins that used to be offered as an additional cost extra are now included as standard. If you take CEDAR as the 'Gold Standard' in noise reduction then there is a pecking order among the others. Sound Forge Noise reduction is up there with the best of the rest but still surpassed by CEDAR, however, like the full AC3 encoder, a single CEDAR process would probably cost more than the whole Sound Forge package...

The iZotope Mastering Effects plug-ins proved to be a bit of a puzzle at first. In the absence of any written instructions I simply installed them but no screen appeared asking for the serial number. Turns out it only asks for the serial number when you attempt to use one of the plug-ins. The four Mastering Effects — EQ, Limiter, Reverb and Multiband Compressor — are interesting and I liked the reverb. But, adjusting certain parameters causes gaps in real-time preview playback. To prove the point I also tried a couple of other reverb plug-ins with Sound Forge. These could be adjusted with no gaps at all.
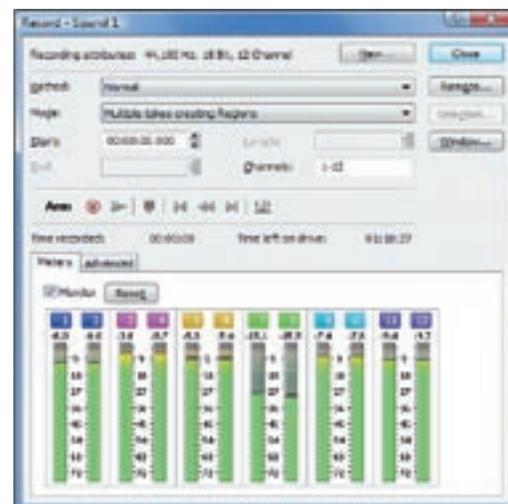
Gracenote MusicID technology has been added to CD extraction. If the PC is connected to the net, automatic labelling for extracted CD tracks is just a click away. These are just the headlines. Numerous detailed improvements add to the offer.

Any application that has survived as long as Sound Forge will have balanced on a delicate tightrope between keeping up with the opposition and retaining its original appeal. For example, producing a 'quick and dirty' CD in no time at all has always been a major strength of Wavelab. Now Sound Forge is almost as quick and even that small discrepancy may be due simply to lack of familiarity.

However, CD Architect did not like my Plextor SATA DVD/CD burner. Attempting to burn a CD resulted in CD Architect crashing with a lock-up at the 'Scanning for Drives' stage. Simply disabling the Plextor cured the problem and burning using my other Pioneer (PATA) drive was uneventful.

One problem with fast and powerful tools that mess around with the dangerous stuff, like file headers, is that it is more difficult to legislate for the idiocy of the users. Sound Forge can be crashed. If you do something illogical, for example trying to use a synth as a processing plug-in, it will bite you.

More than ten years on, Sound Forge remains a must have. Batch processing, scripting and other productivity features keep it at the top of its game. Throw into the mix FM synthesis, Noise Reduction 2 together with the estimable Acoustic Mirror convolving reverb and the iZotope Mastering plug-ins and Sound Forge has something for everyone. ■

PROS Essential toolkit; desirable plug-ins; real improvement over earlier versions.

CONS Not crashproof; issues with certain burners; more of a toolbox than a cuddly creative environment.

Contact

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