

# Steinberg Nuendo 4

How does a DAW manufacturer make an incremental software upgrade seem exciting these days? **ROB JAMES** fires up the latest version of Nuendo and finds out...



**T**HERE ARE MANY similarities between politics today and the state of the digital audio workstation market. Where once the differences were obvious with 'clear blue water' between manufacturers' differing approaches to capability and direction, today there is a worrying consensus. As soon as anyone has a bright idea, everyone else interprets it (to be charitable) and claims it as their own idea instead of dismissing it as irrelevant to core values and purpose. This results in feature bloat and loss of focus, with workstations and politicians alike

striving to be all things to all men.

Nuendo 4 might just be the first sign that the tide is turning. The packaging and documentation are the first signs of change but it becomes a lot more obvious when you discover what Steinberg has taken out. The Score and MIDI Drum Editor, VST instruments and MusicXML import and export are only available as an extra cost add-on, 'Nuendo Expansion Kit'. The sharper focus is equally obvious when you begin to dig a little deeper into what has been added and re-engineered.



Nuendo's mixer is a major beneficiary. Routing has been completely re-thought with the result that signals can now be sent from tracks to groups and effects returns pre- or postfader. Signals can be freely routed between group channels regardless of order, and audio subgrouping is now legal, with signals sent from groups to effects returns and vice versa. Because all of this flexibility introduces a high possibility of inadvertently creating feedback loops, Nuendo 4 automatically detects and disables nonsensical routings.

Steinberg's VST plug-in format has become the most popular standard in use today. Nuendo 4 sees the introduction of a new variant, VST 3. Several of the new effects have sidechain capability and all can be dragged and dropped between tracks and strips. Thirty-eight surround-capable VST 3 plug-ins are included along with more than 20 updated VST 2 plug-ins from the previous version. Perhaps the most noteworthy newcomer is a 4-band parametric EQ that arrives instantiated on every audio channel as standard. The new EQ offers up to seven different characteristics per band. Shelf slopes are adjustable via the Q control. An inverse switch enables fast mirror switching between boost and cut. New VST3 dynamics tools include three compressors, an expander and a limiter. Like all VST3 plug-ins, these can be applied to surround tracks. The renowned MPEX 3 algorithms are used for pitch-changing and time-stretching.

Aimed directly at sound for picture, the new Post Filter is intended to make it simple to quickly find and remove unwanted noise. It has standard low/high cut, and a very tight notch filter and a useful Preview function. There is also the choice of adding further notches to deal with harmonics. It's a bit like having a Urei 'Little Dipper' as a plug-in without some of the undesirable artefacts.

Dynamic automation has long been neglected by most DAWs. While paying lip service to automating fades, pans and mutes and frequently pretty much every other variable parameter, they have all rather missed the point: that an automation system should be easy to use and have the scope to satisfy users with more complex requirements. Not the least of these is how they well they map to hardware control surfaces. The current crop of full version upgrades is, at last addressing the issues and Nuendo is no exception. The automation system in Nuendo 4 has been completely redesigned and now more closely resembles the functions you would find on a high-end console. Among the new features you will find

individual punch-out modes for each channel and so-called 'Virgin territories', which are designated areas where no automation is written. There are proper 'fill' commands for writing automation to end, start, punch or loop.

Automation modes include the usual Touch and Auto-latch and now the excellent 'Crossover' mode. I first encountered this almost two decades ago and I've liked it ever since. Essentially it allows you to drop into write and make an adjustment, and then, when you let go of the fader or control, the automation remains in write until the value matches or crosses the previously written data. At which point it automatically and seamlessly punches out into read. Great for updates.

Some parameters still cannot be automated. Several of these mirror controls that cannot be automated on many console automation systems. Top of my wish list is routing automation. As with most DAW omissions, there are workarounds for this but these are never as satisfactory as the direct function.

Much is made of the 'Touch-Collect' functions: here it means the ability to 'touch-isolate' and adjust many parameters then drop them all into write together at a given point even when the transport is static. When combined with the versatile fill options this is an extremely powerful set of tools. Punch logs are useful for recalling parameters as they were at punch-in, and also for recalling sets of parameters that have been 'touch-collected' at a previous punch-in.

The downside of having all this automation power is that when used to the max, it will require a lot of resources. To get the best out of it, you're going to need the most powerful machine you can lay your hands on: the bigger and more complex the project, the more you will need and use the automation. Let's not forget that big-gun consoles use an entire PC just for automation to obtain this kind of functionality.

Track Quick Controls have been added to the Track Inspector. This means a set of eight user-definable real-time controllers can be assigned to any of the parameters available on the track. A MIDI Learn function simplifies setting up a suitable external hardware controller. The remote control faders or knobs will then follow track selection.

Asset management is another big issue and this includes media files, presets, automation data and another new feature, Track Presets. These are snapshots of entire track/channel strips including Audio, MIDI and Instrument Tracks.

MediaBay adds a database environment to keep track of the ever-growing number of files by using organisational techniques such as folders and attributes. As you would expect there are smart search facilities that can operate using a variety of attributes or rapid filtering of results. Filters operate using a search system including a list of graphical filter elements. Needless to say you can also add and modify tags and preview material in the 'Scope' section. Nuendo still lacks conform and re-conform tools but a summer announcement promised special versions of the well-regarded Virtual Katy software with tight integration.

The editor has not been left out of this upgrade cornucopia. Nuendo 4 offers a total of 20 new editing commands and tool modifiers aimed squarely at sound for picture. These include old favourites such as 'Cut Head', 'Cut Tail', 'Enlarge/Move Range to Previous/Next Event' and a long list of key modifiers that enable events to be aligned with other events or the cursor. You can now use the mouse wheel with a hot key for event volume and fades.

Nuendo 4 is fully compatible with Windows Vista in both 32-bit and 64-bit flavours, and of course

Universal Binary for Macs. A VST plug-in bridge enables 32-bit plug-ins to run alongside native 64-bit examples. It will cost you UK£1063.83 (+ VAT) to buy Nuendo 4 from scratch, or UK£144.67 (+ VAT) to upgrade from Version 3. The Nuendo Expansion Kit is UK£170.20 (+ VAT), and an upgrade from Nuendo version 3 to version 4 with the Expansion Kit is UK£229.78 (+ VAT).

There are many other small improvements, but they are far too numerous to list here. Make no mistake, this is a very serious upgrade. However, even with all these improvements, Nuendo 4 still has a mountain to climb. Workstation applications, and especially their user interfaces, have become so complex that, for professionals using them intensively, it is a brave move to change from the devil you know. To become truly productive requires an intimate knowledge of the package, including keyboard shortcuts (especially

for editing), and this constitutes a considerable investment in time and effort. That said, for anyone starting from scratch, and for those contemplating a change, Nuendo has never before offered such a credible alternative. ■

**PROS**

The plug-ins alone are worth the price; dynamic automation; vastly improved mixer.

**CONS**

Steep learning curve; still no reverse sync play except via shuttle; Conform/Reconform requires Virtual Katy at extra cost.

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