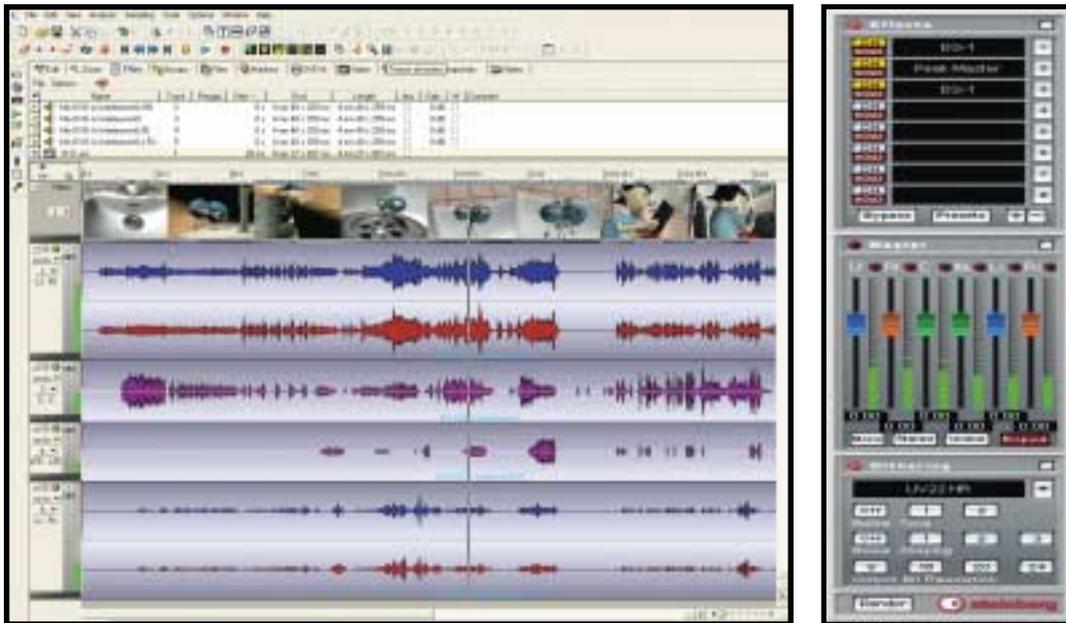


Steinberg WaveLab 5

It's one of the truly great audio editing and mastering suites available and through subsequent iterations has maintained its stance of 'simplicity with power'. **ROB JAMES** now finds it with extra DVD capability and uncovers the promise of very much more in the pipeline.



YOU'VE BOUGHT YOUR HOUSE, in the perfect location. You've lived in it, enjoyed it and loved all the improvements to the décor. But, sooner or later you are likely to be faced with a difficult decision, extend or move? If you choose to move, inevitable upheaval, risks and expenditure await you. The alternative, staying put and extending, has its own downside. Upheaval, risks, expense and, if done unsympathetically, destruction of the very character that made you love it in the first place. However, if the original foundations are sound, this is often the better option.

I have used Steinberg's WaveLab for stereo editing and CD mastering for some considerable time. It already provides a thoroughly capable mono/stereo wave editor, multitrack 'montage' editor and comprehensive CD ripping and burning. The interface is as intuitive as any and, for stereo projects not involving picture, it did almost everything I needed, but not too much. I love its relative simplicity. In some ways, notably metering with a halfway decent vectorscope, simultaneous VU and peak metering with adjustable ballistics and five presets, it was already more powerful, yet accessible than considerably more expensive offerings.

So, WaveLab certainly provides a solid enough foundation and I make no apology for the fact that it is now my tool of choice for anything within its capabilities. Version 5 represents a major extension to the existing functionality.

I'm not going to give you a blow by blow account of WaveLab's existing features, rather concentrate on what is new in V5 and its implications. The principle additions are surround and video support. WaveLab 5 retails at UK£499.99, and there are upgrades available from WaveLab 4 for UK£99.99 until 25 July 2004, after which it will be UK£129.99 (all including VAT).

Surround support is, in this case, primarily aimed at the DVD-A format. Of the two main pretenders to the CD's throne, DVD-A and SACD, the former has a lot

going for it. DVD-A can carry uncompressed linear PCM audio with up to six channels (5.1) and/or high-resolution audio with up to 24-bits at sampling rates of up to 192kHz. Apart from audio, DVD-A also supports pictures, text, graphic menus and video. Video features confer a good degree of backward compatibility with current DVD Video players. DVD-A not only supports high-resolution and multichannel audio formats, it also allows any combination of these different formats and configurations to co-exist on a single disc.

CDs only have one playlist. A DVD-A can have up to nine different playlists (track groups), selected from the same pool of tracks on the disc. WaveLab 5 supports the full nine track groups, each with up to 99 tracks. It also supports comprehensive DVD-A authoring tools including playlist editing, on-screen video menu design, picture slide shows and DVD text. To help with repurposing there is user-definable surround to stereo downmixing. You can define 16 tables of coefficients, which can be applied individually to each track.

It is also possible to import and burn DVD video content. MLP, required for multichannel 24/96, is not currently supported due to the cost of the licence. Metering has been upgraded to cope with multichannel working with multichannel bargraphs. Wave Scope shows all the surround channel waveforms in a single display and Phase Scope has been upgraded to give two XY displays, LfRf and Ls Rs. I would have liked some sort of single surround display but I have no doubt this will follow in subsequent upgrades. Steinberg's Surround Edition effects worked immediately and without drama inside WaveLab's master section. DVD Audio extraction is possible, providing the content is not copy protected.

The alternative multichannel mode enables WaveLab to address up to eight tracks either individually or as

stereo pairs. This considerably expands and enhances the appeal for many uses, including radio production. With a bit of thought it should also be possible to use this for surround mastering in formats up to 7.1.

Instant ASIO switching allows up to four takes of the same material to be compared, on the fly, using the 8-channel configuration and output redirection. Once set up, operation is simplicity itself using either four big, on-screen buttons or the numeric keypad 1-4 keys.

On the video front, WaveLab supports any video format supported by Direct X 9. I played around with a 90-minute AVI generated by a Canopus DV25 codec with considerable success once I installed the relevant playback codec. Although WaveLab can now extract audio from an AVI it cannot (yet) open the audio tracks and video in one operation or insert audio. The images can be displayed as static thumbnails in the timeline or moving video. A 'smart' mode allows for timeline thumbnails when a separate video window is displayed or moving video when it isn't.

WaveLab 5 provides a powerful DVD-A authoring tool and introduces video into the equation. WMA Pro 5.1 and 7.1 export are now included. All this new functionality has been almost seamlessly integrated into the familiar user interface. But the real significance of this release is the firm foundations laid for the future. All this barely scratches the surface of what should be possible with subsequent updates.

When I first started to dig into this version I found a few rough edges. By the time of writing, I had a beta patch successfully addressing the most egregious concerns. This quick response characterises the whole philosophy and development of WaveLab.

Every now and again it is not enough to simply follow the users' wish lists. For real progress the developer must be at least one step ahead of what the users think they want. WaveLab 5 is just such a release. The inevitable consequence is that users will immediately start clamouring for the developer to add bells and whistles they've just thought of because of the new functionality.

Philippe Goutier and the WaveLab team are to be congratulated for considerably enhancing WaveLab's reach without damaging its character or spoiling its simplicity. I await future developments with bated breath. ■



PROS

Builds upon the firm foundations of previous versions; adds essential functionality for DVD-A mastering and audio for video; maintains the workflow ethos.

CONS

Will generate even more questions than it answers; AVIs cannot be added complete with audio in one operation; necessarily greedier with resources.

EXTRAS

You can have the chance to win a copy of WaveLab's big brother program Nuendo 2 by entering the competition on page 59.

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