

EQ IN REVIEW: Sonic Desktop

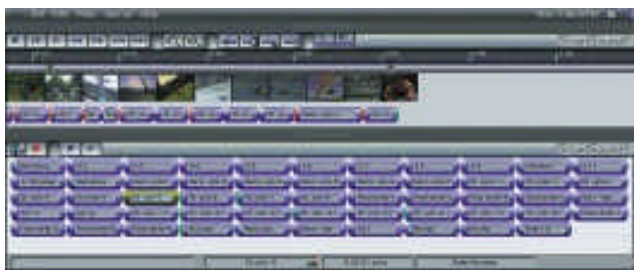
Smartsound for Multimedia

Creating soundtracks just got a lot easier

by Francis Preve

Music arranging, which is part precision and part intuition, is difficult to explain — and harder still to master. It is also the key to a great soundtrack.

Thanks to a polished and intuitive interface, Sonic Desktop's SmartSound for Multimedia brings the art of arranging to the masses in an enjoyable, no-nonsense manner. Its usefulness ranges from creating soundtracks for multimedia presentations, to commercial production, to making mutant musical interludes for answering machine messages.



A television producer I know spends much time sifting through expensive music catalogs for suitable soundtracks. Until now, the only way to create a custom soundtrack for a TV commercial was to hire a composer/producer and hope for the best. When I showed him SmartSound, his eyes lit up. Within minutes he was developing musical "stingers," as well as a 29-second backing track for his latest promotion. Yes, it's that kind of program.

All tracks are recorded in stereo at 22.05 kHz, which is adequate for most multimedia production needs. A slightly more expensive version, called "Dimensions," uses 44.1 kHz samples.

Musically, SmartSound has its bases covered. Though there's a little over an hour of material on the CD, almost every genre is represented once or twice. A good portion of the music is created with full bands and orchestras, and wonderfully recorded. The country tracks feature real slide guitar, the orchestral pieces are lush and well played, and the jazz and Latin numbers are totally authentic. I even liked the quiet, new age passages, which contained some nice melodic motifs.

The only weak area was the "'90s" genre; though I could see TV stations using the rock music for sports shows, some of the electronic music was a bit hackneyed. Not bad, but definitely dated.

Copy protection requires entering a serial number the very first time you run the program; then you're set. The start-up screen presents two options: Maestro and Editor. For starting a new composition, use Maestro. A "Wizard"-like interface presents a series of questions to guide you through the process of making the music.

You can specify the composition's length in increments down to 100 milliseconds. Other questions ask you to choose among a set of musical genres and compositional styles. There are approximately 50 sets of musical and sound effects tracks; musical styles encompass orchestral, jazz, Latin, country and western, Cajun, dance, new age, and rock. A modest selection of sound effects includes nature sounds like crickets, storms, and birds, as well as traffic, telephones, and unique transition effects.

As you work, you can preview the results of your choices. If you're not satisfied, just click back through the questions to revise any of your decisions. When the composition is complete, you can save it as an audio file in any major format (WAV, AIFF, AU, QuickTime, or RealAudio) or open it in the Editor for further manipulation.

The Editor is where the real fun begins. Each soundtrack is divided into a number of musical snippets, ranging from short stabs to one- and two-bar excerpts. These are represented visually as metallic capsules (fig. 1). The capsules can be freely dragged while the composition is playing, so you can immediately hear any changes in real time. This is wonderful, as you can easily fine-tune each arrangement.

A primitive recording function for rolling your own sounds and music is also available. There are no wave editing features other than a "clipper" for trimming start- and end-points, but it's a thoughtful inclusion anyway. Besides, if you run out of music or crave more variety, Sonic Desktop offers six additional volumes of SmartSound music and sound effects on CD-ROM called Audio Palettes (available in two 16-bit formats: 22 kHz for \$69, or 44 kHz for \$129). These require SmartSound V1.6 for MacOS or V1.5 for Windows.

There's even a "Hinting" function that visually "suggests" arrangements based on traditional musical approaches. While definitely useful for novices, I had a blast by breaking the rules — creating bizarre country and western mutations, and even fiddling around with classic Mozart compositions. This application begs to be played with, which to me is the mark of an exceptional tool.

Also included are several digital effects such as flanging, echo, and equalization. These processors are fairly basic (some users may find them underpowered), but they can be individually applied to any section of a composition.

Multimedia producers will appreciate SmartSound's QuickTime support. You can embed any composition into an existing QuickTime movie and display a filmstrip-like preview above the Arrangement window.

On the downside, the app froze once or twice while working with it over the course of a month. Since the freezes were not duplicable, I couldn't determine whether it was a system conflict or a bug. But considering how often my Web browser crashes, this is a relatively minor issue.

I was quite impressed with SmartSound: it not only represents the next step in production music libraries, but also really helps to demystify the secrets of arrangements. Anyone looking for a music resource for soundtracks, presentations, or just fooling around should definitely check out this product. In fact, my television producer buddy is looking into purchasing a copy for his station. I guess that says it all.

(Note: A demo version is downloadable at www.sonicdesktop.com.)



EQ Lab Report

MANUFACTURER:	Sonic Desktop Software, P.O. Box 3205, Chatsworth, CA 91313-3205. Tel: 818-718-9999. Web: www.sonicdesktop.com .
APPLICATION:	Automated soundtrack production tool, available on CD-ROM for Mac or PC.
SUMMARY:	For novices and pros alike, this is a great tool for creating soundtracks of all kinds.
STRENGTHS:	Customized soundtrack creation; intuitive user interface; authentic, well-recorded musical tracks; license-free music (for soundtrack-production only).
WEAKNESSES:	Manual is PDF-only; some "modern" tracks sound a bit dated.
SYSTEM REQUIREMENTS:	4 MB RAM, 4-MB hard-disk space, 2X CD-ROM drive. Mac minimum: System 7, 68020 processor. Windows minimum: Windows 3.1/95/NT, 386 processor, 8- or 16-bit sound card.
PRICE:	\$259 for standard version; \$298 for "Dimensions" version (44.1 kHz stereo samples).



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