

Tape OP GEAR ReV IEWS



Cakewalk

V-Studio 100 portable music studio

One might think that Cakewalk's latest hardware collaboration with Roland is the little brother of the V-Studio 700 (*Tape Op* #72). After all, it comes with a new, "light" version of Cakewalk's signature DAW — *SONAR VS* — and instead of the full complement of Cakewalk's top-of-the-line synths and effects, it's bundled with the leaner *VS Production Pack*. Moreover, the USB interface/controller is calorie-crunched, with only eight inputs, a surround-sound friendly set of six outs, a single fader, and fewer knobs and buttons — all packed into a single, hefty but still portable, tabletop unit. However, there is some cross-breeding with Roland's standalone recorders as you can use the hardware unit to record and playback stereo tracks simultaneously to an SD or SDHC card, making it more of a cousin than a brother.

If you currently rely on a DAW with "all the bells and whistles", *SONAR VS* might be a little too stripped down. But you can record audio and MIDI, and then edit to your heart's content with *VS*, while taking advantage of the latest features from *SONAR*, like the redesigned Loop Explorer and Guitar Rig 3 LE. *VS* even beat *SONAR Pro* to including the new VX-64 Vocal Strip. This plug-in makes for one-stop shopping to finish a track — vocal or otherwise. De-essing — check. Delay with post filter, compander, a nifty doubler which lets you spread out the double across the soundfield, virtual tube EQ, re-patching — all check. Saturation at the input, output, or within the EQ — check. I thought that the tube saturation was lifted from Cakewalk's licensed Studio Devil plug-in, which is sweet, but I was told it was developed in-house. It still sounds sweet. Besides vocals, I found VX-64 handy to twist loops and beats through.

VS Production Pack also includes non-programmable versions of Cakewalk's flagship Dimension and Rapture synths, along with a Studio Instruments pack that includes drums, bass, electric piano, and strings — all much better than your standard General MIDI fare. Don't let the accompanying MIDI files fool you; the instruments themselves sound good enough for final audio. But if you are in a Doors tribute band, there is a MIDI sequence for the electric piano that would make Ray Manzarek blush. *SONAR VS* also worked with all my DX and VST software, so you can patch whatever holes you find in the Production Pack.

The *VS-100* hardware unit is unique in that it's an interface, controller, standalone recorder, and digital mixer with built-in effects rolled into one. Cakewalk claims the preamps and converters are "based" on those from the *VS-700*, and we all know what that means — simpler design and lower-cost components to reach a price point. However, comparing

recordings done on the *VS-700* through the *VS-100* didn't reveal major sonic differences. The mic preamps had a bit less gain, or maybe the gain was just bunched up toward the end of the knob. Either way, I could still get plenty of signal, even on softer sounds, and the inputs and conversion sounded clean. About the only downside was the lack of inserts on the mic channels. For some serious testing, I dragged the *VS-100* to The Kitchen Studios in Dallas, and we mult'ed a mic and guitar DI for some quick comparisons. Unsurprisingly, the Kitchen's API/Apogee combo sounded better, especially in the top end. Of course, any part of that chain is more expensive than the entire *VS* system, so it's not really a fair comparison. The *VS-100* was definitely usable, but if you absolutely, positively need that last bit of sound quality, you can use the line or S/PDIF inputs.

With two XLR mic inputs, four balanced 1/4" (one of which is hi-Z capable), and two RCA, the unit is geared more toward the composer and DJ crowd, rather than the band-at-once engineer, and its sound quality is as good as any similarly-priced units out there. As for the output, the D/A converters sound bright, though in no way harsh. Like the inputs, there are four balanced 1/4" outs and two RCA. A single phantom-power switch for the mic inputs is located on the rear panel, which is okay since it is a tabletop unit.

You'll want that table right beside you since the controller is my favorite part of the package. The 100 mm, touch-sensitive fader felt as good as, if not better than, those on the *VS-700*, and it gave plenty of tactile feedback. It was actually easier to keep track of where it was assigned than with the *VS-700*'s "lockable" faders, where the faders might not sequentially map out to the tracks they control. It was great just letting *SONAR* roll and using the Track buttons to move up and down tracks, practicing swells and fades as instruments came in and out — just like the old analog days, albeit with only a single fader. This practice made it easy to get a feel for the entire song, so the fader moves came naturally as I recorded automation on separate tracks — much better than mousing around, where it is too easy to focus on the tree, not the forest. A Transport button field allows you to jump to the beginning or end of a project or fast forward through the timeline. You'll still need a mouse and keyboard for editing, but many everyday functions are done easier with the *VS-100* hardware. If you aren't using *SONAR*, the *VS-100* utilizes Mackie Control Protocol, so it's DAW agnostic, and it's Mac and Windows compatible with ASIO, WDM, WASAPI, and Core Audio support.

To the top left is a second controller section. This defaults on startup to the digital mixer, with the LCD handily showing input and output metering. *SONAR VS* also includes ACT support to automatically map the controller section's knobs to whichever track or plug-in has focus. You can also make or change assignments manually. If you need more controllers, you can switch the unit into DAW Full Assign mode and use the digital mixer knobs, any footswitches that are hooked up, and the fader as well.

The digital mixer is a basic line mixer with its own output knobs and channel DSP buttons. A universal Comp/EQ button opens up the DSP functions in the LCD. Three knobs work with the LCD to change the parameters chosen with the fourth Cursor/Value knob. This gets fiddly, since there are more functions than knobs, and the Cursor knob moves through both functions as well as new pages, much like on old-school drum machines. It's not bad, but it does take a little time to get used to. As for the DSP effects, the EQ sounds good for subtractive work. The compressor works too, if you are careful, though personally I'd save it for live

use; I only mucked about with it during tracking for review purposes. The reverb is fine for either headphone mixes or live use, and you can set the send level for each analog input channel independently.

Finally, there is the 2-track recorder. It too is pretty basic and records either a mix of all the physical inputs or just one or two inputs. It will also do the old sound-on-sound trick, so you can overdub onto the playback file. It is perfect for late-night, on-the-road, or practice-room sessions when you don't want to fire up or bring along your entire system. It even includes a metronome. For live sets, the playback doesn't do playlists, nor does the mixer include sends or the ability to switch the built-in effects to the outputs for those funky venues (though Cakewalk is looking into this). But for the singer/guitarist/keyboardist, the unit works fine for live mixing with your backing tracks. The *VS-100* is mains, not battery or USB powered, so it won't substitute for a field recorder, but the sound is the same whether you are using an SD card or computer.

As with all multitasking units, there is always the danger of being a jack of all trades and master of none. However, the *VS-100* manages to combine all its functions without losing the reason for including them in the first place, making it a very cost-effective package for recording. I'm sure you could rig up a similar system out of various components, but it wouldn't be as compact and would most likely cost more. As an interface, it sounds good and the digital mixer format provides better ergonomics than many rackmount units. I found the built-in recorder/playback more useful than I thought, since it is so portable. As a DAW controller, the *VS-100* is fun as well as practical, making the most of its single fader. The controller functionality was also better than I initially thought it would be; it's definitely icing on the cake, or should I say, Cakewalk.

(\$699 MSRP; www.v-studio.info)

-Alan Tubbs, www.bnoir-film.com

Charter Oak Pop Filter

A good pop filter for cutting vocals is one of those easily overlooked tools in the studio. Often an afterthought, a good one makes a great mic even better — and an average mic sound okay. A crappy pop filter makes an amazing mic sound crappy. Why screw up your several-thousand-dollar microphone investment with a lousy pop filter??? The *PF-1* is my new favorite pop filter. It is a handsome, sturdy-looking piece about the size of the bottom of a coffee cup. It has not one, but two fine mesh screens Saati-Tech Hyphobe Acoustex with about a quarter of an inch between them. This material repels moisture, and stop plosives without compromising the frequency response of the microphone. It's lightweight, with a black exterior and natural cork middle section that makes for a pleasing aesthetic. There is a small, slightly sticky rubber dot on the mic side of the filter and a Velcro band. It's super easy to use; just press the dot onto the mic and use the Velcro to attach. Besides the nice dual mesh screen, the small size and weight have some obvious advantages over the larger metal-mesh pop filters that need to attach to a mic stand; the filter stays in place even if the mic moves, and the vocalist has a smaller "sweet spot" to focus on, so it's easier to stay on axis. I recently used this filter to track some vocals with a vocalist with whom I've consistently had plosive issues and was very pleased with the tracks as they had far fewer and quieter plosives with the same mic we'd previously used.

(\$44.95 MSRP; www.charteroakacoustics.com) —JB