

DV.com - Inspiring and Empowering Creativity



John Jackman

Notion

VirtuosoWorks, Inc., \$599

Music Composition and Performance Software

DV Score:



Pros:

Astounding orchestral playback is possible. Very nice samples and excellent playback engine.

Cons:

Requires knowledge of musical notation and composition. No MIDI import.

Bottom Line

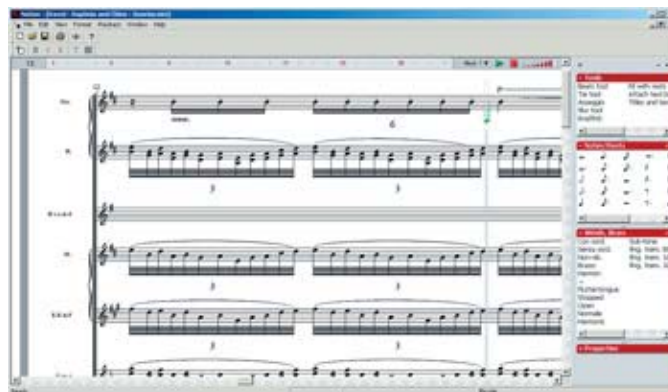
A fantastic tool for a low-budget filmmaker working with a composer to create a soundtrack. Not for the faint-of-music or the beginner.

What the ratings mean

 Excellent! A score of 4.5 or better earns an Award of Excellence.	 Very good.	 Solid choice.	 Almost.	 Don't bother.
---	----------------	-------------------	-------------	-------------------

VirtuosoWorks, Inc.: Notion

Notion (www.notionmusic.com) is an unusual review for DV because the target customers for this product are orchestral composers, not video producers. But video producers and indie filmmakers need music-a lot of music-and this software opens a door beyond loops and royalty-free clips. So DV felt compelled to investigate, asking the question, "Can Notion be used to create effective music soundtracks for movies and videos?" Another caveat: I'm not a composer, nor do I play one on TV.



[Click here to see a larger image.](#)

As you can see from the interface Notion is way beyond simple loop editing - it's designed for composers. Note on the lower right the instrument-specific playing techniques, which you can use to make your composition sound more natural.

But I have written music, played several instruments, and been involved in live musical performance for most of my life. And I am a video producer and indie filmmaker, and I am judging the software for its usefulness in that market.

Working with Notion

Okay, enough caveats. Notion is a newly released software package designed for orchestral composers. It's not unlike Finale, Sibelius, or even the shareware program NoteWorthy, each of which provides musical staff composition interfaces and then uses MIDI to let the composer hear playback of the written notes.

But getting good results out of one of the MIDI-based packages requires the user to become proficient at MIDI sample usage and design, or in the use of Soundfonts for Creative Labs-brand sound cards.

What sets Notion apart from these programs is a new, proprietary playback engine that uses ASIO (Audio Stream In/Out) sound card technology and a custom sampling library recorded by the London Symphony Orchestra at the Abbey Road Studios in London.

The quality of the instrument samples is high, though admittedly a step below the very top professional orchestral sample packages. But Notion's advantage is that a typical user doesn't have to have an advanced degree in electronic music to set it up and use it. It installs straight out of the box complete with configured ASIO playback engine and samples. VirtuosoWorks is planning an enhanced sample set, which will require a higher-end base machine for playback. Notion will play back a full orchestral score with up to 1,000-note polyphony in real time from the program's existing samples, or will render out the score to a WAV file, which can then be imported and used in any NLE or audio program.

In terms of system requirements, Notion currently runs only on Windows-based PCs, though a Mac version is in the works. The program requires the use of an iLok USB dongle, which installed efficiently on my test machine.

In addition to the system requirements, VirtuosoWorks recommends a hard drive with a transfer rate of at least 25 MBps to support the 1,000-sample polyphony playback.

Music software for musicians

When composing with Notion, a user needs a pretty solid knowledge of orchestral composition and music notation.

This is no basic loop editing program; Notion will baffle the average Acid or Soundtrack user. If you don't already know how to write transposed parts for B-flat trumpet or horn in F, you will have a steep, steep learning curve for using this software.

If you have a musical background-or, as many video pros do, are working with someone who does-Notion creates an interesting variety of possibilities for the creation of soundtrack music. This is a step beyond the really good multitrack keyboard player and a step toward a full orchestra.

A good composer working with Notion can create theme and incidental music that may in fact be good enough for final mix. And if it's not quite there, you can use the Notion output for the initial soundtrack and hire an orchestra to rerecord the score if more money rolls into your project later.

One of the main issues that gives away computer-generated music playback is the mechanical regularity of playback and lack of the natural variations of tone, vibrato, and attack that a human

musician uses without thinking. The same issues exist for Notion playback. Simply plugging in notes and hitting Play will sound pretty realistic for some parts, but electronic and mechanical for others. Lead instruments like violin and trumpet are the places where this will be most noticeable. To address this, Notion provides a number of tools that help a composer create more realistic playback. Dynamic markings, vibrato, and instrument-specific playing techniques are available, and using these increases the realism of playback significantly. Perhaps the most interesting tool is the Ntempo playback mode, which lets you "conduct" the score by tapping certain keys on the keyboard. This technique takes a little practice, but does allow the subtle speed variations that a human conductor uses for expression.

Minor flat notes

Notion isn't perfect. Although you can use a MIDI keyboard to input notes directly, you can't import or export a MIDI file, something that is pretty basic for composition programs.

This means that any work done in another program will have to be re-entered note by note, from scratch, in Notion. (The word from the Notion folks is the addition of MIDI file import/export is a high priority, and they plan to release this feature as a free, downloadable upgrade.) Also, the delete tool doesn't always work easily. You must set the music cursor to the exact symbol you want to delete (half note, quarter note, fermata, etc.), click on that symbol in the composition to select it, then hit Delete. Often it doesn't work (maybe I didn't click the note precisely enough?) and it takes three or four tries to get rid of an erroneous note. Some entries are very difficult to delete; the worst were hairpins, the crescendo/decrescendo marks. Alternate deletion techniques, such as dragging a marquee, ought to be available.

Conclusion

A program like Notion can be very useful, but it's important to keep its functions in context. DV isn't encouraging folks to do away with using live musicians.

In fact, it's probably nearly as easy to hire a real cellist to cut a few measures as it is to work up a realistic sounding cello arpeggio in Notion. Use live musicians whenever possible-there are a lot of them out there who need work! But we have to face reality: Hiring a cellist or even a string quartet is one thing; hiring a full orchestra is something else entirely. Notion's real value is opening the door to an orchestral score even when you don't have an orchestra budget.

Notion

System

Requirements:

Pentium 2 GHz processor or equivalent; Windows 2000 SP4, Windows XP or later; 512 MB RAM; a sound card compatible with DirectX 9.0 or ASIO; 3 GB of free hard disk space.

*The Rev. John Jackman worked on harpsichords and pipe organs before he became fascinated with video 25 years ago. He's the author of *Lighting for Digital Video & Television* (CMP Books, 2004) and is moderator of *The Craft of Lighting* forum at DV.com. You can reach him there with your questions.*