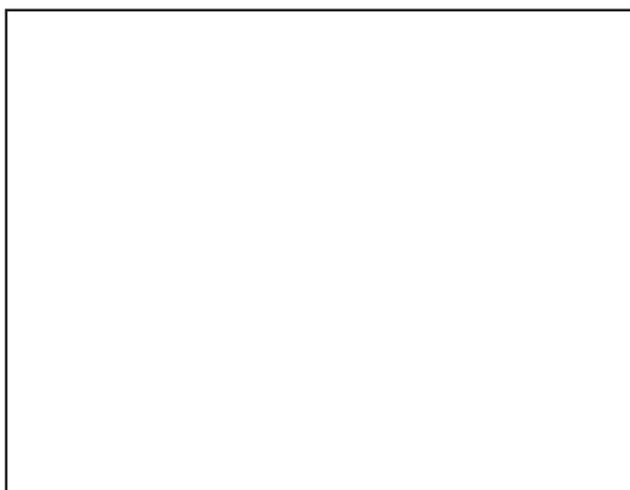


Digital Symphony

A new SoundTracker package reviewed by Richard Hallas.

computer games and demos these days invariably contain background music created by some sort of SoundTracker program. The Amiga and Atari ST have had a monopoly on such musical productions in the past, as the Archimedes lacked a SoundTracker creation program until the appearance of The Serial Ports Tracker just over a year ago. Now Oregon Developments has



Some of Digital Symphony's many windows

bewildering to someone coming to the subject for the first time. Two of the discs contain demonstration tunes and a variety of samples, whilst the other contains the main program and a number of conversion utilities, including one to convert Maestro files into Tracker format. The software I received was an early version which

entered the arena with what it claims is a significantly enhanced implementation, incorporating many new effects and features not available on any other package.

THE PACKAGE

Digital Symphony comes on three discs in a rather anonymous card wallet along with a keystrip, a registration sheet and a comb-bound manual of around 40 single-sided pages. The manual is adequate, but it could have been better organised, and it contains some clumsy explanations and bad grammar. All the necessary information is there, but it may prove rather



Digital Symphony's monitor screen when playing a piece

contained some minor bugs, which I am told will have been eradicated by the time

you read this.

IN USE

When loaded onto the icon bar, Digital Symphony presents two icons, one of which controls its use of the sound system. The other can be customised to open various windows. The windows themselves are unusual, as they do not match the normal RISC OS presentation. They contain the often-seen 3D Impression-style icons but, for once, this style also extends to the window borders and tools. The entire presentation of the application is very classy indeed, although it seems a little strange to have two styles of window on the Desktop at once. There are no high resolution icons, though, which is a pity.

Digital Symphony has a very large number of windows, and some of them are quite sizeable (the Pattern Editor is actually wider than the standard screen), so a good monitor and large screen mode is a real benefit, although the program will work with any configuration.

Digital Symphony's facilities for editing patterns are very sophisticated. It is possible to drag a highlight over whatever part of a pattern is required and then delete or copy the selection, just as in a word processor, or apply some sort of processing effect instead, such as transposition (in semitones) or modification of sample or effect assignments.

Whilst these editing facilities are available within individual patterns in the pattern editor, exactly the same facilities are available for selections of entire patterns in the Pattern List window, which shows all the patterns so far defined. Patterns can also be individually viewed in a Score

window which displays them in standard musical notation. A certain amount of licence must be applied to standard in this context, but the window serves its purpose. Although the score was only a viewing option in the version I saw, it is promised that future versions of the program will allow full editing via the Score window. This is highly desirable, and will be a real innovation for this program.

A comprehensive range of effects is available for each note, and it is a simple matter to pick up a particular combination of sample and effect, and paste it down on other notes. The three different aspects of a note (pitch, sample and effect) can be turned on and off for editing purposes, so effects can be pasted without affecting pitch, which is very useful.

A Sequence Editor has the same drag-to-select approach as the other windows, and it is easy and quick to assign the patterns to where you want them. Once the piece is playing, you can watch its progress in a Monitor screen, the only part of the program which doesn't work in the Desktop. The Monitor shows the contents of all the tracks scrolling past in real-time, along with a waveform and VU bar for each. There is also a Sample Editor built into Digital Symphony, in which a sound sample is displayed as a waveform, and an on-screen keyboard is shown which you can play with the mouse. Here it is possible to select, copy and delete parts of a sample, and to set loops and overall fine tuning (to the resolution of one semitone up or down). As with the other parts of the package, the facilities are extensive, flexible and easy to use.

THE CONVERTERS

It is promised that Maestro, MED, OctaMED, and OctaMED Pro converters will be supplied, although I only saw a pre-release of the Maestro converter. It could play the Maestro pieces at the same time as performing the conversion, and provided various options to aid the conversion process, including the ability to convert just a range of bars. It seemed to do a good job with the conversion, although I think an option to insert note cut-offs would be useful, as the harmonies can easily blur in fast pieces. A curious effect was that the converted melody could wander around the stereo positions from one side to the other! A certain amount of editing will probably always be necessary to avoid this sort of thing but, at the very least, the converters take most of the work out of translating between formats.

CONCLUSIONS

I only really have two niggles with Digital Symphony, but both are minor. It is not possible to save the stereo positions with individual pieces. I also wished it were possible to alter the tuning of samples over more than a semitone, as some of the supplied samples play several semitones away from the correct pitch. The manual could also be better, but apart from that it is very difficult to fault this excellent piece of software. The editing facilities couldn't be better, and make it very easy to produce music quickly. Every aspect of the program's implementation and presentation has obviously had a great deal of thought and attention to detail put into it, and the final result is very polished indeed. It is written in ARM code, and works very 

I evaluated. Another problem is that the viewdata emulation insists on displaying frames in a two pass operation which is quite annoying to watch if you're used to better emulations. I also noticed minor problems with the way certain display codes were interpreted in both the ANSI and viewdata terminals. But there is hope yet. I put all these points to author David Caughley and in response he was good enough to spend some time improving the viewdata emulation. I haven't yet seen the modifications he came up with, but he assures me things are much improved.

Other points he also promised to address were some quibbles I had about the ZMODEM file transfer box which asks the user to enter a filename even though this will be ignored as one is already embedded in ZMODEM files. X, Y and ZMODEM file transfer protocols are supported, but I was surprised there

was no CET telesoftware downloader. 4Mation says there is little demand for it - an assumption I question.

I contacted Campus 2000 for their opinion of Chatter - they had only had a brief time to try the program but besides suggesting the replay utility, which 4Mation has since produced, they did express some reservations about the quality of the Teletel emulation - which has much more complex graphics than ordinary viewdata.

In conclusion I have to say that I was very disappointed with the program supplied for review (version 1.01). The neat RISC OS user interface was badly let down by the terminal emulations. However, I'm heartened by 4Mation's interest in what I thought of their work and if their promised improvements are implemented Chatter may yet have the opportunity of attracting attention in the education market, particularly primary and junior schools. 

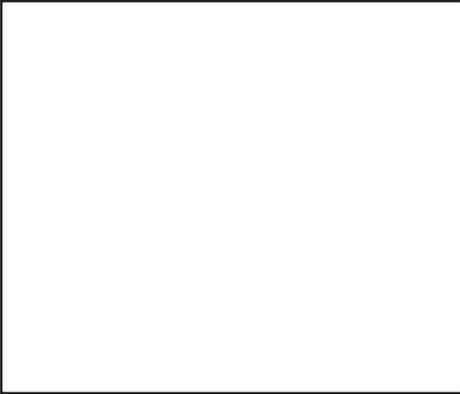
Product Chatter

Supplier 4Mation

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Tel. 0271 25353

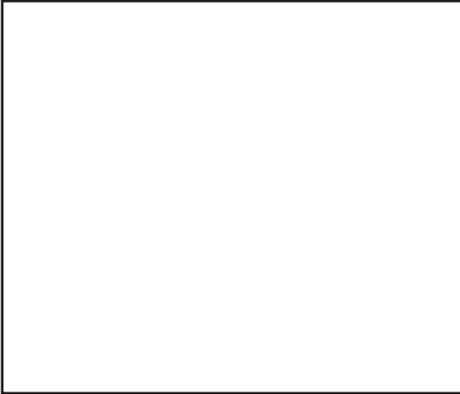
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smoothly. The only notable missing feature is score editing, which is promised for a later version (upgrades are free to registered users). Digital Symphony can save in any Tracker format, including its own new format which has a compressed option. It can also create stand-alone play modules,

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instructions
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programmers wishing to incorporate music in their own programs.

Altogether, this is a first class product which lives up to all the claims made of it.

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