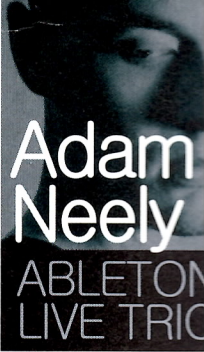


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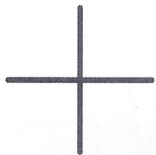
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WordBuilder for entering lyrics

5-stage envelope

The pop-out instrument sidebar displays all component layers of patches and multis, making them available for basic edits and tweaks.



Mic perspectives

Microtuning available

EASTWEST

Hollywood Choirs

A CHOIR THAT CAN SING YOUR LYRICS? NOW, WE'RE TALKING!

BY MARTY CUTLER

Marty Cutler is the author of *The New Electronic Guitarist*, published by Hal Leonard.

STRENGTHS
Lush male and female choirs. Many expressive options. Ability to sing intelligible lyrics. Intuitive UI. Custom phrase dictionaries. Multiple mics. Convolution reverb. Helpful documentation.

LIMITATIONS
Shuttling between WordBuilder and Browser slightly inconvenient.

\$599 Diamond Edition
\$499 Gold Edition
\$24.99/month Composer Cloud Subscription
soundsonline.com

It's easy to be impressed by choral sounds, be they played on synthesizers, samplers, or some combination thereof. Synthesized choirs, in general, tend to comprise pure, simple waveforms, and with a bit of programming practice, vocal-type sounds aren't all that difficult to simulate. Of course, the instant you need them for something more than a backdrop or pad, their limitations are obvious: Most significantly, few will sing precisely what you want them to.

Among the better choir libraries available, some sing phrases, but precious few allow user input. The most flexible, in this regard, is EastWest/Quantum Leap Hollywood Choirs.

As a basic sample library, Hollywood Choirs is perfectly capable of producing simple choral pads singing the vowel of your choice. But the real action is in its WordBuilder functionality, which unlocks the library's impressive lyric and expression capabilities—more on that in a moment.

Hollywood Choirs is available in three editions—Gold, Gold X (a special Composer Cloud version), and Diamond (the full version with 24-bit sample resolution). For the Diamond edition, which I reviewed, the installer deposits around 59GB of 24-bit, 44.1 kHz sample data into the drive of your choice. (The need for such a sizeable library will soon become apparent.)

The vehicle for Hollywood Choirs is EastWest's free Play sample player (version 6 or later). Play supports Standalone mode as well as AAX, AU, and VST plug-in formats. For this review, I used Hollywood Choirs within Steinberg Cubase 9.5, MOTU Digital Performer 9.5, and Apple Logic 10.4.

VOCAL SOUNDS

Hollywood Choirs provides patch folders for men's

and women's choirs, each with subfolders of vowels and consonants. Vowels offer up staccato, legato, slow legato, vibrato, and simple sustained variations. As you load from the menus of individual patches, you can alter each patch's velocity, pitch range, key-switch settings, tuning, and choose from dozens of microtuning presets using the pop-out

sidebar, which you can hide or extend as needed.

A click on the Player button returns you to the main interface, with a Master Channel strip hosting additional programming features, including reverb parameters and mic perspectives. The convolution reverb, which can be applied per instrument or globally, is culled from EastWest's Spaces, with impulses ranging from guitar-amp springs to scoring stages and cathedral interiors.

The sampled mic-array recordings are versatile, bringing 13 mics to bear in several configurations, such as close-mic, Decca tree, and three (wide, mid, far) perspectives. A small mixer, expressly for the mic arrays, lets you combine, match, and enable each position, and you can pan the mix globally or individually. There's an additional large-format mixing console, as well (Figure 1).

I've always appreciated Play's Stereo Doubler, which applies a subtle animated thickening effect without lapsing into obvious chorusing. You may not need it in Hollywood Choirs, but it adds a touch of extra motion and warmth.

The left side of the Player interface has a number of significant performance features, including global transposition, MIDI velocity-curve editing (Sensitivity), limiting, an amp AHDSR envelope generator,

and MIDI-controls and scripts that can enable different types of legato behavior. If you're a moderately facile keyboardist, enabling the Other button lets you vary the speed of legato transitions using velocity—very helpful for humanizing solo lines.

WORDBUILDER

The main attraction in Hollywood Choirs is the WordBuilder. It utilizes two choir multis (one male, one female) that gather all articulations—consonants, vowels, breath sounds, and unpitched consonants—and accept text input for lyrics. By default, the WordBuilder Multis load with an already prepared phrase: The realism is startling and whets your appetite to create your own.

If you plan to use multiple voices—for instance, male and female choirs, sopranos and tenors—you will need a multi (and a separate instance of Play) for each voice. Play's engine is efficient enough that this shouldn't raise performance issues for newer computers.

And although the UI shuttles easily back and forth between WordBuilder and Player pages, getting to the WordBuilder from the Browser can only happen from the Player Page. Likewise, you need to open the Player page before you can open the Browser. This can be a little unwieldy if you want to load additional Play instruments.

VOTOX INJECTION

You make Hollywood Choirs sing by parsing your words, syllable-by-syllable, and typing them into a text-editor square in the center of the WordBuilder page (Figure 2). Naturally, you will want to dive in and start writing lyrics, and my first attempts included a bit of beginner's luck; the engine behind WordBuilder is relatively forgiving. You get three data-entry voice modes: English, Phonetics and Votox, the latter a customized code for interpreting pronunciation and articulation.

As you construct a phrase, you can solo any individual syllable to tweak it as closely as possible to the pronunciation you need. By default, the modulation wheel (CC#1) controls the loudness of the patch, making it easy to build dynamic passages while playing and recording: The higher the CC value, the louder—and more intelligible—the lyrics. For that reason, it's a good idea to audition your work with the mod wheel full on.

As you input syllables into the text editor, the Voice window displays your input in the three voice types, and you can switch at any time between them. That's especially handy, because you can start with simple English and fine-tune the output through Phonetics and Votox as you go. The final outcome will probably not resemble your expected spelling, but the goal is to shape the intelligibility of the words.

Additional steps are required to get accurate articulation and expression. For instance, you can add

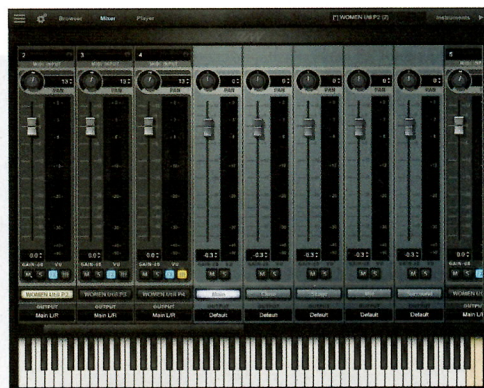


Fig. 1: Hollywood Choir's mixer lets you adjust instrument layers as well as their microphone mixes.

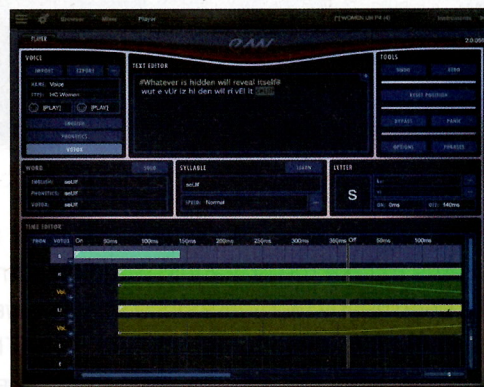


Fig. 2: Using the Text Editor, you parse words into syllables using any of the three WordBuilder types—English, Phonetics, and Votox. I have typed in the phrase for comparison: Notice the differences in translation as well as the automation lanes with breakpoint envelopes below the selected syllable.



Fig. 3: Clicking on the turquoise FX button in the mixer brings up the instrument's channel-strip effects.

characters to emphasize consonants, change the duration of syllables, or sustain them. You can even sustain a syllable while the remaining voices advance through the phrase. The Voice editor has a hidden window in which you can globally adjust the volume of vowels as well as pitched and non-pitched consonants.

Below the text editor is the Time Editor, resembling a typical piano-roll sequencer, where you move syllables, change their duration, create overlapping syllables, and add volume crossfades be-

tween phrases, syllables or even the diphthongs and phonemes. Click on the little plus sign just below, and you can automate any phrase using a variety of MIDI Control Change messages. You can directly input the speed of a syllable relative to other syllables in the phrase or use velocity or key-switching to change the articulation or duration of a given consonant for real-time emphasis or de-emphasis.

Although building a song for the choir is hardly a one-step process, tweaking these elements goes a long way toward developing your virtual choir's depth of expression. Because of the level of experimentation needed, Hollywood Choirs provides 100 levels of undo and redo, available for text editing as well as automation moves.

Another handy feature for editing is the button that resets playback to the beginning, so you can avoid the tedium of waiting for the entire piece to wrap around to the beginning every time you want to audition a phrase. As a DAW plug-in, Hollywood Choirs' lyrics faithfully chased the song position.

To get a handle on how the text translates to sound, try loading and studying any of the dozens of preset phrases EastWest provides. Along with a wealth of English phrases, you'll find folders in German, Italian, Latin, and Spanish. The Phrase section also lets you store and organize your own. Moreover, the text editor window provides a little pop-up glossary, and EastWest supplies an excellent WordBuilder quick-reference guide.

OKAY, CHORALE

The attention to detail in Hollywood Choirs carries over into the sampling and overall high quality of sound. The choirs and component vowel-and-consonant patches are balanced, clean and free of any obvious loop artifacts. When combined as multis, they are warm and animated. As a result, Hollywood Choirs works well in exposed situations.

EastWest's convolution reverb is sweet, organic-sounding and translucent, and you get an excellent model of an SSL channel strip, replete with EQ, filters, and dynamics processing, all tucked into a large virtual mixing console (Figure 3). I'm not sure why, but East West also threw in a convolution guitar amp; then again, who says a choir has to sound normal?

I don't think I've heard as lifelike and as flexible a sampled choir as EastWest Hollywood Choirs. It isn't perfect, but for eminently powerful software that tackles a complex task so musically, it's surprisingly devoid of complication. For the most part, the software is intuitive to use: Nonetheless, the thorough, well-written manual and supplementary WordBuilder guides are indispensable if you want to delve into the instrument's deep channels of expression.

EastWest Hollywood Choirs is an extremely well thought-out, brilliantly executed addition to the company's line of orchestral tools. I recommend it highly and unreservedly. ■