

Spectrasonics: Omnisphere

By Peter Lawrence Alexander / October 25, 2008

We look at the installation process, the sounds, and how to quickly get around without watching two hours of videos!



New from Spectrasonics is *Omnisphere*, the long awaited update to their continually useful and viable *Atmosphere*.

Given the present state of the economy worldwide, if you could only add one or two programs to your musical production arsenal before year's end, *Omnisphere* would have to be at the top of the list with *Symphobia* from ProjectSAM a close second.

If you're a present owner of Spectrasonics' *Atmosphere*, *Trilogy* or *Stylus RMX*, then check their web site because you may be eligible to update for the no-brainer price of \$149US.

Omnisphere comes with literally thousands of new sounds that you'll have a great time going through. Another compelling reason to update/buy *Omnisphere* is that Spectrasonics has listened to its customer requests by also including some of the "best of" aspects of many of their key libraries such as *Symphony Of Voices*, *Distorted Reality*, *Vocal Planet*, *Hans Zimmer Guitars* and many others. They've also included, and apparently beefed up a bit, their string section libraries, too. So if you've never tweaked a sound, if you've never had any desire to tweak a sound, that's OK, because there are thousands of ready-to-go sounds to work with that are viable from song production to game and film/TV scoring and everything in between including sound design.

That said, from the Spectrasonics' website here's their mission statement for *Omnisphere*:

The mission of Omnisphere is all about the creation and manipulation of dynamic new sounds that have never been heard before. However, it's very broad in its sonic scope and will appeal to users all across the musical spectrum. You can think of it more like an "Exploration-station". 😊

Reading their mission statement may give you sense that *Omnisphere* was designed for the ultimate "mad musical scientist" type individual. Well, a mad musical scientist *would* have a lot of fun with *Omnisphere*, but my experience so far would be to define *Omnisphere* as a musical sound creation station.

While there are many excellent programs on the market, the one word I would use to describe *Omnisphere* is *indispensable*. It's part of the tool kit that you'll continue to use over and over in many projects, even full orchestral projects. The inclusion of elements from *Symphony of Voices* alone makes it a valid tool for even an A-list composer.

The organization of *Omnisphere* I have to classify as being *ingenious*. All of the sounds can be found under three different browsers. The organization of the browser works much like a blog in that for each sound there are tags (like you see posted here on Sonic Control). Type a tag name into the search engine, and it brings up all the programs attached to that tag. You can also create new tag categories to customize how you hear sounds.

With one exception which I'll discuss shortly, from beginning to end, this entire project has been thought out with exceptional quality care and design that completely takes into account the user experience including installation, which is the one thing I complain about in most every review. I don't know if Eric Persing, president of Spectrasonics, has been through Six Sigma Quality Training or not, but it sure looks it.

Rarely have I seen the user experience so well thought out.

This is not to say that everything is perfect, because it's not. *Omnisphere* is software. As a software program, it's at version 1.0.2d, so there will be changes and updates.

So let's get under the hood.

INSTALLATION

I'm restating what I said in a private letter to Spectrasonics. The installation process is a textbook model for the industry. It's well thought out. To my pleasant surprise, the contents of the installation manual actually mirrored what I saw onscreen. This rarely happens. For the Mac, there's an installation guide for the Mac itself, a separate tutorial for installing to an external drive (very good thinking!), and finally, how to install on the PC.

Registration with the challenge/response mechanism was very easy, and I might say, a pleasant change from having to deal with USB keys for copy protection. I wish more companies would look at how Spectrasonics uses challenge/response for copy protection. My time here was well managed.

Once you complete the installation process, the next thing you want to do is hear the sounds, just to make sure you didn't screw up and buy a program sold on hype, even with Spectrasonics!

AUDITIONING THE SOUNDS

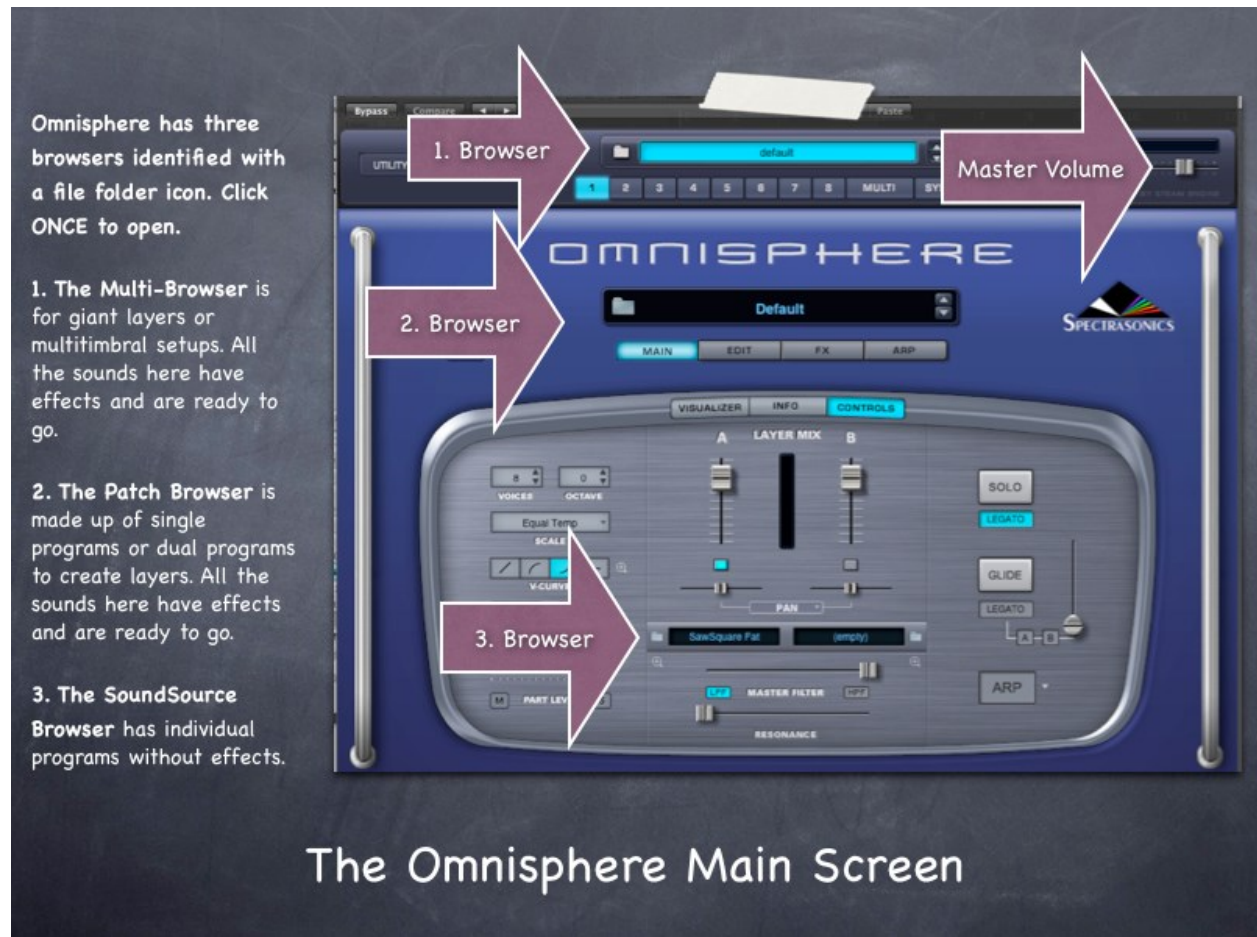
This is where my main critique falls. Some may think this is picayune, but after spending several hours installing *Omnisphere*, I want to use it and hear it (e.g., play around!), not spend two hours watching videos on what to do next.

Up to this point, the user experience is exceptionally designed. All that was needed were a few more screen shots in the Users Guide, or in the PDF reference to get you started.

That's because after installation, the user wants to know three things *right away*:

1. What does it sound like (confirming a good buying decision was made)?
2. Where are the effects (to sound "Hollywood" big, many sounds have lots of reverb that need to be backed down a bit)?
3. How do you set up multitimbrally (so you know how to approach working in your sequencer)?

Both the User Guide and the Reference Guide stopped short on these three points all of which are resolvable with either a few PDF pages or teaching graphics. So to fill in the blanks for now, I've created a short series of graphics for Sonic Control readers that cover points 1 and 2 above. As you look at each graphic (on the following pages), what you'll continue to see is how well *Omnisphere* is thought out and how easy it is to use it.



Omnisphere is really quick to use. Once you get to the main screen, you'll see three folder icons (see the arrow in the slide). Clicking once on any folder opens the browser for that group of sounds. In the upper right hand corner is the Master Volume fader. I suggest you pull that to the left to lower the volume a bit to avoid distortion.


EFFECTS

Omnisphere has a powerful effects section. Click the FX button to get there.

Click the FX button to get into *Omnisphere's* powerful FX sections.

You get presets and a full effects rack. All the effects are completely programmable.

Remember, Patches and Multi's already have effects applied.



The screenshot shows the Omnisphere software interface. At the top, there are utility buttons like 'Bypass', 'Compare', and 'Paste'. Below that is a 'UTILITY' section with a 'default' preset name and a 'Master Volume' slider. The main area is titled 'OMNISPHERE' and 'POWER SVATH'. It features a 'Default' preset name and buttons for 'MAIN', 'EDIT', 'FX', and 'ARP'. The 'FX' button is highlighted. Below these are four slots in an effects rack, each with a 'PRESETS' dropdown menu. A purple arrow points to the 'Master Volume' slider. Two blue callout boxes with white text and arrows point to the 'PRESETS' dropdowns in the first and second slots of the effects rack.

Click here to open the effects rack.

Click here to apply a preset effect.

The Omnisphere FX Screen

THE PROGRAMMABLE FX LIST

Click the FX button to get into Omnisphere's powerful FX sections.


Click the reveal triangle once to bring up the effects list.

Omnisphere gives you these programmable effects.

- ✓ No Effect
- Tube Limiter
- Tape Slammer
- Modern Compressor
- Vintage Compressor
- Gate Expander
- Imager
- Vintage 2-Band EQ
- Vintage 3-Band EQ
- Graphic 7-Band EQ
- Graphic 12-Band EQ
- Parametric 2-Band EQ
- Parametric 3-Band EQ
- Wah-Wah
- Power Filter
- Formant Filter
- Valve Radio
- Flame Distortion
- Smoke Amp Simulator
- Ultra Chorus
- Retro-Phaser
- PRO-Phaser
- EZ-Phaser
- Retro-Flanger
- Flanger
- Chorus Echo
- BPM Delay
- BPM Delay X2
- BPM Delay X3
- Retroplex
- Radio Delay

The Omnisphere FX List

THE PRESET LIST



Click the FX button to get into Omnisphere's powerful FX sections.

Click the reveal triangle labeled preset to open this list.

Omnisphere gives you these preset effects. Once applied you can still adjust them.

The Omnisphere Preset FX List

The screenshot shows the Omnisphere software interface with the preset list menu open. The menu lists various preset effects such as Ambient Guitar, Cheap Mics+Bad Room, Cheeseball Spring, Chorus Delay Room, Chorus Verb, Chorus Verb2, Clear n Wide Space, Closet Recording, Dub Surf rig, EP Uber-rich Hall, Filtered Ambience 1, Filtered Ambience 2, Filtered Ambience 3, Filtered Ambience 4, Gated Eighties, Gianormous, Harpy Delays, Mid-Mono Ambience, Mono Lo-Fi Chamber, Mono Metal Chamber, Scott's Rack of Love, Snare Resonator, Space Echo Modern, Space Echo Retro, Superphaser Plate, and Tape Chamber. The interface also shows the 'UTILITY' button and the 'MULTI' and 'SYSTEM' buttons.

LOADING A SOUND

Because I was working on a vocal arrangement, from the Patch Browser list I decided to select a sound from *Symphony of Voices, Boys Choir*. Here you can see the context sensitive browser in action. For the most amount of choices, select ALL.



PRESET FX FOR BOYS CHOIR

Once I selected *Boys Choir*, I just clicked on **FX** to take me to the screen below. *Boys Choir* only has reverb applied.



THE VIDEO TUTORIALS

I watched a couple of the teaser videos, then after registration I entered the user area and watched the first 22-minute video. The video was well produced, but for training it felt more to me like a NAMM presentation. There's a lot of good information in it, and you get the sense quickly of how easy *Omnisphere* is to work with. So it accomplished that mission. But the three user expectations that I listed earlier, which represent a Stage 1 in training, weren't right up front. I thought the video was going that way, and then it slid into the standard NAMM, "...and now you can do, and then you can do this, and look at this," type of presentation.

This is why I strongly recommend getting the training videos out in the main area where anyone can see them. Many homes have two computers, and millions have iPhones. So watching while you're installing is a good use of time. And, the first 22-minute video is a sales closer.

Another reason for moving the videos out of the "registration area" is that to watch them, you have to keep track of your serial number. Since there's no auto registration on the Spectrasonics site, this is yet one more thing to monitor. If the idea is to make me feel "special" since only registered users can see the videos, well, speaking for myself only, it doesn't make me feel special. So please, let's liberate these videos so everyone can see them without a serial number.

AUDIO DEMOS

As of this writing, October 25, 2008, there are no audio demos posted on the Spectrasonics site. The only way you can hear audio demos is to watch the videos or, as Eric Persing, *Omnisphere's* creator suggests, search the Net and other forums to find them.

Folks, let's get serious.

If someone is upgrading from *Atmosphere* to *Omnisphere* it's no big deal since they know what to expect. But if someone is buying it brand new, making them wade through videos, then searching the Net for audio demos is really unwise. *Omnisphere* has been shipping since September 15, 2008. Given the number of composer endorsements Spectrasonics has, Mr. Persing well knows that asking people to buy a virtual instrument without hearing audio demos is like asking people to see a movie without first watching the trailer. It simply isn't done. Spectrasonics needs to make the customer buying decision easier by getting audio demos up and liberating those "tutorial videos" so everyone can see them.

CONCLUSION

Omnisphere is a great program and a great value for the working composer/songwriter/sound designer. I stand by my conclusion that *Omnisphere* is an *indispensable* part of the tool kit.

This article was previously published at the SonicControl website.