

Absynth is back and weirder than ever after 16 years

Absynth is something of a cult classic in the soft synth world. It was originally released in 2000, and quickly found an audience among the growing cadre of people making music on computers. But its last major update, Absynth 5, was released in 2009, and Native Instruments officially discontinued the instrument in 2022, citing a lack of resources to continue supporting software in desperate need of modernization. But now the Absynth is making a grand return with version six, created in collaboration with the original designer Brian Clevinger, and featuring presets from Brian Eno and Kaitlyn Aurelia Smith.

The core of what made it so beloved is unchanged in Absynth 6. It's still a robust semi-modular virtual instrument with several synthesis engines to choose from and extensive modulation options. There's traditional subtractive synthesis with a ton of waveshapes to choose from, ranging from basic sine waves to buzzy complex chords – you can even draw your own wave shape. There's also FM, a sample player, and a granular engine.

That puts it in a league with other flagship super-synths such as Omnisphere, Serum, Pigments, and Native Instruments' Massive X. But where it manages to outdo even those powered plugins, is with its envelope system. Rather than a standard four-point ADSR (attack, decay, sustain, release) envelope, or even a six-point DAHDSR (delay, attack, hold, decay, sustain, release) envelope, Absynth 6 envelopes have up to 68 points. These can be looping, single-shot, or time-synced. The modulation system in Absynth is absurdly powerful.

This is part of what allows it to excel at evolving soundscapes. Native Instruments bills Absynth as being “weird by design,” and it’s hard to argue with that tag line. Many of the factory presets aren’t the sort of thing you’d find in the score of a sci-fi or horror film, designed with a focus on texture and atmosphere. If you’re into ambient or do score work, Absynth is an intriguing tool to have in your arsenal. Adding to its cinematic versatility, Absynth 6 supports up to eight-channel surround sound, which is basically unheard of.

Also new to Absynth in version 6 is support for MPE, which gives its already pretty complex sounds even more expressive options. Pressing harder or sliding your finger up on a compatible controller, like the Push 3 or Roli Seaboard, can open a filter, bring in a new oscillator, or turn up the feedback on the Aetherizer granular effect on a per-note basis. That means you can highlight just the highest notes in a chord progression, while keeping the root note dark and muted.

The most immediately noticeable change to Absynth, though, is the new AI-assisted preset explorer. Instead of just a list of sounds for you to click through, Absynth defaults to a collection of points organized roughly by vibe. It’s not unlike Obsidian’s graph view or the XO sample manager. Personally, I’m not a huge fan. It’s ok for finding surprises in the library of over 2,000 presets. But it makes it difficult to keep track of what I’ve auditioned, what is new to me.

If you want to quickly tweak a preset without having to dive into the various sound design tabs, patches have up to eight macro controls, and there’s a Mutate button that semi-randomly makes minor changes to whatever sound you have loaded up to create a new variation.

Absynth 6 is available for \$199 for new users. But if you already own Absynth 5, you can upgrade for only \$99.

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