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A Second MusiCHI Appraisal

This review constituted something of a challenge, because when it comes to computer programs I am, shall we say politely, relatively unskilled. For me, a computer is mostly a glorified typewriter, post-office box, shopping catalog outlet, and information search site. Prior to being sent the MusiCHI (pronounced “musi-chee”) program, I had never attempted either to download a piece of music from the Internet, burn a CD in my computer, or rip an existing music CD into a file stored in my computer for playback from there. Precisely because of this, however, *Fanfare’s* editor and I thought that I would be a good candidate to offer a review of this product from a computer neophyte’s perspective, to see how user-friendly it is for those who are not technologically savvy.

Downloading the program itself from the home site, musichi.eu, is straightforward. Since the complete program consists of a set (or suite) of four interrelated applications, four icons appear on the desktop or in any folder created for it: MusiCHI Library Manager, MusiCHI Player, MusiCHI Ripper, and MusiCHI Tagger. These applications respectively allow users to catalog, index, and search for music downloads; play downloaded music files from the computer; rip music CDs (that is, copy and store them in a computer as digital files); and tag or label downloads with various specific categories, such as genre/period, instruments, and performers. The ripper application also has limited tagging capabilities. There is a free trial version that works for three weeks, and a sample music library of excerpts can be downloaded with it for initial use to gain familiarity with the program. If you decide to buy the product, there is a choice between the Portable version for devices such as USB drives and data sticks (€19), the Studio version for home computers (€39), and the Ultimo version that combines both (€49). The Portable version contains only the MusiCHI Library Manager and MusiCHI Player.

Each of the four applications has a toolbar at the top of the screen, with some or all of the following categories: File, Edit, View, Library, MusiCHI, Flavors, Settings, and Help (all seven appear only in the tagging application). From File the user selects features such as the desired “flavors” of music (classical or jazz), playlists, libraries, or grids (data templates), and can add to, edit, or delete these, as

well as copy selected files. The Edit function allows selection and revision of various filters (categories of information), cleaning and manual editing of tags (specific category entries), and similar features. View allows a choice of columns, album covers, font sizes, and other items to be displayed. Library allows tracks to be added or saved to a particular library (more than one library can be created). MusiCHI accesses the other applications and the MusiCHI data folder. Flavors allows the user to create, edit, and delete basic musical styles (classical and jazz are the two default flavors). Settings covers features pertaining to album covers, font size, buffer size, and use of the ASIO sound driver or MusiCHI Clean function, while the Help file contains a standard query/search function and links to the online tutorials.

The Library Manager application is used to create and manage libraries of stored musical files. A library is actually an index of titles—roughly equivalent to a card catalog—rather than the corresponding set of actual musical files. The initial screen is divided into three sections. In the first section, the user selects the Studio or Portable version. In the second, there are tabs for Music, CD Covers, Advanced, and Express. Music allows folders to be added, deleted, refreshed, or populated from scratch, and provides a link to go directly to playing selections from the existing music library. (Note that deleting an entry from the library does not delete the corresponding audio file from the computer.) In the third section, there are tabs for Status of Operations, Browse Library Data, and Fixing Problems (for example, duplicate files or errant tags). A pop-up screen for a very basic tutorial also appears when this file is opened; the home website for the program has 16 detailed audiovisual tutorials, lasting two to nine minutes each, that provide further guidance.

The Player application lists the files in the library available for playing. It has categories for artist, genre, and album in one section, and another section with columns for filters, ranging from composition title and artist to track number and timing to sample and bit rates. A third section of the screen has the actual player with all of the usual function buttons; these also appear on a miniaturized toolbar when the main screen is minimized.

The Ripper application allows for music CDs to be converted into digital files and stored in a computer for playback. The contents can be customized in various ways. For example, individual tracks may be included or excluded; various “file patterns” (categories of information displayed in different orders) may be selected; music folders and directories may be accessed; and pictures of CD covers can be embedded in files. For ripping CDs, one can choose between MP3, WAV, and FLAC formats (the website states that the program supports FLAC, MP3, WMA and M4a/MP4 formats). Another area of the screen displays the categories of artist, composer, and album. A Tagging tab accesses a tagging screen similar to that in the application; above this (and not appearing in the regular Tagging application screen), a toolbar has options to load or eject CDs, load tracks, play selected items, and open or close panels (displays of categories such as composer, composition, artist, etc.). The program

allows for the use of a different ripping program if preferred.

Like the Library Manager, the Tagger application screen is divided into three sections. The first section contains all the selected tags for a given music file—track number, CD number (useful for multidisc sets), year of recording, audio file format, file size and length (time), sample and bit rates, album name, composition name, movement title, album artists, instrument, genre, period, etc. The second section has the list of chosen filters or categories (composer, period, etc.). Together these form grids, or templates of selected tags and filters, that can be used for saving future files in the same overall format. The third section contains a How To tab with basic directions for tagging, plus tabs that directly link to the Amazon, FreeDB, and MusiCHI websites. Each of these tabs has subsidiary categories such as Get Data, Update Tags, Browse Selection, Grouping, Grid View, and Save Covers. Of these, the Get Data function is by far the most important; it allows information about albums to be downloaded from Amazon and FreeDB, automatically populating tags to their correct filters and allowing for images of the CD covers to be embedded in files. Items can be searched for by composer, title, artists, or ASIN number (the number beneath a product bar code). A CD cover image is saved by double-clicking on the image and saving it to a temporary file, for later embedding in the permanent music file. Because the tags attached to a file will determine how it is cataloged, it is important to tag an item before actually ripping it and adding it to a library.

The basic procedure for tagging and ripping a CD using MusiCHI is as follows:

- 1) Open the MusiCHI Ripper application and choose the Tagging tab.
- 2) Load the CD into the computer's CD-ROM drive.
- 3) Click on the FreeDB tab and then the Get Data tab underneath that. If data is found, corresponding fields will be populated. If Amazon is chosen instead, a popup box appears to search Amazon.com for the title by either ASIN number, composition or album title, or name of a composer or artist, with a special checkbox to indicate a search for classical music. If no data is found, populate the required fields manually by following instructions in Step 6 below.
- 4) Click on Load Tracks in the top center toolbar.
- 5) Click on the Update Tags tab under the FreeDB or Amazon tab, and then All. The tag fields on the left side of the screen will be populated with available data.
- 6) Fill in additional tag fields and edit populated fields manually as desired. To do this, click on the blue header above the center section and choose Manual Edit to make the editing screen appear. To save results, click on the Save button in the lower right of the editing screen. (In order for the same tags to

appear in multiple tracks for the same composition, all tracks must be selected by holding down the Shift or Ctrl key and clicking on the desired tracks before entering the editing.)

7) Now choose the Ripping tab in the far upper left of the screen.

8) As desired, successively include or exclude tracks, choose a preferred file pattern, pick a music folder in which to save the resulting files, and choose whether or not to embed the image of the CD cover (usually from Amazon).

9) Choose the action to be taken if a duplicate file exists, the file format, and the library action after ripping.

10) Click on the RIP CD button to rip the CD. A pop-up box appears, asking if the file pattern names are the ones you desire. Choose yes to rip the CD, or else go back and choose a different file pattern name. A different pop-up box may appear instead, advising you that a required field is missing in order for the CD to be ripped with the selected file pattern. In that case, go back to the Manual Edit function in Step 6 and populate that field, or else choose a different file pattern name.

11) A pop-up box appears, showing the progress of the ripping process.

12) When done, the CD automatically ejects and a pop-up box appears, asking if the ripped CD files should be added to the library. Choose Yes.

13) A screen appears to select the library to which the files should be added. Name the file and click the Open button.

14) A pop-up box appears, asking for confirmation to import the files. Choose Yes.

A particularly useful tool is the MusiCHI Clean database. Since different CDs list their data in different ways, the automatic downloading of tags from Amazon or FreeDB will necessarily result in inconsistent tag formats—for example, “Johann Sebastian Bach,” “J. S. Bach,” “Bach, Johann Sebastian,” etc. This function allows for all selected files with a designated keyword (for example, “Bach”) to be converted to a single consistent entry format. This feature is Unicode-compliant and recognizes diacritical marks on foreign words. The program has an internal database of some 2,000 names of composers and 1,500 names of artists and ensembles to facilitate proper formatting; it also regularizes capitalization and track numbering (as in converting “01” to “1”).

The MusiCHI program is flexible in numerous useful ways. The columns can be displayed in various orders or suppressed as desired. Many entries can be dragged and dropped from one category to

another. Music files can be retrieved for any category or combination of categories; for instance, to see all the Bach cantatas stored in the database, select “Bach” as a composer keyword and “cantata” as a composition or title keyword. Music files can be played in designated or random orders, and searches can be conducted while a file is playing. Music files already stored elsewhere in a computer can be dragged and dropped into the MusiCHI Library. Online booklets as well as disc covers can be saved, as well as links to external sources (such as Wikipedia articles on the composers and performers). Files saved in one audio format can be converted to another (for example, FLAC to MP3 for portable players). Data can readily be transferred from one application to another. Finally, given an adequate processor and storage capacity, the memory can accommodate more than 100,000 separate audio files with no impairment of search and recall speed.

There are a few limitations to the utility of this program. First, some of the chosen terminology—“flavors,” “filters,” “panels”—is not intuitively obvious. Second, despite the useful links to Amazon and FreeDB in the Tagging application, users are still likely to have to do a considerable amount of manual data entry, as many classical-music discs do not have information that can be readily downloaded from these sites. Third, the choice and design of tagging categories could be improved. It is confusing and often redundant to have one category titled Composition, another titled Album, and still another titled Name, Title, or Movement, especially since data downloaded from Amazon or FreeDB usually populates the Album field rather than the Composition field with the name of the piece in question. Assuming that this is a limitation imposed by tags from FreeDB and Amazon, it would be much better to have just a single field named Album/Composition. Exactly the same problem, requiring the same solution, occurs with the Composer and Artist fields, wherein once again tags from FreeDB and Amazon populate the latter and leave the former blank. Likewise, the inclusion of all types of performers in a single Album Artist tagging category, with successive entries separated with a dash, is inconvenient. It is possible to drill down through a search tree—not easy to find—to create separate tags for conductors, ensembles, instrumental and vocal soloists, voice ranges (here, non-intuitively included under the heading of Instrument!), and roles. However, to be really useful, this field needs to have distinct subfields created for Conductor, Ensemble, Soloist, Instrument/Voice Range, and Role that immediately display as separate subcategories within the Album Artist field. Finally, there are also a few minor flaws; the French terms “compositeur” and “epoque” occur instead of the English “composer” and “era” (the creator of the program is French), and “the” is misspelled “thee” in one subheader. I have been advised that these errors will be fixed in a succeeding version. (This is the fourth version of the MusiCHI Suite; the original version 1.5 was released in November 2010, followed by versions 1.7, 1.8, and now 2.1. A multilanguage version is in preparation.)

One further caveat is in order. MusiCHI relies on the Firebird database, an open-source software that supports various systems (Windows, Linux, Macintosh, etc.). Installation of MusiCHI downloads the 32-bit version of Firebird, but users with a 64-bit system will want to install that version instead

(available from firebirdsql.org) before installing MusiCHI. The MusiCHI Suite runs on the XP, Vista, and Windows 7 operating systems for PCs, and VMWare Fusion or Bootcamp systems for Mac computers.

While correspondingly more complex, the MusiCHI Suite is a far more powerful and useful storage, cataloging, and retrieval system for classical music aficionados than is iTunes, with its limited capacity (tailored to rock-pop music devotees) for sorting tracks by album, song title, and performer. However, even with the helpful online tutorials, the learning curve for this program is rather steep for the neophyte. If you are someone who still listens primarily to a CD collection through a stand-alone stereo system, this program will have little utility for you. However, if you are someone who has a considerable music library of downloads and/or ripped CDs stored in your computer, or is planning to move in that direction but has hesitated because the right tools were not easily available for storing, cataloging, and accessing a large number of classical-music files, then the MusiCHI suite offers a superior all-in-one solution that, once mastered, will pay dividends far beyond its modest initial cost. This is an excellent program that with a little tweaking can become even better.

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