

Ableton Live: from Session sketch to exported track

The two views and what each is for, MIDI effects as a harmony teacher, warping without artefacts, and racks that let you finish.

HOW TO USE THIS WORKBOOK

Four lessons, in order. Read the lesson, do the steps in your own project, then use the check at the end before you move on. The video walkthrough on the course page follows the same four chapters.

LESSON 01 - 12 MIN

Session view is for finding, Arrangement is for finishing

Ableton's two views are two different jobs, and mixing them up is the most common reason a Live set never becomes a track. Session view is a sketchpad: clips you can fire in any order while you audition ideas. Arrangement view is a timeline: the version that exists in time and gets exported.

Work in Session until you have four or five clips you actually like, then record a pass into Arrangement and stop going back.

DO THIS

- 01 Set the tempo and the global key (Live 12: the Key field per clip and in Scale Awareness).
- 02 Build one scene: drums, bass, chords, one melodic idea.
- 03 Hit the Arrangement record button and play your scenes for two minutes, changing something each time.
- 04 Switch to Arrangement view and edit what you recorded - do not start over.

CHECK YOURSELF

There is audio on the Arrangement timeline before you allow yourself to open another plugin.

LESSON 02 - 14 MIN

Chords with MIDI effects: Scale, Chord and Arpeggiator

Live's MIDI effects let you play harmony you cannot yet play with your hands. Scale forces every incoming note into the key. Chord stacks fixed intervals above whatever you play. Arpeggiator turns a held chord into a rhythm.

The trap is leaving them on forever. Use them to find the part, then flatten it - Freeze and Flatten, or draw the result into a MIDI clip - so you can voice individual notes afterwards.

DO THIS

- 01 Drop Scale on a MIDI track, set the key, and play with one finger until a shape sounds right.
- 02 Add Chord with +4 and +7 semitones for triads, then move one of those to +11 for a major 7th.
- 03 Add Arpeggiator, rate 1/8, and set Steps to 2 for an octave climb.
- 04 Freeze and flatten the track and edit the resulting notes by hand.

MAKE IT YOURS

Turn the Arpeggiator's Gate down to 40% and the same notes become a plucked, staccato part.

Warping and groove pools

Warping is Live's real superpower: any audio can be forced onto your tempo and grid. Complex Pro for full mixes and vocals, Beats for drum loops, Tones for a single sustained instrument. Choosing the wrong mode is why warped audio sounds like it is underwater.

The Groove Pool goes the other way - it lifts the timing feel out of a loop you love and applies it to your programmed MIDI, so your drums borrow a real drummer's push and pull.

DO THIS

- 01 Warp a sample, set the mode by content type, and set warp markers at the first transient of each bar.
- 02 Drag a swung loop into the Groove Pool, then assign that groove to your hi-hat clip.
- 03 Set the groove's Timing amount to 50% first - 100% almost always overshoots.
- 04 Commit the groove to the clip once you like it, so it survives the export.

CHECK YOURSELF

Your warped sample stays locked when you change project tempo by 10 BPM.

Racks, macros and finishing

An Instrument or Audio Effect Rack collapses a chain into eight macro knobs. That matters for finishing, not for sound design: once a section only needs 'brighter' and 'wider' instead of twelve parameters, you can arrange with your ears instead of your eyes.

Map the two or three moves you actually automate, then automate them in Arrangement view across the section changes.

DO THIS

- 01 Group your chord chain into an Audio Effect Rack and map filter cutoff to Macro 1.
- 02 Map reverb dry/wet to Macro 2 and stop there - eight macros is a maximum, not a target.
- 03 Draw automation for Macro 1 rising into the chorus over four bars.
- 04 Export at 24-bit WAV with Normalise off, then a separate MP3 for phone checks.

MAKE IT YOURS

Save the rack as a preset. Your next track starts three hours ahead of this one.

Session checklist

Print one per session. Tick as you go; anything left blank at the end is your next session's first job.

- ☐ Tempo and key set before any notes were written
- ☐ Progression written down as chord symbols
- ☐ Chords voiced by hand, not left in root position
- ☐ Groove checked with the melody muted
- ☐ One new sound at each section change
- ☐ Rough export listened to on a phone or laptop speaker
- ☐ Project saved with a name that says what it is
- ☐ Next session's first task written at the top of the page

NOTES
