

XCE--Xsample Chamber Ensemble



As a long time user of Xsample sound libraries, I recently was asked if I'd review their flagship product, Xsample Chamber Ensemble.(XCE), and its use in Sib 6. XCE is a library of high quality solo instruments for chamber music and chamber orchestra, that combines thousands and thousands of sounds. This collection contains a very large amount of instruments, (see complete list at end of review) and very diversified playing styles for live, notation, and sequencer situations, that's very intuitive and easy to use,

This all coincided with switching my work method from being sequencer based, to using Sibelius 6.2. almost exclusively--and XCE works seamlessly and easily with Sibelius, (Sounds sets) , and also Finale (Human Playback). XCE is multi purposed and dimensional, and is a powerful extension for your notation software, and also for your DAW/Sequencer. The library contains a "score version" for ideal notation playback, and a "play version" for normal use with a keyboard or DAW/sequencer, and may be used as a standalone application and as a plug-in within a host sequencer.

This excellent library features fully chromatically sampled and multilayered instruments, with natural loops for all sustained notes. and seamless xfade controller for dynamic and sound-color-- continuous sound dynamics from ppp to fff. And In the "play version", all articulations are laid out in one instrument, with easy handling of the numerous keyswitches through a Kontakt2 script and global occupied keyswitches, so you can find e.g. "sul pont." for violin, viola, violoncello and doublebass always on the same key.

(Using XCE in a DAW/sequencer, wont be covered here--its the same excellent sounds, but used a different way involving ingenious key switching. More information can be found in the XCE Users Guide-see link at end of review)

In addition to the score (notation playback) and play (DAW/sequencer playback) versions, XCE also includes several Sound Sets- stereo, (complete or reduced), mono (complete or reduced) , and two additional reduced versions of the library.(advanced and classic). The advantages of using reduced versions while scoring, are faster loading times, and when your work is done, just switch to the high quality complete versions. Also, mono instruments can be better placed in the mix if you work with big chamber orchestras.

A description of these Sound Sets follow:

Mono reduced: complete library in mono with only every 3 tones sampled

Mono: complete library but only one channel (mono)

Stereo reduced: complete library in stereo with only every 3 tones sampled

Stereo: complete library in stereo

Advanced: stereo with the most common extended techniques

Classic: only the standard techniques (less than advanced)

These different versions help to save loading times and performance, especially if you have a big score. You can also choose to use Manual Sound Sets (please see below).

The Instruments themselves can be used as solo, part of a small group, ensemble, and also, in Ensemble Mode, (please see below) the instrument can be increased to more than one voice, ("solo") after setting up and using the keyword "tutti". The mallets, and percussion are very conveniently set up in banks., and switching between these instruments in these banks is accomplished by use of keywords. This multi-functionality was perfect for me as my interest is in writing for solo instruments, and different sized chamber ensemble groups, and not for symphonic orchestra, at least at this time. Realistically, the opportunities for performance for soloists and smaller groups are much greater.

So for example, here at my fingertips, in addition to all the instruments being able to be used in a solo capacity, I have a String Quartet, Woodwind Quartet, Percussion Battery (including Vibes, Marimba and Xylophone, and numerous percussion instruments etc), Piano, Harp, countless duos, trios, etc .etc...

An assortment of impulse reverbs, and combinations, are also included with XCE.

Ease of installation:

XCE is available on 2 DVD's or for immediate download,

Setting XCE up, was very straightforward-- for me, it came on two DVD's, the first of which self installed, and the second required simply dragging other instrument files into the library. Updating it, was also ok, and whatever problems I ran into, Georg, and Hans Josef were right there, always very kind and supportive thru emails until it was done.

Kontakt Player 2 is also included free, for playback, as is the NI (Native Instruments) Service Center for authorization of your XCE library. The serial number of your XCE is located on a sticker, affixed to one of the DVD envelopes.

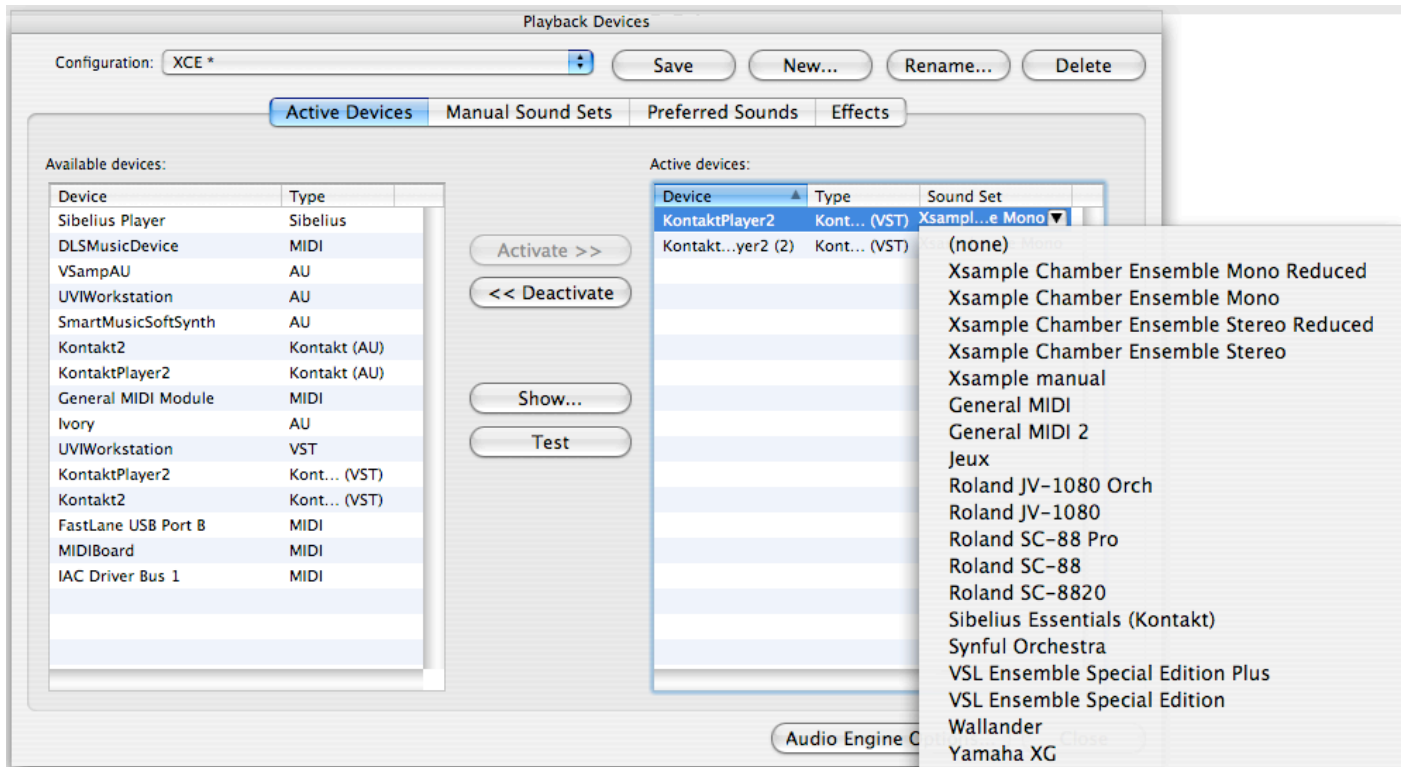
After Installation, and authorization, the update was available thru the NI Service Center.

I am advised that XCE, will also work with all versions of the Kontakt Player. If you use XCE with Kontakt Player 4 (which you can also download free), it will work fine, but in order to get the special advantages of very fast instrument loading times, thereby enabling you to start playing while the instruments are still loading, the XCE instrument patches must be re-saved In KP 4 format.

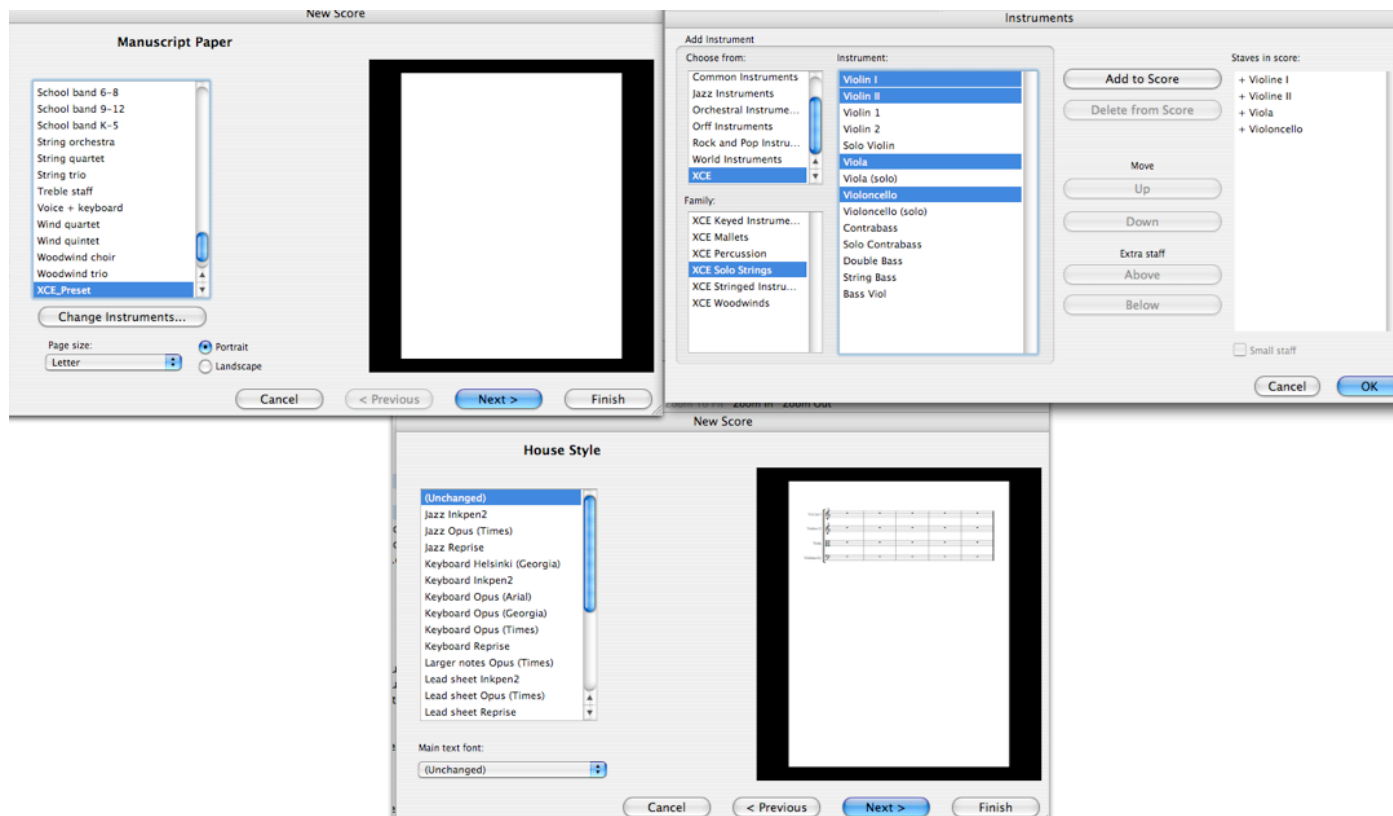
Also there are no reported problems of XCE working with the latest operating systems of Mac and Windows.

Using XCE in Sibelius (score version)

Once the XCE library is installed, and updated, set up a new playback device in Sibelius for XCE, (Play Menu-->Playback Devices) and choose your Sound Set.



Then simply start a score in Sibelius by choosing the XCE_Preset Manuscript paper, and click on "Change Instruments" to choose which instruments will make up your score, as in the String Quartet below.



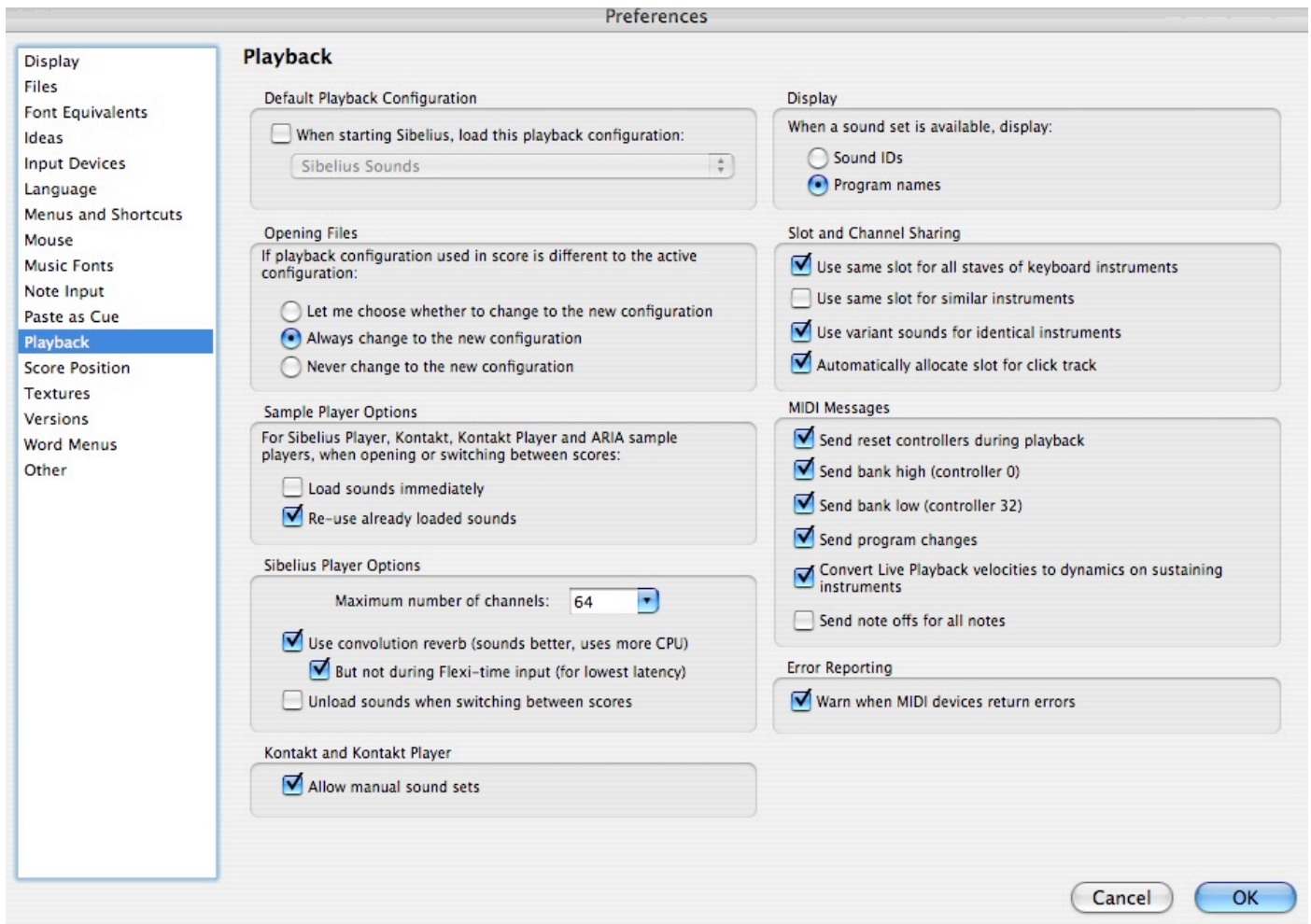
Then enter your score in Sibelius by mouse, keyboard or MIDI as usual and add keyword text such as staccato, pizz., con sordino, harm gliss or senza vib., etc, and immediately hear the result.. Add legato bows or crescendo signs and dynamics from ppp to fff--your score immediately will be played like a musician would do .There is no comparable product in the market with so many articulations per instrument recognized and interpreted by Sibelius and Finale.

(Hint: if an articulation doesn't seem to be working, and it matches the Playback Dictionary term, try inserting a "norm" between the last articulation and it)

Three very special features of XCE worth mentioning are the Manual Sound Set, Percussion and mallet banks, and using the "tutti" feature, to increase the number of the same instrument playing.

Manual Sound Sets

In order to use Manual Sound Sets, you have to first enable them in Sibelius, by checking "Kontakt and Kontakt Player--Allow manual sound sets" on the Playback page of Preferences.



If you choose any of the regular Sound Sets (i.e. not the Manual Sound Set), Sibelius opens and automatically handles the preselection of instruments. If desired, you can reselect the instrument in the mixer and on the next playback Sibelius will replace the instrument "type". For example you can change to the "classic" instrument.

With the manual Sound Set there is no preselection, you are always free to change between all types, and also between mono and stereo. You can also combine both types.

The manual Sound Set is just a additional way to work with the XCE library. It doesn't load the instrument automatically the first time, and you have to make the initial MIDI setup in Sibelius and KP2 manually.



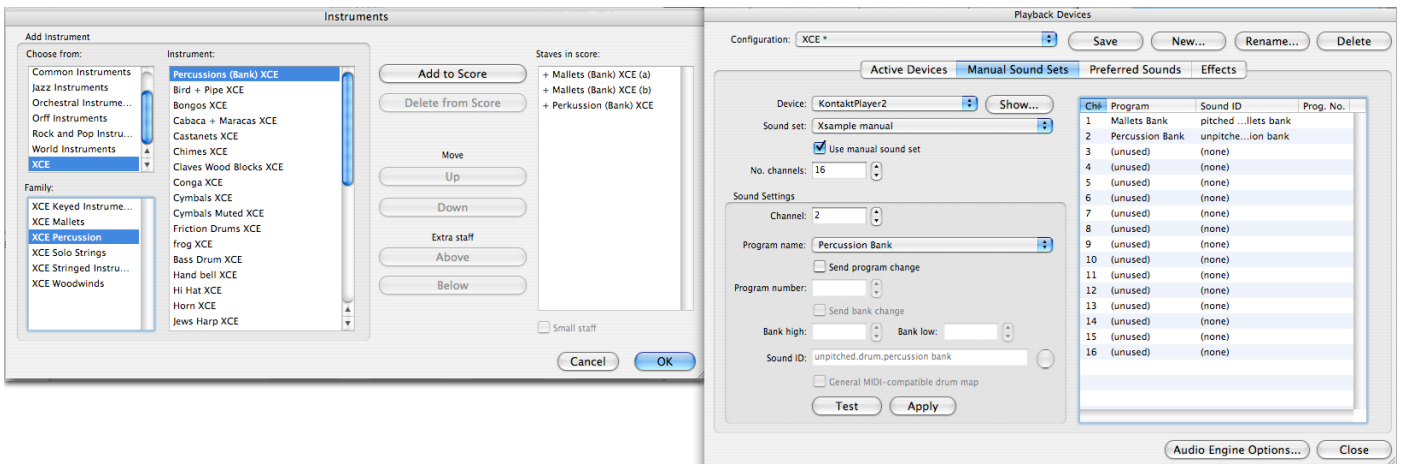
The second time you load this project, Sibelius will remember all this settings. But there are some special features, that could only be realized by a manual sound set. For instance instrument banks. All percussion and mallet instruments can be opened individually, but they are conveniently arranged to MIDI banks, with each instrument being chosen by keyword (see list below). This spares a lot of instruments and gives you a better overview to the score.

The more usual way of using the XCE library is choosing the four other Sound Sets, which load the instruments automatically.

The Mallet and Percussion banks

Start off same way, as above, choosing the "Xsample Manual" Sound Set. Then choose the Mallets and Percussion Banks, and click on the "Manual Sound Sets" tab of the Playback Devices window, and choose how many channels you want, and assign the desired instruments to these channels. You can also test the sound here by clicking on "test" and lastly hitting "Apply" when your choice is final.

Make sure "Use manual sound set" is checked.



To switch between the instruments in the Mallet and percussion banks, use these keywords (from the Playback Dictionary /XCE house style). This allows you to use a great number of different instruments very easily.

Mallets Bank Instrument Switch (only manual Sound Set)

marimba	
xylophone	
vibraphone	
glockenspiel	
crotales	
damp	+damp
half damp	+damp.half
not damp	+damp.none

Percussion Bank Instrument Switch (only manual Sound Set)

side drum
cymbals
tam-tam
tom-toms
tambourine
conga
bongos
triangle
chimes
wind chimes
hi hat
small anvil
castanets
claves
woodblocks
cabaza
maracas
steel plates
cymbals muted
tibet bowl
hand bell
talk drum
friction drums
water gongs
rainmaker
lotosflute
train pipe
trill pipe
bird
toy
frog
horn
metronom
rattle
scraper

Using Ensemble mode

Ensemble mode can be switched on and off in your score by use of the key words "solo" and "tutti". The sections are programmed in KP2 --simply use the "Round Robin Menu" and choose ensemble.

In general all instruments with the round robin menu (strings, woodwinds, mallets, concert harp), can avail themselves of Ensemble mode. It is up to you to decide if it is to be used as a common section playback or to use it also as effect.. and you can adjust the settings by selecting the ensemble sub menu, via drop down menu.



How does XCE sound?

Very simply put, these sounds are EXCELLENT, extremely realistic, and excite me to compose with them, and listen to them, as a good virtual instrument should. They are all authentic sounding, perfectly sampled instruments with flawless looping for sustained sounds. But as always the best way is to judge for yourself.

Here are various ways to do so:

Try-Sound -:this is the world's first online Test Station for virtual instruments and Plug-Ins-a really good and needed idea. I understand there is latency (delay) in hearing the sounds from the site.

http://www.try-sound.com/detail.asp/xsample_chamber_ensemble/en

How to use this site:

<http://www.try-sound.com/service.asp/howto/en>

Click on Audio and Video Demos, There is also very much useful Information of XCE here:

http://www.bestservice.de/detail1.asp/best_service/xsample_chamber_ensemble/en

Contains score, live, and user demos of XCE:

http://www.xsample.de/html/xsample_music_demos.html

http://www.xsample.de/html/xml_xs_dm/Banks.mp3

http://www.xsample.de/html/xml_xs_dm/Banks.pdf

You tube videos:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=39XZjidGTVQ&feature=related>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HQbxJFrutQo>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PDJFG366-5M>

How is Xsample Support?

Georg and Hans-Josef are really nice guys, and very knowledgeable, helpful and open to suggestions. They provide EXCELLENT support.

XCE--The Bottom Line:

For the cost, and sheer amount and excellent quality of XCE instruments, samples and articulations, coupled with its ease of use, and superb technical support, in my opinion, it can't be beat. Future plans include brass instruments, timpani, etc. I'm informed there are sometimes special sales of XCE, and there also is a lower priced Education version.(for more information, or any questions please contact Georg Stahl (stahl@xsample.de) or Hans Josef Winkler (winkler@xsample.de)).

Its the next best thing to owning your own chamber group--with many varied soloists, and ensembles, and having them at your beck and call 24/7/365.

You cant beat it:)

Product:

Xsample Chamber Ensemble (XCE)

Website:

<http://www.xsample.de/>

Contact/ Technical Support:

Georg Stahl (stahl@xsample.de)

Hans Josef Winkler (winkler@xsample.de)

XCE Users guide:

http://www.xsample.de/pdf/XCE_Userguide_L.pdf

List of included Instruments:

http://www.bestservic.de/detail1.asp/best_service/xsample_chamber_ensemble/en

Solo Strings

Violin
Viola
Violoncello
Doublebass

Woodwinds 1

Flute
Oboe
Clarinet
Bassoon

Woodwinds 2

Piccolo
English Horn
Bassclarinet
Contrabassoon

Woodwinds 3

Bassflute
Oboe d'amore
Bassethorn

Harp & Keys

Concert Harp
Steinway B
Celesta
Spinet
Clavichord
Toy Piano

Mallets

Marimbaphone
Xylophone
Vibraphone
Glockenspiel
Crotales

Percussion

gran cassa, sidedrum, cymbals, cymbals bowed, cymbals muted, tam-tam, triangle, tambourine, claves, woodblocks, castanets, bar chimes, wind chimes, tom-toms, watergongs, rattle, scraper, steel plates, small anvil, hand bell, tibet bowl, maracas, cabasa, rainmaker, hi hat, bongos, conga, diatonic steeldrum, "frog", horn, trainpipe, "bird", metronom, kazoo, lotosflute, jew's harps, kalimba, friction drums, talk drum

An assortment of impulse reverbs, and combinations, are also included with XCE,

(A complete list of articulations can be found in the XCE users guide)

System requirements

http://www.bestservic.de/detail1.asp/best_service/xsample_chamber_ensemble/en

NI Kontakt Player 2 is included in this product!**Minimum:**

- Windows XP/ Vista, Pentium 4/ Athlon, Single 2,8 GHz, Dual Core CPU above 1.6 GHz per core
- Mac OSX 10.4 or above, G5 1 GHz or Intel Core Duo1,66, 1 GB Ram

Optimal:

- Windows XP/ Vista, Pentium 4/ Athlon, Quad Core CPU above 1.8 GHz per core
- Mac OSX 10.4 or above, any Intel Mac G5, 2GB Ram

Free hard drive space - at least 14,3 GB (28584 Samples) for the sound library alone

You can use this library with the free Kontakt Player 3.5 (or higher) which is compatible to all actual operating systems and interfaces on Mac & PC

Product activation:

An internet connection on any computer is required to authorize / activate the product.

Review by Robert R. Morabito 03/11