

We covered the launch of Novation's ground-breaking Automap system as part of the introduction of the ReMOTE SL series of advanced MIDI controllers, about 18 months ago. Now, they have taken the technology one step further with the Automap Universal standard. Reverb finds out what new functionality it brings to your studio.

# Novation Automap Universal The Best Things In Life Are Free



Since the dawn of MIDI controlling, computer-based music makers have been on a quest for less painful configuring of hardware and software combinations. In an ideal world, we would all have wonderfully integrated setups that instantly provide all the hands-on control we need, without eating into our 'play' time, and so maximising creativity. In reality, we frequently have time-consuming and frustrating equipment that ends up mostly ignored; all too often, a keyboard is used for its keys whilst the knobs and buttons above are left alone, redundant. With Automap Universal, Novation have made it their mission to put this right and produce an automatic system that does all the hard work for you, making the whole process as simple as possible, leaving you free to focus on what matters most – your music.

Novation created the original Automap late in 2005, alongside the launch of the ReMOTE SL, Novation's flagship MIDI controller. The SL range set a new standard for controller keyboards. Giant screens provide instant information at a glance, and Automap ensured that software parameters were 'automatically mapped' to its controls. All along, the goal for

Automap software was to deliver an all-encompassing solution that would work seamlessly with every software program. This is an extremely difficult goal to achieve because of the varying nature and depth of MIDI implementation across the vast array of software solutions available. Consequently, although Automap supported a growing number of sequencers from day one (Reason, Cubase, Logic, Live, Pro Tools etc.), the way it worked was different from one to the next.

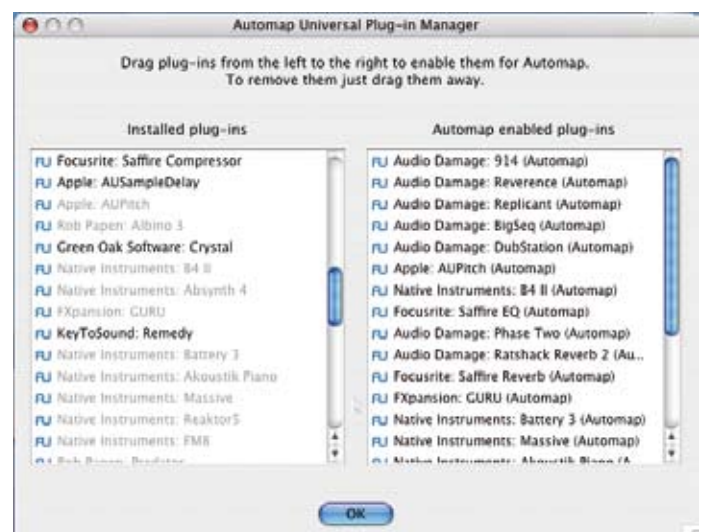
Despite these differences, Automap represented a revolutionary leap forward in MIDI controlling. Opening up any major sequencer with the ReMOTE SL activated instant communication; the controller automatically switched into the correct mode, loaded all mixer tracks and parameters and, in many applications and allowed immediate control of many internal and external instruments and effects. The only real weakness concerned external plug-ins; a weakness that is, until now.

Automap Universal, launched at the Winter NAMM show in January 2007, is a free update for the ReMOTE SL that delivers the ultimate solution by changing the way in which plug-ins in your session are controlled.

Instead of attempting to have an all-in-one system that works for all sequencers and plug-ins, Automap Universal has split into two modes that work side-by-side. The first 'Mixer Automap' mode, uses the already existing Automap Templates that load automatically with your session and provide logical and automatic control of track levels, panning and a host of other useful session parameters. This works instantly, once the SL is selected in the MIDI preferences, exactly as you'd expect.

The second 'Plug-in Automap'

mode ensures no setup is required, since no MIDI data routes through the sequencer. Simply open up a plug-in and the SL sees it straight away. The SL does this by wrapping your plug-ins and providing you with an Automap version of that plug-in alongside the normal version. The only difference between the Automap version and the normal one is a small border at the bottom of the plug-in window that displays the Automap and Novation logos, alongside a few boxes showing parameter names and numbers. Other than that, the plug-in behaves and



appears exactly as before, only now with MIDI controlling options that you've always dreamed of. Indeed, with Automap Universal, even plug-ins formerly without the option to assign MIDI control, become entirely controllable.

**So, enough explanation, let's see how I got on with it...**

I reviewed a ZeRO SL when it first came out and was very impressed with how much it offered for the price. It's essentially the top half of the ReMOTE SL keyboard: all the controls and the two screens, minus the keys, Touchpad and joystick. Because of the high quality keyboard in the SL range, losing that keyboard makes the ZeRO an incredibly affordable option for anyone already owning a controller keyboard but desperate to get hold of Automap Universal's functionality.

This time, I got hold of the medium-sized keyboard, the 37-key SL, and an extremely useful size it is too! Previously, Novation have made 25-, 49- and 61- key instruments (2-, 4- and 5- octave). However, the 3 octave format is compact and portable yet allows you to get two hands on for richer chords and progressions – it's a key-size that has worked really well with my projects.

Updating the keyboard is easy. If you already own an SL or have bought one recently and it doesn't contain the latest version of the OS, you can download the latest installer from the website. The Installer uploads the OS and Templates to the SL, once you've put the keyboard in the correct mode (the only vaguely tricky bit of the installation – but instructions appear onscreen to guide you through). The program also installs the Automap Universal software application on



your computer, which acts as a 'server', routing communication from Automap-wrapped plug-ins to the SL and vice versa. This isn't something I had to bother with much as it just sits happily in the background on my Mac. More apparent is the 'Plug-in Manager', which opens up automatically at the end of installation, asking which plug-ins you want to Automap. Simply dragging them to the 'Automap-enabled' plug-in window is all that's required to complete the process.

Installation and assigning done, I booted up an old Logic session. The 'Mixer Automap' Template automatically loaded on the SL. Initially, the screens just showed a row of dashes across the top, but I soon remembered that this means the SL is in the instrument mode and I used the arrow buttons to the left of the screens to switch to mixer mode within this Template. (The instrument mode from the original Template is still useful for controlling some Logic internal instruments but not for external plug-ins that Automap Universal now caters for.) All my track names instantly appeared and I could start playing with levels, panning and sends straight away.

I'm still impressed by the immediate results and simplicity of the original Automap system, but I'm here to test the new Plug-in Automap so I open up a

NI Pro 53 (Automap) in my AU list. With the Plug-in Automap Template selected on the SL (you can do this by pressing buttons or using the Template select encoder), the SL sees the Pro 53 instantly and I can start tweaking parameters. I then tried opening up a reFX Vanguard and that also appeared on the SL straight away. I followed this with Rob Papen's new Predator soft synth which, surprise surprise, popped up immediately. To switch back to controlling the Pro 53, you don't even have to call it up on screen – any Automap plug-in can be called up from a list on the SL's screens in seconds, without ever having to touch your session!

In addition to showing you which plug-in is currently active on the SL, indicated by the Automap logo glowing (you can control a plug-in by clicking on this logo), the small border at the bottom of the plug-in window allows a few other nifty features. The main one is a Learn facility, which can also be activated using buttons on the SL. This is fantastic and means that you can assign controls simply by moving a knob in the plug-in window then one on the SL. It's funny that only a year ago I was writing rave reviews about their Template Editor that can scan plug-ins for parameter names, and now this! Once you've created your plug-in layout, you can save it or set it as the default so that every time the Automap version of the plug-in is opened it will map to the SL in exactly the way you want it. The other features on the border are the ability to name parameters and set maximum, minimum and

step values. It's great that you can use the computer keyboard to set up such things and can always see these settings on screen whilst you use the plug-in.

In an attempt to stretch Automap Universal to the limits, I thought I'd try a couple of even more complex plug-ins to see how the SL fared. I'm a big fan of NI Reaktor so I thought I'd open up a few of the more intimidating ensembles. Just like all the other plug-ins I tried, the SL saw Reaktor straight away, only this time all the parameter names were a little harder to follow, amusingly (in a childish way) being 'POO' followed by a number. I thought I'd found a weakness but then I discovered the 'Revert to plug-in' button on the SL, which is a bit like a refresh button that calls up all the parameter names on the SL's screens. Each ensemble I tried was the same – a quick press of the button made all the correct names appear in an instant.

I truly feel that Automap Universal is an incredible system that combines the most advanced MIDI controlling processes to create a product that's instantly usable, easy to operate and lots of fun. The new plug-in control is excellent and, combined with the powerful mixer support it really does make the SL the most powerful controller keyboard on the market.

And the best part; SL owners can download the new and improved Automap Universal for free! So it's true then – the best things in life really are free.

