SpaceVibe

Chris Ritchie heads for the sonic stars in this astonishing debut

Holy mackerel. Gadzooks. Crikey and crumbs! In place of the most explicit language I can imagine, these words will have to do when I describe how much I enjoy using SpaceVibe, Yannick Roy's inspired creation that anyone with a jot of interest in sonic manipulation simply must own.

The Canada-based developer, a guitarist and axe enthusiast who apparently one day just decided he wanted to make one of the best music apps ever, has nailed the touch screen's advantages while trimming all of the stuff that doesn't matter.

At first glance SpaceVibe may seem shallow. It doesn't have loads of screens or options or fancy social media connectivity. That's because it doesn't need them – everything SpaceVibe is about and needs is immediately accessible, right in front of you, and what we have here is a serious musical instrument that 'gets' composition and sonic beauty far more than many apps 10 times its price.

Okay, let's calm down a bit. Firstly, we need to declare this officially as a musical instrument, although it may not look like one (indeed, when I first played with it I thought it needed a keyboard but now realise it's better off not having one).

As with all other instruments, your level of success depends on what you put into it. Many apps simplify the process of playing an instrument, from guitar simulators to chord generators. The difference here, however, is the level of precise interaction that is possible. It's easy just because it is. If that doesn't
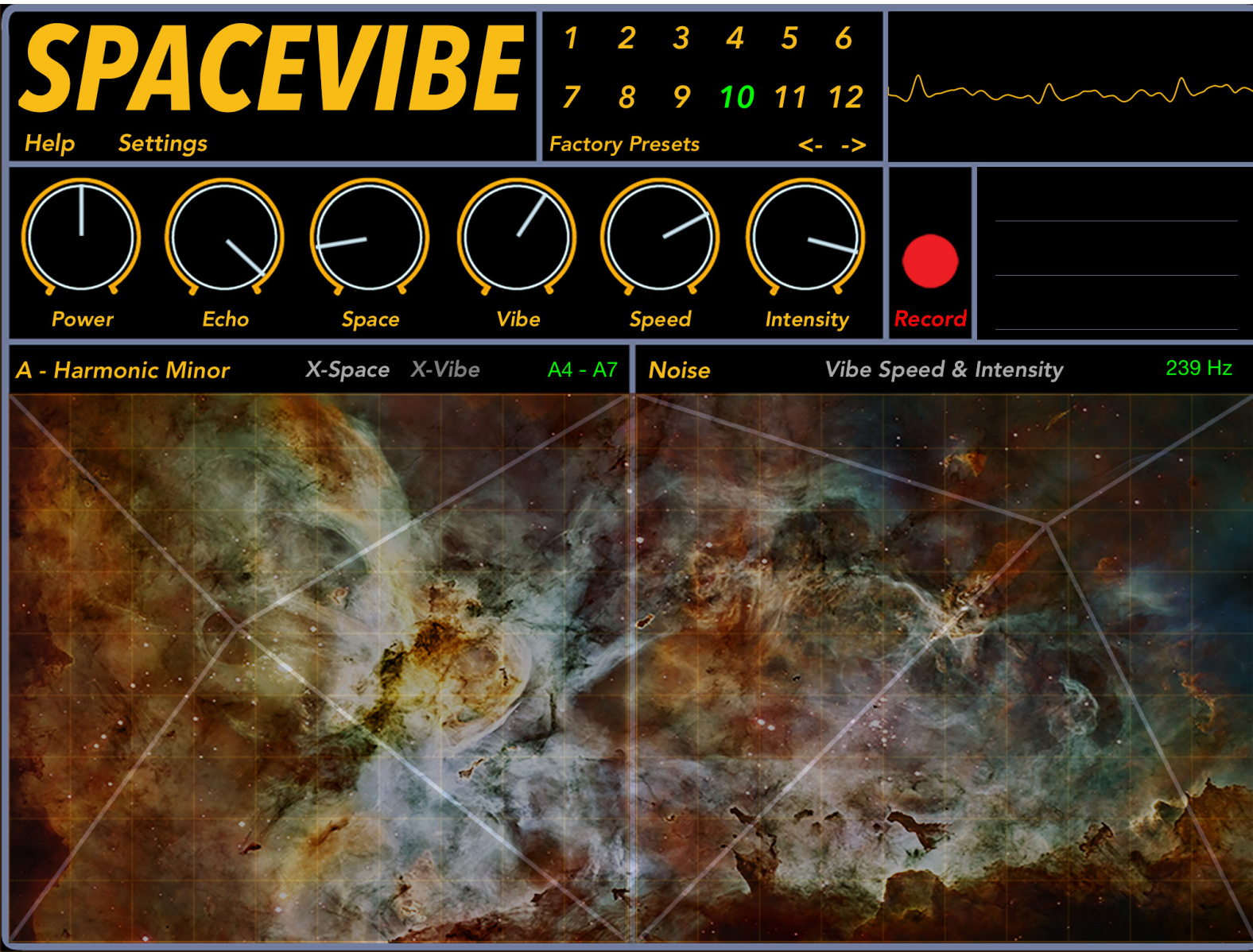
make sense, that's fine. It doesn't make a lot of sense to me either.

SpaceVibe is essentially two x-y grids with a number of dials on top. The left grid controls key and scale, range, space and vibe. Have those latter two activated on the pad and they will affect the dials above, and in addition there we have power and echo, which do exactly what you think they would do.

Over on the right is the Noise grid. Vibe speed and intensity can be set independently of the 'noise' and this side is pretty much the sub-tweakery area. This is about finding notes within notes, those tiny adjustments changing a sound from rough to smooth, from urgent to calm – but it's also capable of massive sonic power.

The wonderful thing about these grids is the control and, simultaneously, experimentation that is possible. You can deactivate the dial-link and either specify the left grid to work within a particular scale or key, or let it be frequency-driven. This ability to hop between actual notes on a scale, to play it like a real instrument, is simply brilliant.

SpaceVibe's other two major draws for me are its responsiveness – if there's any input lag it is beyond my brain's comprehension, and the range of sounds you can make with it. I wish I could freely scream expletives to describe just how versatile this app is. From kitsch sci-fi sounds to urgent sirens, beautiful harmonies to scraping industrial noise, plinky-plonky melodic passages to drones... this is an extraordinary soundscaper.

More fun (and usefulness) comes in the shape of the presets. Numbered 1 to 12 and again on the same screen as everything else, switching between these on the fly produces some great results, with echoes merging into new echoes, tones shifting but not jarringly (although you can reduce the fade settings to make it so), and the audio from before the switch continuing into the new. It's a remarkably organic process and that's because we're not mangling samples here or post-processing, we're literally shaping sound in real time. Audiobus compatibility means you can run this through your effects modules too and record into a DAW or just output for live performance.

You can save presets by holding down a number and also save finger locations on the pads, as well as delay ranges (from 25 to 10,000 ms). That's pretty much it. What you see is what you get, but what you can do with this little gem belies its 'shallow' exterior. There are bells and whistles here but they're not front and centre. Or maybe they are.

No, it's not a new concept and no, it's not the

only app you'll ever need, but it's genuinely one of the most exciting, versatile and downright fun apps available, and considering its bordering-on-daft low price point, everyone should have this. Everyone.

INTERVIEW

Yannick Roy, creator of SpaceVibe

There's a lot of great stuff that comes from Canada. Labatt Ice beer, Cobie Smulders and maple syrup, for example, and Calgary-based Yannick Roy, who has brought us the superb SpaceVibe. The Quebec-born developer worked as a structural engineer for 14 years and then quit to start a software consulting firm. So where does music fit in to all this?

'I didn't play any instruments or sing as a kid or anything,' he says. 'I picked up a guitar for the first time late in my 20s and just went completely bonkers about everything guitar. I didn't take any lessons and just figured out how to play as a hobby. It's been fun. Along the way I developed a serious gear acquisition problem and wound up with a fully-equipped studio. Then the disease spread to guitars, amps, tubes, cables and effects pedals.'

SpaceVibe and the guitar seem to be at different ends of the musical spectrum. Yannick explains how the app came about: 'After being enormously impressed with Pink Floyd's Quadrophonic live sound system, I just had to try that myself and built a quad guitar rig with an Eventide H8000. It was crazy good but very impractical as you might imagine.

'Then I moved on to just playing floor effects through a tube amp and I started developing an affinity for massive reverbs and echoes. I added a uni-vibe clone and things just took off from there. I was so impressed with what could be accomplished with a basic uni-vibe and delay pedal that I figured I could build an app around those two effects.'

Having been involved in software development at one level or another throughout most of his career and having minored in software engineering at college, once Yannick got an iPad and downloaded a few audio apps, the potential of the platform really struck him and he set about learning how to code for it.

'I had tried to duplicate the massive echoes and weird noises I could pull off on the guitar with a couple of nice keyboards with loads of effects, but I always came up short,' he says. 'So I wanted the app to make it really easy to create massive soundscapes and have the great tone and effects to be really engaging. And it couldn't have any piano keys because they are just too limiting for me. I wanted the app to be super-easy to play.

'I had a very basic version of the app with the two x-y pads up and running pretty quickly and then just improved it from there.'

SpaceVibe's biggest strength is its playability, yet much of its pleasure is derived from chaos. 'Yeah. One thing I was really keen on as the app developed was trying to create the sensation of controlling something that's unstable and can get away from you and do crazy things all by itself; have the audio engine throw you some curve balls if you will and then have it all fit somehow into a larger soundscape.

'It was a very impractical design goal for a piece of software – it was like walking on a razor's edge. Every adjustment I made to the audio engine would teeter the app too far to one side or another – too docile or too crazy and uncontrollable. Getting it exactly right took dozens of prototypes.

'I'm a big Floyd fan and one of the cooler things about their albums is that one song just flows into another without interruption. So I was really keen on duplicating that feel in the app. I didn't want the audio to stop and/or reset when you changed presets. Everything had to flow together perfectly with echoes from one preset continuing to another until they fade.'

SpaceVibe seems particularly suited to soundtrack composers, being able to produce all kinds of atmospheric sounds. Is this something Yannick was interested in?

'Honestly, no, I hadn't considered soundtrack composing but it makes perfect sense now. SpaceVibe was created mainly for me to use those atmospheric sounds in my music. So it had to be good enough for me to want to play it and I'm happy to say I still get a big kick out of it!'

Are we likely to see SpaceVibe ported to other platforms? 'Absolutely. Porting to Android is something I want to do and possibly to the desktop as well.'