

SONICFIRE PRO 4 REVIEW

Reviewed for TOPCC by Darrel Priebe.

Summary Sonicfire Pro 4 is a sophisticated but easy-to-use music creation program with unique features like mood-mapping, which simplifies creating variations in orchestration to give the feel of changing musical moods. When you don't want to rip copyrighted material, or you need a more sophisticated approach to the music in your next box office bonanza, Sonicfire Pro 4 will leave you singing a happy tune.

What is Sonicfire Pro 4, and why do you need it? If you are like a lot of photographers and videomakers, you enjoy sharing your work on DVD or over the internet. You might even be pushing the limits of amateur status and selling your work professionally, or you want to submit your newest indie flick, "The Modern History of the Brassiere" on UTube, and need original music for your creation.



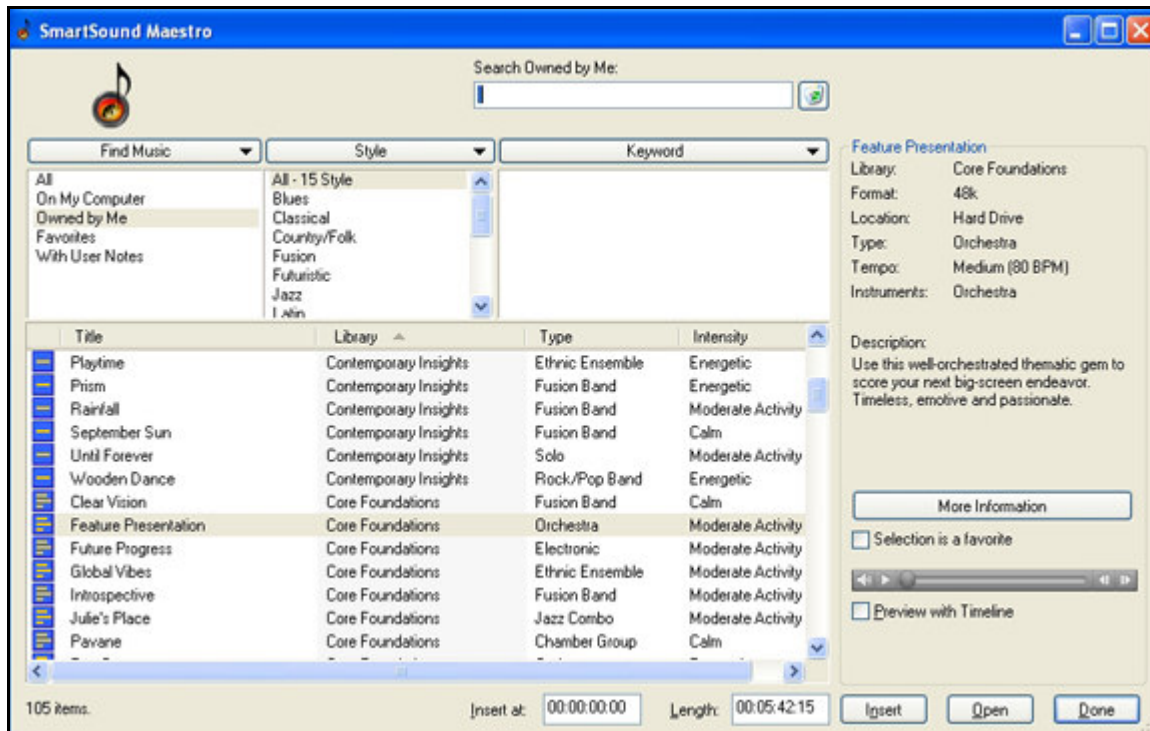
If you're still using copyrighted music to bring your beautiful pictures or videos to life, you've got to be at least a little worried that the goons from the RIAA – the Recording Industry Association of America – will catch up to you and break your little mouse clicking fingers. If so, you need Sonicfire Pro 4, by SmartSound, an easy to use program for the non-musician to add original, royalty-free, instrumental music to any movie, photomontage or video, whether it's a hi-res DVD, or low-res email or web-site production.

What makes Sonicfire Pro 4 unique? They have cleverly arranged their music with multiple layers of instruments, all of which can be turned on or off to change the sound or "mood" of the music. It's easy to do this "sound mixing" because each musical selection has a wide variety of preset "moods," up to 12 to choose from, such as Full, Light, Small Group, Strings, Percussion or Dialogue. You just match your visuals to the music by clicking on the "mood" that sounds best for your video.

The whole process is really just a four-step cha-cha: 1) Pick your music, 2) Import and watch your video file as you click to set markers wherever you want the music to change moods, 3) Click to select the desired mood for each marker you've set, to match the needs of the video, and 4) Export your music. It's really that easy! Here's the step-by-step to get you into the mood to create your own original sound tracks.

First, you pick the piece of music you want to use from the 2-CD's that come with the basic program. If you don't like those selections, you can also buy more music online, either by song or by album, to download or have delivered by mail on CD's. They have

a huge catalog of styles, including full orchestra film scores! And it's all royalty-free. You pick your music using the Maestro feature, which opens up a new window (see screen shot below) showing all the music available to you. You can quickly search, sort and preview any of the selections you own, or the entire library on the Smartsound website via your Internet connection. Once you've made your choice, Smartsound creates the music to the exact length needed for your video. Now that's cool!

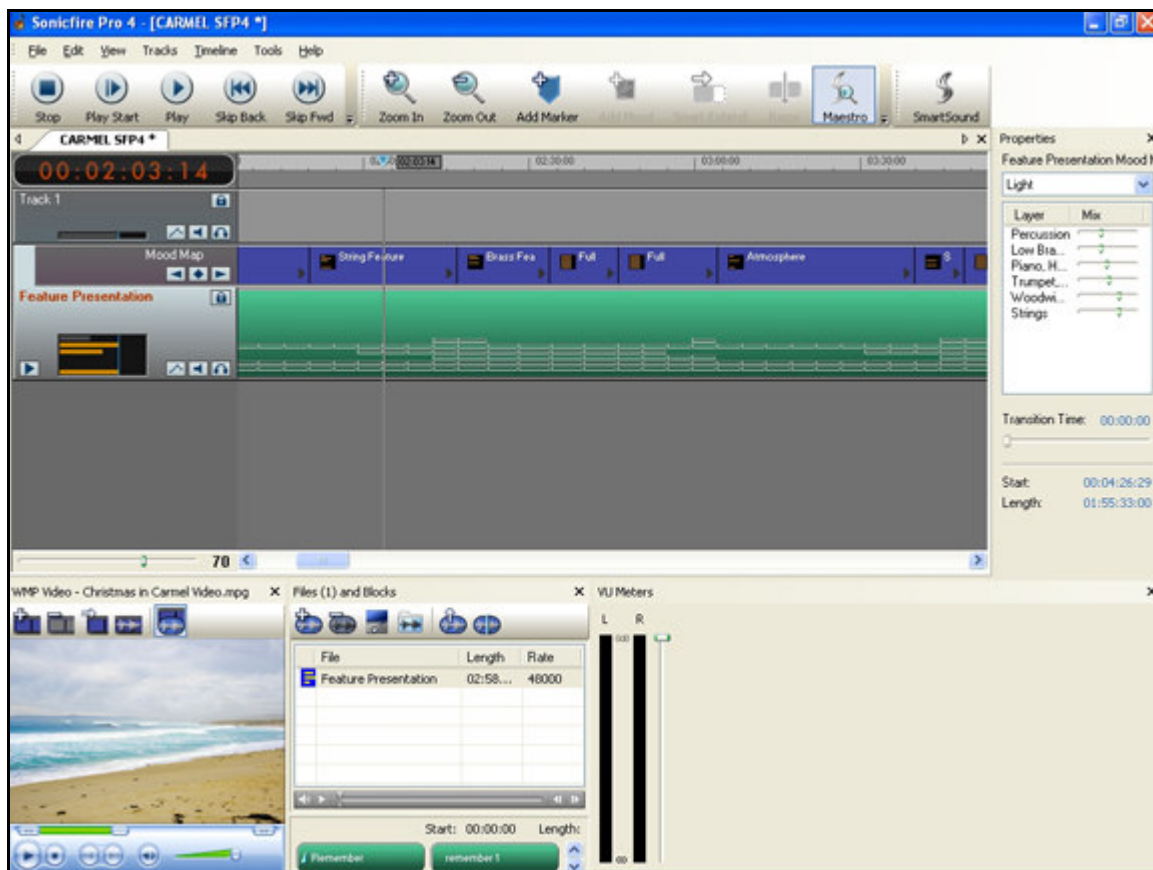


The Maestro window – to search, preview and select Smartsound music selections on your computer, or available to download from Smartsound.com. The Maestro works very well!

Second, you import your video or photo montage video you previously made in another photo or video editing program. I made a 5 minute, 42 second photo video of family pictures in ProShow Gold called “Christmas in Carmel,” and exported it as an MPG file. Sonicfire easily imported it and displays it in the lower left corner of the main window. Despite my clicking all over the place as I learned the program, rapidly starting and stopping the flow, there were no freezes, stumbles or lock-ups as there often are with other music/video editing programs. Next, with the video and music playing, I clicked on the Add Marker button to insert a new mood-map marker (keyframe) in the music timeline.

Third, while the video and music were still playing, I selected a different mood from the preset mood pull-down menu. This changes the “mood” of the music starting at the marker I had just placed. Voila, a changed music mood to fit the changing video scene. Just repeat this procedure as needed, and you have a unique orchestration to accompany your video, with the music changing to match the changing moods of the video, from serene, to small group, to full band or orchestra, or even a soft-and-quiet background for the narration.

What's really cool, the music length exactly matches my video length: 5:42 precisely. No need for a sudden fade-out of music in the middle of a song. The program figures it all out for you! If you wish, you can use more than one music track and easily cross-fade between them with one click. Rubber-band style faders are available for custom control. For longer movies, select different music for each scene, and change the mood as you see fit. If you want even greater control, you can change the mix of the individual instruments in each mood section, with simple volume sliders to raise or lower an instrument's sound level.



Sonicfire Pro 4's main music editing window, with my video displayed in the lower left corner, and the mood presets in the upper right column. The music selection, *Feature Presentation*, is shown in green, with the various selected moods in blue across the top of the music.

Fourth, exporting the completed soundtrack was the next step. How tough was this going to be? Under the File menu, I selected Export Soundtrack/Video. I had two choices, either a WAV file, or AIFF. Since I have a PC, not a MAC, I chose the WAV file-type, then selected a folder to store the file. In less than 10 seconds, the music file was saved. Now to burn a DVD in my video editing program, and send out the next blockbuster to my fans. (At least I hope my family will watch this!)

Other Cool Features:

- Sonicfire Pro 4 will rip and import songs from your CD's in case you want to mix copyrighted music with your SmartSound music tracks. I don't recommend that, of course, but remember what my dad always said, "Do as I say, not as I do."
- Each music track in SmartSound can be easily resized to make it fit your needs, from 20 seconds, to 20 minutes, just by clicking and dragging the track to a new length!
- Each music track has several different musical variations, in addition to the different moods, to give you even greater variety in your musical soundtrack.
- You can create seamless loops of music with the click of a button, which are useful for DVD intros or web site background music.

Pros & Cons

Let's talk about moods and music. While SmartSound has a very clever and useful product here, they over-generalize the use of the term, "mood." The mood of a piece of music is affected by many elements, including tempo, key (minor vs. major keys, modes, etc.), composition, and orchestration. The only component being altered by the Mood Mapping software is the orchestration, that is, which instruments, and how many instruments, are playing simultaneously. This is only one component of the "mood" of a musical selection. Even so, the ease of altering the orchestration in Sonicfire Pro 4 is outstanding and a valuable tool in scoring a movie for the independent video producer who can't write music, nor afford to hire a composer.

The music quality is good; some of it is very good. Selections vary widely from hard rock, to Cajun, to movie orchestral themes. The compositions are interesting, played by studio musicians, and with high quality recording standards. Unfortunately, quality costs money, and the musical selections in Sonicfire Pro 4 are not cheap. The CDs cost \$100, (quantity discounts are available) which is \$10 a tune. You can sample and purchase a specific track you want to use online for \$20, which is a bargain if you don't use any of the other 9 tracks on a CD.

Problems & Glitches:

Installation was a snap. Unfortunately, the program wouldn't work! Tech support, in the form of a personable, native English speaker, was easy to reach at their 818 area code, a local number in the Valley. They quickly figured out the reason the program locked-up and make an endless clicking sound. My soundcard needed an updated driver to handle the newest version of QuickTime, which Sonicfire Pro 4 uses to handle sound files. Quality tech support like this is hard to find these days! Overall, this is a very stable program with no bugs to be found.

Improvements Needed:

What about music videos? Sonicfire Pro 4 doesn't offer an easy way to sync your video to the beat of the music, and it really should. Narration? No way, you can't narrate your video from Sonicfire Pro 4. Sorry. Hey, I really wish the program had this feature! You

can import a prerecorded narration track to mix down with the music, but not record one within SFP4.

The computer Help files don't have video tutorials, only endless pages of written explanations, which is a tedious and boring way to learn anything. But there are a few tutorials on line. The Help File needs to have these kinds of tutorials. Here are a few that I found: <http://www.smartsound.com/sonicfire/demos/> These few are enough to teach you the program; its definitely user friendly.

Conclusion:

Sonicfire Pro 4 is a fun-to-use program that lets the non-musician easily create unique musical orchestrations that match the changing moods of their videos. Its target audience is probably the indie movie producer, but the home user will have just as much fun with it because of its ease-of-use, stability and high quality music. For the intermediate level (or higher) computer user who makes his own DVD's from photos or videos, I highly recommend Sonicfire Pro 4. The only downside is the relatively high cost of the music tracks, but they are far less expensive than hiring a composer to score your film. If you are selling your product, Sonicfire Pro 4 is a very affordable solution to the thorny issue of illegally using copyrighted music. A FREE 30-day trial is available at <http://www.smartsound.com/sonicfire/demos/#demoDownload> and I encourage you to give it a try.

Additional Information:

Price: It depends on the amount of music you get bundled with the software. The basic package is \$199 with 2-CDs (20 tracks) of music. The next bundle up is the Film Maker Edition with 2 CDs and 15 downloadable tracks for \$399. The Mega Bundle is \$799 with 10 CDs. A \$50 discount is available if you are upgrading from an earlier version. I searched and found on-line discounters have the basic package for a \$20 savings, and the Film Maker version for a \$40 savings.

Publisher Info: SmartSound, 8550 Balboa Blvd., Suite 180, Northridge, CA 91325.
Phone: 818-920-9122. www.smartsound.com The program works on both PC and Mac computers. System Requirements: Microsoft Windows XP SP1 or better. Processor: Intel 1GHz Pentium processor or equivalent. Sound: Sound card & Speakers (with the newest drivers ☺) Optical Drive: DVD Rom drive. RAM: 256 MB available RAM. Space: 50 MB hard disk space (minimum). Media Players: QuickTime 6.0.1 or newer (7.0 recommended). Windows Media Player 9 or newer.