While the graphics are eye-popping, the gameplay is a bit off the mark. There's plenty of action, but disaster strikes too suddenly. At times, it can be difficult to distinguish depth on the simulated 3-D battlefield. Though the action is somewhat disjointed, Buck Rogers offers tremendous challenge and enjoyment. *(Sega Consumer Products, 360 N. Sepulveda Blvd., Suite 3000, El Segundo, CA 90245.)*

Ted Salamone
Bridgeport, CT

Master Composer

This Music Utility Lets You Unlock the Power Of Your C-64's SID Chip

Master Composer, from Access Software, is a disk-based, copy-protected program that allows you to create musical compositions on your Commodore 64. These pieces can be played while a score appears on screen, or by a SYS command to a memory location while other activity (such as Basic programming) is taking place.

The program assumes that you are cognizant of the fundamentals of musical notation and theory—this is not a musical tutor. It also assumes familiarity with various aspects of the C-64's SID chip, such as waveforms, ADSR, synchronization, ring modulation and filters. An appendix to the program's manual gives rudimentary information about the principles of sound waves.

With the C-64's three voices, Master Composer does its job well, but I get the impression that this is a program for a person who likes to sleep in only one position. In other words, the program has limitations that can cause difficulty for someone who wants to use it for applications that are just a bit out of the ordinary.

The program is divided into two modes—Input mode, where music is created and edited on a score-like chart, and Programming mode, where various decisions are made about SID chip-related parameters relating to the Input mode work-in-progress.

After overcoming a few preliminary obstacles, creating music is relatively easy.

The Programming mode is also where completed pieces can be viewed on four staves representing not only treble and bass clefs, but also two clefs for the notes above and below these. One feature I don't like about the music's performance here is that the screen is not erased when something new begins at the left margin—instead, the new notes write over any old ones from the previous screen.

When Master Composer is booted up (which takes over two minutes), there is a piece of music present and ready to play—Beethoven's Fur Elise. Pressing the C key is supposed to clear all measures at this point—which it does, but only from the Input mode. The information about voices, tempos, filters and so on is still present in the Programming mode for the Beethoven piece. This also has to be cleared away, again by pressing C, which now means "close block." Even when all the blocks have been closed, there are still values remaining. These can either be retained (in which case, the new piece will sound like the beginning of Fur Elise) or modified. Also, one of several pre-programmed "voices," such as piano, French horn, banjo or oboe, can be called up and used instead.

This seems like a lot of hassle just to get started. It is further complicated by inputting the time signature after the C key clears all measures in the Input mode. According to the manual, "A legal Time Signature is anything that works out to an even multiple of 1/16, up to 16/16. For example, 3/8, 4/4, 5/16 and 2/2 are legal Time Signatures, while 3/7, 5/4 and 6/16 are not." Apparently, the programmers aren't aware that 5/4 *is* a legal time signature (e.g., Tchaikovsky's 6th Symphony, 2nd movement), as are tempos such as 9/8, 12/8 and 11/4. The manual says nothing about how to create such an unusual tempo.

Once a time signature is established, it isn't possible to change it without going through equally complicated maneuvering. This eliminates a lot of 20th-century music from Master Composer's repertoire—some of Bartok's and Stravinsky's music changes time practically every bar!

Another problem which must be overcome before any music can be created with Master Composer is the key signature. This is preselected by pressing the K key, which brings up another menu where you can choose either C major (no sharps or flats) or keys that have up to five sharps or six flats. Obviously, someone forgot about C flat major (seven flats), F sharp major (six sharps) and C sharp major (seven sharps). These keys may be very rarely encountered, but what if someone wants to use them? A piece in C sharp major would have to be transposed into D flat major (which is the same thing)—a truly brain-bending task.

After overcoming these preliminary obstacles, I found creating music (using the cursor keys to put notes on the four score-like grids) to be relatively easy. The smallest unit of tempo is a 16th note, which could prove restricting, though the manual explains how to overcome this. A passage with 32nd notes (again, not an unusual occurrence in music) can be created by using two bars with 16th notes and then doubling the tempo for those two bars alone. The business of triplets (three notes played in the space of two) is only cursorily covered in the manual, and no examples are referred to. This is disappointing.

The maximum length of music that can be created at one time is 127 measures, 64 blocks, or 23 pages. Block refers to a unit of measures (or even a single measure) for the purpose of changing SID parameters, tempos, and so on within a piece, while a page is a unit of blocks. You are not entirely restricted to a total length of 127 measures, since longer works can be created in several parts and then loaded into

specific memory areas, to be played sequentially.

This last feature allows you to load a piece to a memory area of the computer without even using Master Composer. Type a SYS command (usually SYS 30120), and the music will play while you go about other activities (though running a program or loading from disk causes the music to pause). You could also use this procedure to create pieces of music for use in other programs, which could then be accessed by the SYS command.

Although the manual suggests it is possible to duplicate blocks that have already been created and move them from one place to another, there is no append feature in the Input mode. Loading one piece into memory wipes out what was already there.

Included with Master Composer are other pieces in addition to Fur Elise: *Bill Bailey*, *Maple Leaf Rag*, *The Entertainer*, Donna Summer's *She Works Hard for the Money* and a movement from one of Bach's Brandenburg Concertos.

One interesting feature of Master Composer is the ability to dump screens from both the Programming and Input modes to a printer, which works very well. It should be noted that the "score" in this case does not look like normal music, but it is quite easy to follow once you are familiar with the program's system of notation.

A backup disk is available by sending in the warranty, and damaged disks can be replaced, both for an additional charge. *(Access Software, 925 East 900 South, Salt Lake City, UT 84105. $39.95.)*

Michael Quigley
Vancouver, BC, Canada

Slalom!

World-Class or Novice, You Won't Break a Leg On These Slopes!

Skiing is big business in the U.S.A., so it makes sense that virtually every home computer system has, or will eventually have, a program that lets you wax your skis and hit the slopes without leaving the comfort of the ski lodge.

Slalom! for the Commodore 64 was designed with the assistance of some se-