

COMPUTER MUSIC

Tony Cliff steps behind the virtual drum kit to try out Superior Drummer S2.0 from Toontrack, priced at £189 or £69 for the upgrade pack, and takes the opportunity to sample some of the wide range of Professional MIDI Beats from Groove Monkee priced from around £16



WHEN you are recording songs and instrumentals one of the most important elements for success is a vibrant drum track. Fortunately nowadays musicians are spoilt for choice with a range of excellent technology products.

One of the companies leading the way has been Toontrack who, some four years ago, released the original dfh Superior drum player to great acclaim. This was followed by the hugely popular EZDrummer which, as its name suggests, is a simple application designed to achieve a great drum sound with minimum fuss. Next, Toontrack

introduced a series of EZDrummer expansion packs, including Latin Percussion, Vintage Rock, Nashville and Claustrophobic, designed to produce the ideal drum sounds for different musical genres. Now the company has launched its totally redesigned premier drum sampler, Superior Drummer 2.0, so let's see how it shapes up.

Installation

Superior Drummer 2.0 operates from within practically any virtual instrument host sequencer such as Cubase, Sonar or Logic and requires a reasonably fast computer with either Windows XP or Vista or Apple Mac OS X 10.4 or higher. The

product comes on a set of four DVDs allowing you to choose from four different custom installations ranging from the basic 4 GB version to the full 20 GB installation. Initial install takes some time since there are so many samples to copy onto your hard disc. Next you need to go through the straightforward registration and authorization of the product with Toontrack which also enables you to keep up to date with any future changes and upgrades to the product.

Drum Sounds

When you activate Superior 2.0 you see a full graphic representation of the drum-kit where you can



construct your personal choices from a wide range of different kick drums, snares, toms and cymbals: clicking onto an instrument image plays back the sound. You can also call up the 'Tools' setting to specify drumsticks, brushes, rods or felt mallets. You can even choose between felt or plastic beater for your bass drum. In addition the X-drums feature enables you to extend your kit with additional sounds from any Toontrack sound libraries. Since the drum kit samples were painstakingly recorded at New York's famous Avatar Studios and played by drummer NirZ the sounds are astonishingly convincing and a genuine full-bodied acoustic drum-kit leaps from your speakers.

Naturally you can operate all the sounds from a MIDI keyboard and record your own drum tracks or, even better, play the sounds from a MIDI drum-kit. Alternatively, of course, you can use the superb sounds to output your MIDI drum grooves and Superior 2.0 comes supplied with a generous selection of grooves. The software also includes the excellent MIDI organizer EZPlayer Pro and Toontrack Solo which enables you to operate Superior 2.0 as a stand-alone product without requiring a host sequencer.

Mixer, Controls and Effects

At the bottom of the Superior 2.0 window there are essential functions always on view. 'Memory and Status' indicates how much RAM has been used and there is the option to switch from standard 24-bit to 16-bit to save RAM usage. There is also the EZMixer which is a simplified mixer with quick access to a single microphone for volume level adjustment, panning and overall bleed setting. Next is a Master Volume section which controls the overall sampler output and a Voices and Layers section dedicated to optimising the sampler's demand on computer resources. Finally there is the Instruments section where the relative volumes of each instrument from the drum-kit can be adjusted and also where MIDI mapping may be user-specified if desired.

To the right of the window there are controls for X-Drums selection, an envelope shaper and a pitch control which allows you to alter the instrument's original pitch in real time and apply changes. There is also a Humaniser section with controls specifying how even a single instrument responds to varying and adjusting as if played by

a real human drummer. The Superior 2.0 samples have been recorded at numerous different velocities since the drum timbre changes along with the loudness. The 'humanise' feature replicates the way that a real drummer never hits a drum exactly the same way twice and this results in a supremely natural sound.

As you can see from the first screenshot, without even opening the full mixer within Superior 2.0 you already have an amazing level of control over the sound output. However when you do open the full mixer window you see just how much more control is available. Superior Drummer 2.0 is a microphone-based instrument, as you would expect from a sampled drum-kit recorded in a professional studio. This mixer enables you not only to control the sound of each microphone per instrument but also the degree that any other instruments may bleed into that microphone. When you apply a series of microphones to record a drum-kit each microphone will obviously pick up aspects of the other drums as well as the one it is most closely attached to. This sound 'bleeding' is a crucial part of what makes a great and natural-sounding drum-kit recording. In



Superior 2.0 you have the same type of control as the recording engineer in the professional studio.

Another essential feature in Superior 2.0 is the Inserts section where you can insert any of the integrated effects included in the program. These effects include a five-band equalizer, a Hi/Lo pass filter, a noise gate, a compressor and transient modeler. Using these effects you can alter your overall drum production sounds with great attention to detail.

EZPlayer Pro

Included with Superior 2.0 is the excellent MIDI groove player, EZPlayer Pro, which is also available separately to purchase from Toontrack. It is essentially a MIDI organiser capable of driving any sound source that can be controlled by MIDI including drum samplers like Superior 2.0 and EZDrummer. Once set up, all your MIDI groove libraries can easily be called up and auditioned and you can quickly arrange a drum track directly into your sequencer's arrangement window. Also if you have tempo changes within your song then the loops always fit as the tempo is controlled by the sequencer master tempo. EZPlayer Pro is both simple to operate and sophisticated, allowing you to

create multi-layer rhythms and polyrhythms if you so desire.

Summing up, Toontrack Superior 2.0 is a brilliant drum product and is just like having a real professional drummer at your disposal. Even though it is possible to tweak all the settings to your heart's desire the product sounds just great straight out of the box and for many people the default settings are likely to be fine.

It is available from the UK distributors Time + Space (www.timespace.com) at £189 or £129 as a cross-grade price for owners of EZDrummer. Owners of the original Toontrack dfh Superior only pay £69 for the upgrade. More details are also available from Toontrack (www.toontrack.com).

Groove Monkee MIDI Beats

It is incredibly difficult to achieve truly convincing MIDI drum tracks when recording them from a MIDI keyboard. Firstly most keyboard players are not drummers and it is nigh on impossible to play the variation of 'feel' and 'ghost' hits that a real drummer would create without a thought. The Groove Monkee MIDI drum groove collections, available from www.groovemonkee.com, have received consistent praise and I

decided to take a look at them.

All the MIDI drum loops are available in a wide variety of formats so will work with practically any drum player. The company also generously offers over 350 MIDI loops to download free of charge, with samples taken from its 11 MIDI libraries, so that you can try them out for yourself.

The Groove Libraries are arranged in genres including 'Blues', 'Country', 'Electronic', 'Funk, Hip Hop and R&B', 'Fusion', 'Jazz', 'Metal', 'Power Rock', 'Progressive', 'Rock' and 'World Beats'. Each pack contains hundreds of MIDI drum loops played by professional drummers and always recorded without being quantized. This is important as, if you have loops made by professional drummers, the last thing you want to do is to quantize the rhythms and thereby remove the human 'feel' and groove.

Groove Libraries

Each library costs either \$39 or \$29 which translates to about £22 or £16 but there are also various different collected packs which offer better value than buying each library separately. There is the also a 'Studio pack' at \$269 (about £155) which contains all 11,000 loops from all the libraries.



Grooves in Action

With Toontrack EZPlayer Pro all the Groove Monkee loops were conveniently categorised and ready for auditioning. The loops are of an exceptionally high standard and include drags, flams, ghost notes and extensive timing and velocity variations since they are recorded by real drummers. When they are played through a high quality drum sampler like Superior 2.0 the results are superb.

Once you have selected a loop it is a simple task to drop it into your sequencer arrangement and since the sequencer is controlling the timing the loops all line up perfectly. Of course once any loop is in your sequencer you can edit it, adding or removing elements from the pattern and then copy if desired. The Groove Monkee loops are presented in different lengths such as eight-bar or four-bar and also include fills, intros and endings together with plenty of variations suitable for bridge sections or choruses.

I tried out loops from all the libraries and they were all of a very

high standard providing ideal material for building excellent drum tracks. The products are available as immediate downloads to your computer or on CD.

Since the company keeps a record of all your purchases you can

log in and re-download if necessary in case you had carelessly not backed them up! I highly recommend Groove Monkee MIDI drum loops and suggest you try the free samples so that you can judge for yourself.



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