Toontrack Superior Drummer 3

RUSSELL COTTIER takes drum production to the next level.

Our magazine doesn't normally review software instruments, but this is no normal software instrument. Toontrack has a solid reputation in the software instrument world primarily for its flagship product, Superior Drummer. Back in May Toontrack flew journalists from across the world to Galaxy Studios, Belgium. This iconic studio is something to behold, built in the 1990s by the already established Van Baelen brothers, Galaxy Studios is one of Belgium's premier recording facilities. Sporting some incredible studio architecture and acoustics with a stunningly low background noise floor this was certainly the place to record the latest version of Superior Drummer. Each room is essentially a bunker mounted on helical springs, offering over 100dB isolation between rooms.

It was here that Toontrack unveiled the ambitious new project, a 230GB drum production studio software package engineered by the great George Massenburg. However to make this launch special Toontrack insisted on absolute secrecy from the press until the release date.

The software includes six drum kits, Ayotte, Gretsch, Pearl, Premier, Yamaha and two configurations of Ludwig plus additional snares, kicks cymbals and percussive instruments all suitable for use in up to 11.1 surround. Massenburg recorded an extra six channels to encode height into the recordings for modern surround systems. There are even electronic drum samples and sound design tools.

It's worth noting that previous users of the Superior Drummer will find version three more efficient and user-friendly due to the complete rebuild from the ground up, and Toontrack are currently offering attractive crossgrade or upgrade deals. The interface can be re-scaled and each tab control window can be detached so you can use the software as just a plug-in, or an entire drum production studio DAW.

Initially we are presented with a an image of Galaxy Studios where drums will appear as selected. Additional instruments such as percussion and electronics float at the top left-hand corner and like the drums can be clicked to audition. Along the top there are several drop down menus dealing with file management editing controls, settings and help. Annoyingly the operation manual requires login to the website to view. This is fine for single registered users but a commercial dry-hire studio may not want to leave that account unlocked.

Next there are a set of four tabs: Drums, Grooves, Mixer and Tracker we start as default in the Drums

tab. The Grooves tab offers a navigation window whereby MIDI grooves can be managed and imported into our project. Interestingly here there is a function called Tap To Find which returns us to the Drum tab. Here we click drums to build up a rough interpretation of the groove that we want, simply create a rough pattern and the software will return possible options of pre-programmed grooves. As mentioned the software comes with an extensive library of grooves of different genres.

The Mixer tab shows a dynamically generated mixer to represent your specific selection of drum kit. It's notable that the faders do not scale with window resize which is mildly inconvenient because at high resolution faders get tricky to fine tune. The mixer comes with a variety of plug-ins including EQ, Dynamics, Distortions, Reverb, Delays and Modulations. The Comp 76 and Tape Simulator plug-ins prove effective for creating spanky rock snare drums, whilst more adventurous sounds can be achieved using plug-ins such as the Fat Muff distortion, String Machine Chorus and Auto-Wah. These unusual effects are a rather inspiring composition tool, ideal encouragement to step outside the norm.

The tracker tab allows importing of multitrack drum recordings to create MIDI tracks for enhancements or replacement. Because the system is off-line — unlike many other drum trigger plug-ins — you can potentially work faster than in standalone mode. Perhaps you might hand off the drum multitracks to an assistant who can set it up whilst you are working on the main session with the artist.

At the bottom of the interface we have The Song Track, an arrangement area which allows us to create multiple tracks of MIDI groove blocks. Interestingly if you create a new groove block each of the relevant drums can be simply sequenced with the Amount knob to automatically create new and interesting patterns. The setting dictates total number of hits of each drum during the block and the software places the hits at relevant points, if however you prefer a grid mode that is also available.

One of the standout features of this area is the Song Creator button that offers suggestions for songs structure and potential patterns to use. Whilst this may not seem of immediate use in standard studio sessions, for the songwriting producer this could be very interesting.

But the most important question is what do these instruments sound like? Simply put the sounds

provided on this piece of software are superb. With hundreds of drums and microphone configurations to pick from it is surprisingly difficult to find a bad sound. The Slingerland Radio King 50s snare is particularly nice as is the 7x14" Noble and Cooley Steam Bent Maple snare. The Comp 76 is particularly useful for adding a modern aggressive sound to these older snares and conveniently has a parallel compression mode. The various surround modes will be ideal for film composers but even the stereo mode offers a real sense of depth once the room mics are pushed.

The software comes with a 191 presets, some from George Massenburg himself and other big name producers Andy Sneap, Bob Rock and Mark Lewis. So everything from Jazz to extreme metal is covered. Massenburg used a 5.1 array of Sanken CO-100Ks along with Schoeps CMC 6 and Sanken CS-1e for the additional six channels to create the immersive 11.1 surround, but the spot mics and basic overheads are great for tight sounds too.

The Ayotte kit with hot rods sound particularly nice for singer-songwriter material, without being too intrusive, and has a lovely natural sound, the Ludwig 70s kit is also extremely versatile. I found myself drawn to this, particularly for 70s rock and stoner rock tracks, but it could be used in a wide range of genres. As one might expect the Pearl Masters kit has a particularly punchy, modern sound — from the graphic it looks as if pinstripe heads were used — the toms sing out beautifully.

The kick drums in this library sound particularly good, these often suffer in sample libraries but Massenburg's engineering skills have clearly come through here with every kick drum having the perfect balance of low-end and beater detail. If you want variety there are numerous permutations of each drum, brushes, sticks, rods, snare position and more.

At $419 Superior Drummer 3 is by no means cheap but this is a serious investment for a serious user and could undoubtedly save significant recording costs, where in the past MIDI drums just haven't cut it for the record. There are plenty of drum sample libraries out on the market ranging from simple sample packs to extensive software, but Toontrack's latest flagship package offers a range of unique features coupled with world-class recordings. If you are in the market for a new drum sampler package Superior Drummer 3 is absolutely worth considering. ■

PROS Excellent sound. Surround options will cover use for most film applications. Excellent sample replacement options with the Tracker Tab.

CONS Huge sample library, 230GB is needed so you might need a dedicated drive. Mixer faders are unnecessarily small.

Contact

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