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EASTWEST QUANTUM LEAP

StormDrum 3

BY ROB SHROCK

ALTHOUGH THERE ARE NUMEROUS PERCUSSION LIBRARIES ON THE MARKET, EastWest StormDrum 3 deserves its place by deftly bridging the world music and cinematic paradigms. In fact, I'll go so far as to say it's one of the best-sounding percussion libraries anyone has created to date.

Overview

With a clear focus on ethnic and world music percussion, StormDrum 3 (SD3) builds on its excellent predecessor, StormDrum 2. There are no traditional drum kit or standard orchestral percussion samples in SD3. The spotlight is on the exotic with a cinematic feel, although many of these sounds could easily work themselves into pop productions.

SD3 also explores the vast percussion collection of former Grateful Dead drummer, Mickey Hart. Mickey was a proponent of world music long before it became fashionable, and he has spent decades collecting and studying exotic percussion instruments from all around the globe. Additional instruments were provided by Remo Belli (founder of Remo Inc.).

For those already familiar with EastWest's "Play"

Snap Judgment

PROS Unique collection of ethnic drums, metals, and pitched percussion. Individual instruments with round-robin hits, flams, and rolls. New Play 4 engine provides 5 stereo multimic positions with SSL-licensed EQ and dynamics. True-stereo convolution reverb from EW Spaces included. Excellent recording and programming throughout.

CONS Understanding how to play many of these exotic instruments authentically could be a challenge. Levels can get hot on some patches when playing hard velocities and/or mixing mic perspectives.

Fig. 1. Pressing the FX icon brings up the SSL EQ and dynamics. Additional editing parameters for the built-in convolution reverb are also available.

interface and sample engine, there are no immediate surprises. In addition to the main parameters, SD3 features a simple delay and filter section. The tuning section provides Play's traditional tuning that affects both pitch and playback speed (A) and a tuning mode that does not affect speed (B), also with a high/normal quality switch. All of the live loops folders can be tempo-synced to your DAW.

Rhythmic Collection

SD3 is divided into a Quickstart folder (an introduction to the library), followed by seven categories: big drums (excluding taikos); gongs, clocks and waterphones; metals; shakers; small drums; taikos; and woods. A collection of tempo-synced "Mickey Hart Live Loops" was derived from a multi-instrument jam session including Hart, producer Nick Phoenix, and percussionists Greg Ellis and Chalo Eduardo.

There are too many great sounds to cover, but there are audio demos online. A few standouts include the taiko drums, which cover large to small in great detail. The "Dragon" hits are huge and the gong collection is one of the best ever sampled. The metal collection can be eerie or ethereal, and I love the "Chimes Burma." The frame drums and clockworks are exceptional. The live loops do feel *very* live. Throw a loop into your DAW, mess with the filter, and you've got an instant mood bed.

Many of the instruments feature an average of four round-robin notes per key, with several having six, eight, or even 12 notes. There doesn't seem to be much velocity switching between samples, and the articulations are typically spread across the keys. However, there is scripting for velocity affecting the volume, tone, and envelope of the notes in a very musical way. The result is a very playable and dynamic feel once you become familiar with how instruments are key-mapped.

Play 4 Engine

SD3 is the first library to be hosted in the new Play 4 engine. Play 4 includes a new Mixer view that allows the user to control level, pan, and effects. Each instrument can be expanded to five channel strips for each virtual mic array: Close (up to eight mics near the instrument for a drier sound); Mid (a tree of mics 15 feet away); HiFi (a slightly wider "super-clean" pair of mics 15 feet away); Main (a Neumann M50 Decca tree array 20 to 25 feet away); and Ribbon (vintage RCA ribbons 20 to 25 feet away). Clicking the channel strip name automatically loads the associated samples.

All of the mic positions sound phenomenal. EastWest Studio 1 (formerly the vaunted United Western) has a room tone and decay that is well known to be great for drums and percussion. Instruments open to a default blend of Close and HiFi mics that's immediately useful without additional reverb, although you can most certainly dive into loading the other mic arrays. Blending the various mic positions gives you a staggering amount of control over tone, and lets you dial in professional depth well beyond what can normally be done with dry samples and multiple reverbs. When even more ambiance is desired, the included true-stereo convolution impulse responses are imported directly from EastWest Spaces, one of my current favorite reverbs.

Play 4's new effects are courtesy of SSL and sport a filter, EQ, compressor, gate/expander, and a transient shaper (see **Figure 1**). Effects are available on each individual mic array and the master output. In addition, a single SSL stereo bus compressor is available per instrument. EQ and compression are certainly welcome additions; however, the samples sound so great that I rarely felt the need for effects. The new mixer and effects of Play 4 will be available in future Play libraries. Older Play libraries can add the SSL effects for a one-time upgrade fee of $99—which covers everything you own.

The transients are so well recorded in SD3 that in my initial tests, some of the patches overloaded the mixer (in Play and/or Logic) when played at the hardest velocities. You can work around this by watching your levels, which you should do even more so when combining multiple mic perspectives. I told EastWest about this experience, and they're working on a fix.

Conclusions

Although I've had my issues with the Play engine in the past, my experience with SD3 and Play 4 was pleasant. I experienced a smooth workflow and was able to concentrate on the music and explore the massive amount of cool sounds.

In practice, I generally had no idea what I was doing with many of the instruments, which made for a lot of fun. I'd usually poke around to get an idea of what an instrument could do, and then just start playing until something sounded good. It's a simple matter to move notes to "better" articulations after the fact, and that's what I did if I was feeling picky. There's both a lot of instant gratification for those not obsessed with being convincingly authentic and plenty of meat for those who are.

There are so many great sounds to choose from in SD3, especially for composers working in film, TV, video games, and multimedia. The recordings and playing are stellar, and blending the mic arrays can make you sound like a Hollywood A-lister. ♪

Bottom Line

An amazing assortment of ethnic world percussion that sounds fantastic and complements StormDrum 2. Perfect for composers working in film, TV, gaming and world music.

$395 on DVD | $479 shipped on hard drive
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▶ Original audio examples.

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