

EastWest ProDrummer

Virtual Drum Instrument

Need a professional drummer in your studio? How about auditioning EastWest's ProDrummer for the job?

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EastWest have a substantial catalogue of high-end sample libraries, which are used by an equally high-end roster of composers and musicians. All these products now use EastWest's own Play 4 engine, albeit often with a customised front-end interface. The latest additions to the EastWest roster are actually two related products, called ProDrummer Vol 1 and ProDrummer Vol 2. The core function of these libraries is not unlike BFD3 or Superior Drummer, in that each library provides you with some mega-detailed, sample-based acoustic drum kits, full mixing facilities, effects options and a huge collection of MIDI drum patterns.

The interesting twist is that each ProDrummer volume has been created through collaboration with a top-notch, high-profile producer. For volume 1, that's none other than Mark 'Spike' Stent, with Steven Sidelnyk, whose credits include Madonna, Seal and Massive Attack,

EastWest ProDrummer \$249 per volume

PROS

- Makes it almost ridiculously easy to create a highly produced acoustic drum track.
- Both volumes stand up well on their own and contain plenty of variety.
- Room-specific mic channels and effects options make the sounds highly customisable.
- MIDI groove library is substantial.
- Composer Cloud subscription would be great for working professional composers.

CONS

- Perhaps a little resource-hungry.

SUMMARY

Either volume of ProDrummer makes it easy to create a great acoustic drum track. EastWest's latest release deserves serious attention alongside the best of the rest in the virtual drummer instrument market.



on drums. Volume 2, meanwhile, was created by Joe Chiccarelli with drummer Matt Chamberlain, whose credits include Pearl Jam, Bruce Springsteen and Peter Gabriel. EastWest's own Doug Rogers provided the glue to bring it all together.

If you happen to be an aspiring Hollywood composer, you could do a lot worse than equip yourself with a RAID array stuffed with EastWest's entire back catalogue. Unfortunately, given that that catalogue is (a) extensive and (b) expensive (undoubtedly value for money, but this is top-end stuff), you would need a loan from someone who actually is a successful Hollywood composer in order to fill said RAID array.

Well, you would until now... because the other interesting thing about ProDrummer is that it is EastWest's first release since they launched their new Composer Cloud service. While you can still buy individual library licences, EastWest now provide a monthly subscription option and, depending upon

the subscription level you opt for, you can access the entire catalogue (with a combined value of over \$11,000) for as long as your subscription lasts.

So, if you are in the market for a sophisticated virtual drum instrument, how does ProDrummer fare? And, if it finds its way to the top of your wish-list, should you go for a one-off payment or subscribe to Composer Cloud?

Set Up The Kit

Volume 1 of ProDrummer is a 60GB download, while Volume 2 comes in at just 40GB, with all the samples presented in 24-bit/44.1kHz format. Authorisation can be either machine-specific or to a USB iLok key but, as with most modern music software, this proved pretty painless on my test system. You get a stand-alone version of Play 4 plus plug-in versions in VST, AU and AAX formats. Play itself requires a 64-bit OS but, even though a 64-bit host is also recommended, I was able to run Play with ProDrummer using

ProDrummer is supplied with an impressive library of MIDI patterns that can be easily searched via the Groove Browser page.

the 32-bit version of Cubase Pro 8.

When using either of the ProDrummer volumes, the main Play 4 'Player' window gives you a drummer's-perspective 3D graphic of the virtual drum kit, and you can audition the loaded sounds by simply clicking on the appropriate kit piece. The four large buttons arranged along the top edge provide access to other elements of the interface.

The Settings pane is where you configure various settings for the instrument, including useful features for streamlining the engine's workload if your host system



needs a little help. The Browser screen allows you to switch between your various Play Libraries or browse within the contents of the two ProDrummer volumes to find the preset kit you wish to load.

At first glance, the Mixer screen looks fairly modest, but it gives you access to all the individual mic channels used when recording the kits, as well as some comprehensive effects options (more on these later). The options for controlling your drum mix are, therefore, considerable.

Beneath the kit graphic on the Player screen is the Song Builder. This allows you to assemble a series of MIDI grooves from the impressive included collection into a full performance. The

Grooves button opens a further browser, so you can find, audition and then drag and drop the patterns that you want. While you can't edit the MIDI patterns within the Song Builder, you do get all the >>

» usual tools for changing the lengths of patterns, copying, deleting and reordering, as well as export options for patterns or a full song. However, if you're using ProDrummer as a plug-in, grooves can also be dragged and dropped onto a MIDI track in your DAW, where you can use all your usual MIDI editing tools on the patterns.

Other controls in the bottom strip include transport and tempo options, plus the Sync To Host button. The Drums button overlays labels on the drum graphics in the Player display to show you which specific drum was used for the currently loaded samples. For some kits, a small drop-down menu within these labels allows you to load alternative drum samples.

As described more fully below, one aspect of both ProDrummer volumes is that they have been recorded in multiple studio rooms. This gives you some very distinctive and characterful drum sounds but, as the aim of the instrument is to provide you with a 'real' drum kit, and the presets offer a series of examples of those kits pre-mixed by Spike Stent and Joe Chiccarelli, the bulk of the presets limit you to using a set of drums that were recorded within the same physical space. However, if you pick the 'hybrid' presets, then you can mix and match from these different rooms. The downside is that you don't then have access to the various room mic channels (because



The right end of the virtual mixer includes all the additional room mic channels that can be used to provide some natural ambience to your kit.

think there is a duff sound to be had, but I particularly liked the 'Kit 2 — MixSuite LA Kitchen' presets, which seemed to have a very well-balanced sound and a really nice 'room' character; I could imagine these working in almost any modern rock or pop context. In contrast, the 'master' preset for Kit 5, recorded in EastWest's own Studio 3B, has a somewhat 'bigger'

the kit pieces have been recorded in different rooms) but you can, of course, always add your own reverb/ambience either through the Mixer or via your host's processing options.

The final option within this strip is the Vel Proc section where you can use the Thresh, Ratio and Makeup controls to fine-tune the MIDI velocity response of the drums (rather like a 'MIDI compressor'). This is very effective and can change the dynamics of a performance in some useful ways.

Turn Up The Volume, Part 1

What about the sample content itself? Well, Spike Stent's Vol 1 is built around drum pieces from Drum Workshop, Slingerland, Gretsch, Ludwig, Yamaha, Orange County and Zildjian, and was recorded in five different studios. The 60GB of sample content is organised into seven main kits, although you actually get a good number of presets built around each kit with different mixer/effects combinations. The PDF manual provides a comprehensive list of which kit was recorded where, and the MIDI mapping used. This follows pretty standard practice for the main articulations such as snare, kick and hi-hat, but you also get the extra articulations — drum and cymbal edges, short and long snare rolls, and so on — mapped higher in the MIDI note range, so if you want to craft in all the subtleties that a real drummer produces in a performance, you have the tools to do it with.

And just how does a set of seven Spike Stent/Steven Sidelnyk drum sessions sound? Well, very good indeed. I don't

sound, if you want something that will attract a bit more attention. The Mixer does, of course, allow you to dial in more or less 'room' for any of the presets.

Turn Up The Volume, Part 2

In Vol 2, you get a good crop of presets built around four different kits and spread across 40GB of samples. These were all recorded in EastWest's own studio spaces, but the Joe Chiccarelli/Matt Chamberlain combination still manages to generate a diverse set of production-ready drum presets. Kit pieces are derived from Craviotto, Ludwig, Tama, Slingerland, Gretsch, Istanbul and Zildjian. This volume also includes 'J37 Tape' mic options within the mixer; these are alternate mics that were run through a Studer J37 tape machine for a subtle bit of extra vintage analogue sound.

Comparing the 'master' preset for all four kits, Kit 1 would make a great modern rock kit, while Kit 2 is perhaps

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Test Spec

Minimum System Requirements

- Mac: Intel Core 2 Duo processor 2.1GHz or faster, 8GB RAM, OS 10.5 or later, 7200rpm or faster hard drive for sample streaming, 60GB (Vol 1) or 40GB (Vol 2) free hard-drive space.
- PC: Intel Core 2 Duo or AMD Dual Core 2 2.1GHz or better, 8GB RAM, Windows XP SP2, Vista or Windows 7 or later, soundcard with ASIO drivers, 7200rpm or faster hard drive for sample streaming, 60GB and/or 40GB of free hard-drive space.

Test System

- Apple iMac with 3.5GHz Intel Core i7 CPU and 32GB RAM, running Mac OS 10.9.2.
- Focusrite Scarlett 8i6.
- Steinberg Cubase Pro 8 (v.8.0.20).
- ProDrummer with EastWest Play v.4.2.35.

Alternatives

There are a number of high-end virtual drum instruments that might be considered competitors with ProDrummer, and SOS has looked at most of the obvious candidates. For example, **FXpansions's BFD3**, **Toontrack's Superior Drummer 2** and **XLN Audio's Addictive Drums** all provide a similar combination of highly detailed drum sampling, virtual mixing, effects, MIDI grooves and optional expansion packs. A further option — and one which gets close to the 'celebrity drummer' element of ProDrummer — would be **Spitfire Audio's** recent library **The Grange**, although it is perhaps as much about the place it was recorded (Headley Grange) as it is about the fact that Roger Taylor, Chad Smith and Andy Gangadeen were behind the various kits.

» a little softer and has a more vintage vibe. Kit 3 was recorded in EastWest's Studio 2 Live Room and the 'master' preset has an obvious room character. Again, you can dial that in or out to taste using the mixing options. Kit 4 (like Kit 7 in Vol 1) is a hybrid kit, which combines drums from each of the other Kits. This sounds great and makes for a very good multi-purpose acoustic drum kit. Note that within these hybrid presets (but also elsewhere on occasions), there are some 'layered' drum sounds included where, for example, samples from two different snares have been blended to give a composite sound.

In The Mix

As with all the top virtual drum instruments, the samples themselves are only part of the story; you also get a sophisticated mixing environment to tailor your sound. The Mixer covers the obvious basics — faders, mute/solo buttons, pan, and so on — but each channel also has an FX button, a send to the master reverb effect (you can access this, and a master bus compressor, via the FX button on the master output channel strip) and a further button that contains the drum label. This is a kind of 'resource saver' button; if you toggle it off (grey), the samples related to that channel strip/microphone are purged. Toggle it back on and the samples are reloaded. At the base of each channel strip, you can also assign any channel to a specific virtual output pair (10 are available) if you want to process certain channels separately within your host DAW's mixer.

There are two elements of ProDrummer's mixing environment that deserve a special mention. First, as you scroll to the right end of the channel set, you can see various overhead and room mic channels. These vary from one kit to another depending upon what was used for the specific session, but it is here that you can add or subtract the sound of the room or the amount of mic bleed. As with BFD3 and SD2, this is a key element in making the kit come together, and ProDrummer certainly doesn't disappoint in this respect: there is plenty of control available.

Second, both the channel and master effects options are impressive. In the channel effects you get the comprehensive SSL channel strip emulation combining filters, EQ, a transient shaper, compressor and gate/expander. This is complemented with



a very respectable amp simulator so, if you want to let a drum or two roar through a virtual Marshall stack, then that's perfectly possible.

However, that's not your only 'added grit' option, because each channel also includes an instance of Ohm Force's Ohmicide multi-band dynamics and distortion processor. This is quite a beast and includes over 80 different distortion options, ranging from tape saturation through to very crunchy overdrive. Each of the four bands offers a range of processing options including Mid/Sides matrixing, gate, dynamics, distortion, stereo and feedback. If you like to get all NIN or EDM with your drum sounds, then this is just the tool for you.

Get In The Groove

So, ProDrummer has the detailed sampling and playback engine, and it has the mixing environment... The other vital ingredient is the performance. Drummers (or drum programmers) can obviously

The Vel Proc section provides a sort of 'MIDI velocity compressor' for adjusting the dynamics of the MIDI patterns.

cater for their own needs here but, for everyone else, EastWest have included a library of over 14,000 MIDI drum grooves covering a wide range of musical styles. As described above, the Groove Browser allows you to track down what you need and includes genre, sub-genre, style and type filters.

Musically, the ground covers everything from jazz through to metal, with plenty of stops along the way. As well as short patterns of a few bars, the collection also includes a good number of 'full song' MIDI files that give you a complete drum track running for 80 or so bars. I'm a big fan of the way Toontrack allow you to extend SD2 by offering inexpensive add-on MIDI groove packs, and it will be interesting to see if EastWest also decide to go down that route. However, the core MIDI content supplied with ProDrummer is a substantial starting point for any new user, and is of a consistently high standard.

Beat it?

In use, you soon realise that ProDrummer offers the sound quality, impressively detailed sampling (including the range of articulation variations) and level of control required to shape your drum track in the sorts of ways that you might in a top-level recording studio. Despite that, the Play front end makes it almost unbelievably easy to produce a polished drum track. »



The effects options for each mic channel are very impressive.

» Pick a kit preset, drop some suitable MIDI grooves into the Song Builder, tweak a few faders in the Mixer and, with ProDrummer, you could have a complete drum track in less time than it takes to set up a snare mic. Things only really get more technical than this if you choose to delve into the excellent processing options offered within the FX section of the Mixer. These are pretty deep (a good thing) but that also means a bit of a learning curve.

In terms of a comparison with some of the obvious competition, ProDrummer's individual volumes are in a similar price bracket to the likes of BFD3 and Superior Drummer. I've used both of these products on a regular basis, and ProDrummer is somewhat different in terms of the approach adopted (for example, in the use of name producers and drummers and the sound of specific recording spaces) but is certainly in the same lofty bracket in terms of results.

The Ohmicide effect is great if you want to turn your acoustic drum kit into something just a touch more industrial.

My only qualifier here would be that I found ProDrummer to be a touch more resource-hungry. For example, comparing the stand-alone versions of ProDrummer and BFD3 side-by-side with similar kits and playing similar basic rock drum patterns, ProDrummer used noticeably more CPU cycles than BFD3, and a very similar



amount of RAM. That said, if your host is flagging a little, the 'lite' preset versions still sound very impressive (you lose some of the extra articulations such as some 'edge' hits). If you want to squeeze every last drop out of the library, and you have the computer to do it, there's also the 'powerful system' version which includes extra round-robin and double-hit articulations.

Conclusion

In building ProDrummer's content around named producers and, in particular, around a collection of kits recorded in named rooms with distinctive sonic characters, EastWest are coming at the concept of a sophisticated virtual drummer instrument from a slightly different angle. Both volumes, however, deliver fabulous results. Do you need both? Well, that's a tricky call, and you might easily decide that the mixing options provide you with more than enough variation from just one volume when getting started. Alternatively, opting for a Composer Cloud subscription gives you all the choice you could want!

That said, both Spike Stent and Joe Chiccarelli — plus the EastWest team of course — have done a great job in creating these libraries. If you are in the market for a top-end virtual drum instrument, ProDrummer, whether Vol 1 or Vol 2 or both, should most certainly be on your audition list alongside the obvious competition. **///**

\$ ProDrummer Vol 1 \$249, ProDrummer Vol 2 \$249.
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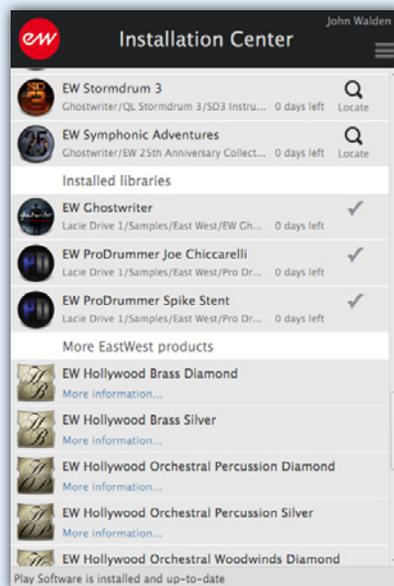
Cloud Funding

Following the lead of a number of other major software producers, EastWest are now offering users the option of a subscription-based payment model: Composer Cloud. Before we go any further, I should make it clear that this is in addition to the existing 'buy once' approach rather than a replacement for it. There are a number of different monthly pricing options, with the best deals available if you commit for an initial 12-month period (although month-on-month subscriptions are also possible). Initially, there were two main tariffs, one costing \$29.99 per month which gave you access to seven instrument collections, and the other costing \$49.99 per month and granting you access to all current collections plus any new releases. However, EastWest have now simplified this by scrapping the first tariff and reducing the price of the second to \$29.99 per month, which makes things easier, not to mention cheaper.

For the purposes of this review, I was given a short-term account for Composer Cloud. Download times aside (there are many multi-gigabyte libraries available), the EastWest catalogue is hugely impressive, and in particular about being able to access some of the best orchestral and 'world' sounds, this is certainly a very cost-effective means of doing so. Accounts are easy to manage online and the EastWest Installation Centre software makes it very easy to install and organise the required downloads.

EastWest products are used by many of the top film and TV composers. For those working in that tier of the industry, the pricing of the individual virtual instruments

is perhaps not such a big issue. However, now, for a fixed — and very manageable — monthly budget, a budding composer can have access to all of the same sounds. This still might seem like a bit of a stretch for those just starting out, but I can see Composer Cloud being very popular with composers who are working professionally but not yet perhaps at the 'Hollywood' level. The ability to fix the monthly budget is going to be a big plus for such users.



The EastWest Installation Centre makes managing your Composer Cloud libraries very straightforward.