

Steinberg Groove Agent 3 | £170

The third incarnation of Groove Agent has arrived with Steinberg promising many new exciting features. **Dan JD73 Goldman** puts this latest version of the virtual drummer to the test



WHAT IS IT?

A virtual drummer program that offers a comprehensive range of sounds, styles and FX for creating ultra-realistic-sounding drum grooves

CONTACT

Who: Steinberg
Tel: +44 (0)207 8207 7880
Web: steinberg.net

HIGHLIGHTS

- 1 Ultra realistic multi-sampled sounds with velocity layers and ambience
- 2 Wide range of useful styles and complexity levels with MIDI export/sample import
- 3 Many sound-shaping options and module combinations with new dual mode

The concept of virtual musicians taking over the world is a scary thought for many a seasoned live player.

But with much lower budgets for making records these days it's often impractical to find a drummer, studio and budget that fits the bill. This is where Groove Agent 3 comes in.

Steinberg have been on this virtual tip for a number of years. They started out with Virtual Guitarist and Virtual Bassist with great success, and then with the launch of Groove Agent in 2003 they cemented their position in

the virtual drummer world. Since then, Steinberg have sought to continually improve the software, and now for 2007 they bring us GA3.

Hoop jumping

Installing the software on my MacBook was relatively painless but still took nearly an hour. This was mainly due to having to authorise the license for GA3 on to a Steinberg USB dongle that has to be bought separately, (thankfully at a reasonable cost). Once the licence was installed on the key there were still a couple of glitches but after several

restarts and re-inserts of the key, the software finally launched.

High specs

For this review I used my Apple MacBook with Logic Express 7, which hosts GA3 as an audio units plug-in. Unfortunately it takes around four minutes to load up the samples and boot the plug-in, even on my dual 1.83 Intel core 2 duo processor laptop with 1GB RAM. I can't stress enough that you need a very highly spec'd machine for running this software. It's very processor-intensive so I'd recommend at least 2GB RAM. Hopefully it'll run better on a PC with Steinberg's Cubase.

GA3 has several operating modes. The first and main window is Classic mode. At the top is the Style slider where you can choose from 108 different styles ranging from old Jazz to modern Club. Underneath is the complexity slider where you can dial in 25 varying levels of intricacy and feel.

Each of these levels also has a corresponding fill so it's easy to keep the patterns moving and evolving. The fills can be triggered manually with the fill button but there's also a very useful Auto Fill feature that can trigger a fill every two, four, eight, 12 or 16 bars, or fill before a change of style. On the left-hand side is the Shuffle control for





Groove Agent boots up into Classic mode



Import and FX page for importing your own samples



Dual mode has two Classic mode modules loaded

adding swing to the beats, a Humanise dial that adds a more human feel to the grooves, and an Ambience control.

The Ambience dial accesses the room reverbs recorded with each specific kit. This option (and the Shuffle and Humanise options) work in a very musical and effective way and I was very impressed by the quality of the reverbs in particular.

The drum machine samples have also been recorded with some really

type and the playing and kits have been impeccably executed and captured. GA3 even allows for import of any sound from your existing sample library.

Terminal velocity

The velocity layers triggered seamlessly from my MIDI keyboard and you can even play along live and record the MIDI output to your host application if you don't want to use the preset styles. You can also export the MIDI files from the

percussion kits within each kit). There's also a very decent 9-band EQ and a great compressor with release control, which helps to make beats bang nicely.

If this isn't enough, there are also another two types of 'agent' within GA3. The first is the Percussion agent, which is designed specifically for percussion and offers detailed control over the feel and sound of eight percussion parts. The second is Special agent that adds a further 15 specially recorded styles with

25 fills and complexity levels. There's also the new Dual mode that allows any two modules to be combined together (for example one Classic and one

GA3's sounds and styles are some of the best I've heard in a program of this type... It's inspiring to use

nice hardware reverbs for added versatility. The interface itself is simple enough, although a little cluttered, and it's sometimes easy to lose what you're looking for with all the different fonts, shapes and graphical displays – but you soon get used to it. In practice, it's very simple to use and you'll be grooving away in no time at all.

The sounds and styles are some of the best I've heard in a program of this

preset styles directly into your host application, although I couldn't get this feature to work with Logic.

And there's more! The level of detail, and sound modifying options are astounding. Once you hit the Import and FX button you can access a mini mixer for changing individual level, ambience, decay, pan, tuning and output of each sound in a kit (generally there are seven hit sounds and two

Percussion agent). This gives even more flexibility to an already mind-blowingly flexible program.

Versatile

So what's the verdict? I'm thoroughly impressed with nearly every aspect of GA3. It's worth the price alone just as a great drum sample library and drum machine. When you add in all the other features its apparent what an extensive and versatile piece of software this is.

It's an inspiring program to use and the results, though a little glitchy on my Mac, are fantastic in the end. I really love GA3 and can certainly see it getting a lot of use in my studio. **FM**

The rise of the virtual instrumentalists

From virtual reality to virtual modelling of buildings and cars, there's no escaping the virtual realm. So why have virtual technologies for music creation become so popular? In the main it's down to small budgets and available space – or lack of!

Over the last few years major studios (both in the UK and further afield) have been closing as cheaper technology has enabled producers and engineers to do much of

their work at home. Not so long ago, pro results could only be achieved by using real instruments in great-sounding rooms, in expensive studios.

To this day if you have the money, time and access to a great studio or engineer, it's still the best way to go by far.

But with recording budgets being slashed, record advances getting smaller and cheap city centre studio rents a thing of the past, many producers have had no

choice but to work from small home studio spaces where it's not always practical to set up an entire drum kit, and where issues like noise isolation and complaints can be a real problem.

It's easy to see why virtual software has become so essential in this situation; it allows us to obtain realistic sounding drum/instrument performances that fit with the tough and often restrictive demands of modern music making.

SPECS

PC: Windows XP (Home or Professional), Intel/AMD 2GHz minimum

Mac: OS 10.4, Power Mac G5 2GHz/intel core solo 1.5GHz minimum

AU/VST2 compatible host/ Core Audio compatible hardware

1GB RAM

4GB HD

DVD drive for installation

Steinberg Key (£17.99)

Upgrade paths from GA and GA2 available.

ALTERNATIVES



Rayzoon Jamstix 2

\$99

On par feature-wise with GA3. Can jam with your MIDI or audio input and supports sub hosting of other VSTi drum programs such as BFD and DFH.

rayzoon.com



FXpansion BFD

£120 (for acoustic drum module)

Based around a 9GB sample library. Allows multiple mic positioning, tuning and dampening of drums and is expandable with several add-on packs.

fxpansion.com



DFH Superior

£166

Comes with a huge 30GB sample library that uses extensive multi-sampling. Very in-depth editing of sounds but no built-in MIDI grooves.

toontrack.com

FutureMusic VERDICT

STABILITY [Progress bar: 4/5]

VALUE [Progress bar: 5/5]

EASE OF USE [Progress bar: 4/5]

VERSATILITY [Progress bar: 5/5]

RESULTS [Progress bar: 4/5]

Stability issues aside, the results are great. This is a serious piece of software capable of pro results.