

Nord Drum | £369

Marking a return to electronic percussion, Clavia's new drum synth is aimed at actual drummers as well as studio rats. **Ronan Macdonald** pulls the trigger...

INCLUDES AUDIO

WHAT IS IT?

A four-channel virtual analogue drum synth built with real drummers in mind.

CONTACT

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HIGHLIGHTS

- 1 Works beautifully with drum pads and acoustic triggers
- 2 Fantastic, versatile sound
- 3 Very easy to use

It would be fair to say that Clavia know a thing or two about electronic percussion. Long before the Nord range of synths, pianos, organs and sound modules, the company began life in the late '80s as manufacturers of the ddrum series of kits and triggers. In 2005, however, the brand was sold to Armadillo, and that, as far as percussion was concerned, was that for Clavia. Until now.

On the face of it, the Nord Drum couldn't be more straightforward a proposition: a low/mid-priced drum synth with no onboard sequencing. But that's really only part of the story – Clavia are all about playability and performance, and the Nord Drum is aimed primarily at drummers and percussionists (of all ability levels), for live triggering on its own or integrating into an acoustic and/or electronic

set-up. Make no mistake, though – this is no 'static' ROM-based drum brain.

First impressions upon taking it out of the box are very positive. It's smaller than you expect, with that characteristic Nord weight and solidity. A baseplate is included for mounting it on a stand or drum rack, and the wall wart power supply, although as unwelcome as ever, makes sense given the size of the unit. Crucially, hook-up to a set of drum pads or a MIDI interface is a doddle – see the *Trigger Time* box – as is connection to a PA, mixer or audio interface, but we'll come back to that later...

Four-in-one

The Nord Drum is a four-channel virtual analogue synth – ie, it uses DSP chips and software algorithms to emulate analogue circuitry, without a sample in sight. Rather than being specifically (and sonically) designated 'kick', 'snare'



Noise

A noise generator with variable colour control, a low-pass filter and a decay envelope.

Row Select

Switch to the bottom row of parameters and hold this button down to solo the oscillator currently being edited.

Tone

The body of each sound is shaped here, based on one of 17 synth waveforms – three analogue and 14 'harmonically complex'.

Programming Dial

Presets are selected and parameters adjusted using this central 'endless' dial.

etc, all four channels are identical, so, you can have whatever 'kit' configuration you like – kick, snare, hat and tom; kick, snare and two toms; four toms; two congas, a bell and a cymbal... it's up to you. Editing is old-school, done using a row of satisfyingly clicky buttons, a single dial and a three-character LED; but even young 'uns raised on a post-Millennial diet of slick software GUIs will find themselves flying around Clavia's efficient and intuitive layout after a few minutes of use.

Each channel, then, is a complete synth in its own right, comprising three separate oscillators – Click, Noise and Tone – that are balanced in the final Mixer section. The Click oscillator generates the transient at the start of the sound, and offers three different sets of waveforms (noise, noise mixed with pitched tone, and pitched tone) for

Stuck in the MIDI

The Nord Drum's MIDI spec is very basic. It receives four notes on one channel, all of which can be set to the values of your choice, either manually or through MIDI learn. Velocity is of course understood by the synth, but that's it as far as MIDI CCs go

– not even pitch bend or mod wheel input have any effect, so you can forget any sort of parameter automation from your DAW. Still, at least Program Change messages can be received.

With only 19 empty memory locations

(although the factory presets can be overwritten), it's a good job the Nord Drum can dump (via its MIDI Out port) and receive SysEx data. It's a bit of a shame there's no Mac/PC editing software, but I wouldn't be surprised to see this appear at some point.

use as starting points – your choice here has a big impact on the overall sound. Click decay length and envelope are adjustable, the latter having three shapes: a gradual slope, a soft knee slope and a hard gate.

The Noise generator features the same Decay/Gate control as the Click

oscillator, but with a much greater maximum length, as well as a low-pass filter featuring seven different resonance settings and a simple velocity-sensitive envelope. This is used to provide 'tish', 'psst', 'voosh' and, er, 'snare', and the Color setting gives it a good range of foundation timbres (in

SPECS

4-channel drum synth
3 oscillators per channel (Click, Noise, Tone)
1x mono audio output
4x trigger inputs
1x MIDI In
1x MIDI Out
99 program locations (80 Factory, 19 User)
3-character LED display
6 trigger types (3 pads, 3 acoustic drum triggers)



ALTERNATIVES



Korg Wavedrum

£399

Combining synthesis with samples, the second generation of Wavedrum leads the electronic hand percussion pack.

www.korg.com



Roland HandSonic HPD-10

£579

Very much sample-based, but nonetheless a powerful, affordable electronic option for the performance percussionist.

www.roland.com



DSI Tempest

£1,425

A supercharged hybrid drum synth/ROMpler featuring 16 pads for triggering, and performance features galore, the Tempest is the Rolls Royce of drum machines.

www.davesmithinstruments.com

the noise-based sense of the word!), emphasising and attenuating different frequencies in the noise spectrum.

The Tone section is where the body of the sound is brewed up, and it starts with a sizeable selection of waveforms: three simple analogue shapes (sine, saw and square) and 14 'harmonically complex' ones. All of the waves have been tonally designed with pitched and unpitched percussion in mind – the complex ones all sound very similar if you just scroll through them at their default settings, but once you get

editing, the profound differences between them become apparent. Being synthesised, these waves are open to manipulation in ways that samples just aren't, facilitated by a bank of parameter controls that offer a high level of flexibility while keeping the focus very much on the percussive.

The Tone oscillator's pitch ranges from B-1 to D7 in quarter-tone steps, and velocity-sensitive pitchbend with variable range and time can be dialled in, applying quick drop-off to 'realistic' drum sounds and longer pitch dives to

syntons, for example. A low-pass filter is in place (strange that there's no high-pass, but I can't say I found myself desperately needing one at any point), along with a Punch control (adding a bit of velocity-controlled attack transient to the Tone) and an adjustable velocity-sensitive envelope. Finally, the same combined Decay/Gate control found in the Noise sections appears again here, and yes, you can easily push the pitch and decay down/up into ass-quaking sub-bass range.

Pad world

Playing the Nord Drum via a set of pads is a riot, and I can enthusiastically report that it unequivocally qualifies as an 'instrument' in every sense of the word, being responsive, dynamic and expressive. The range of sounds it can produce is quite amazing, from the authentically analogue to the surprisingly 'acoustic', the bangin' to the delicate, and the stridently industrial to the lavishly organic. The 99 presets kits are largely excellent in their own right, and also serve as great jumping off points for your own patches – and with programming being so quick and easy, tweaking them onstage shouldn't be too risky.

For acoustic drum reinforcement (particularly the kick drum), the Nord Drum could be the perfectly portable triggering solution that many drummers are looking for. I can think of no easier, cheaper way to add sub-bass, white noise and full-on analogue layers to a trigger-equipped acoustic kit than this.

In the studio, the Nord isn't quite so groundbreaking, of course, particularly given the stiff competition it faces from software instruments such

The Good and Great

Three things that make the Nord Drum worth banging on about...



> The Nord Drum's trigger-happy design makes it a genuinely playable performance instrument that drummers and percussionists are going to fall in love with.



> It sounds superb and is far more sonically versatile than its relatively modest feature set implies. The range of sounds it can produce is positively awesome.



> It's extremely simple to program, with a focused, well-thought-out set of controls within an intuitive layout perfectly suited to percussion sound design.

MIDI and Trigger I/O

The 1/4-inch trigger inputs are compatible with all makes of drum pad and triggers, while the MIDI In and Out ports cover more conventional interfacing.



as Sonic Charge MicroTonic and Audio Damage Tattoo. Nevertheless, its awesome sound and hands-on tweakability keep it confidently in the fight, and I'd urge any Dance, Urban or Electronica producer looking for quality analogue percussion to take it for a test drive.

One for the money

So, in terms of playability, programmability, triggering flexibility and sound, the Nord Drum is a resounding success. It really is. There are a couple of problems, though, that, while not show stoppers, might cause some to think twice about investing in it. The first is that four channels isn't really enough. I appreciate that this isn't meant to be a drum brain, per se, but a couple more channels would make a huge difference in terms of completion: kick, snare, closed hat, open hat and two toms, say, or kick, snare, hat, two toms and a crash cymbal. As it is, while you could do a gig using the Nord Drum entirely on its own as a 'drum kit', you'd have to be very clever in your patch programming

Trigger Time

Clavia are making a lot of noise about how easy it is to trigger the Nord Drum for live performance – and rightly so, as it is indeed supremely straightforward. Alongside the MIDI In socket are four 1/4-inch inputs for connecting electronic pads (mesh or rubber) and/or acoustic drum triggers, each jack hardwired to its own synth channel. And that's pretty much all there is to it: simply plug your pads in and play! If the response isn't quite how you want it, adjust the sensitivity and/or dynamic response curve; and if cross-triggering's an

issue, tweak the response threshold until it stops.

We tested the Nord Drum with the kick, snare and two toms from a Roland TD3K kit, and found it to be every bit as responsive as the TD3 brain they were used to dealing with. Triggered via MIDI using the same pads through the TD3, the results were identical, of course, but the convenience of being able to jack pads and triggers straight into a synthesiser is hugely appealing and effective.

Finally, MIDI and both types of trigger input can be combined, so you could, for



example, reinforce an acoustic kick drum, trigger a snare and hats from a pair

of pads, and sequence a percussion sound from your DAW, all at the same time.

The second issue is going to drive live sound engineers ker-rasy. The Nord Drum has one output. And that's literally 'one' – as in, a single mono jack. Taking its groovy, laid-back,

outputs – just a pan-able stereo pair, so that you can at least pull the kick or snare out of a mono mix for EQ, reverb or whatever, or put those cosmic percussion sounds on a stereo stage.

Seriously, Clavia, how much would it have pushed the price up to make this thing stereo? I can happily accept the lack of high- and band-pass filter types and

effects, and even the four-sound limit, but this is pushing it.

Still, I guess the upside of this downside is that getting sound out of the Nord Drum into your PA or DAW literally couldn't be easier – one cable and the job's done. It's a busker's dream. In fact, solitary output aside, it's any electronic drummer/percussionist's dream, sounding absolutely fantastic and making triggered drum synthesis easier than ever before. **FM**

It qualifies as an 'instrument' in every sense of the word, being responsive, dynamic and expressive

and rather minimalist in performance terms – it does always feel like there's a sound or two missing. On the other hand, though, for supplementary percussion purposes, four simultaneous sounds feels like just the right amount.

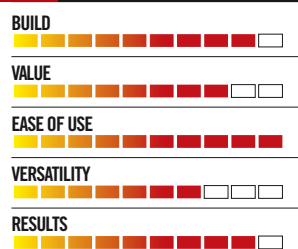
just-plug-into-the-PA-and-get-busy ethos fully onboard, I've given a lot of thought to how much this bothers me and come to the conclusion that it bothers me quite a bit. It's ridiculous, frankly. I'm not even after the full four

Audio Output

A puzzling lack of outputs is the Nord's only real issue – one mono jack just isn't enough.



FutureMusic VERDICT



A superb drum synth for drummers, percussionists and programmers alike... with one mono output.