

Mac PC What is it? Third-generation virtual drummer plug-in **PRICE: £170**

CONTACT: Arbitr, 020 8207 7880 WWW.steinberg.net

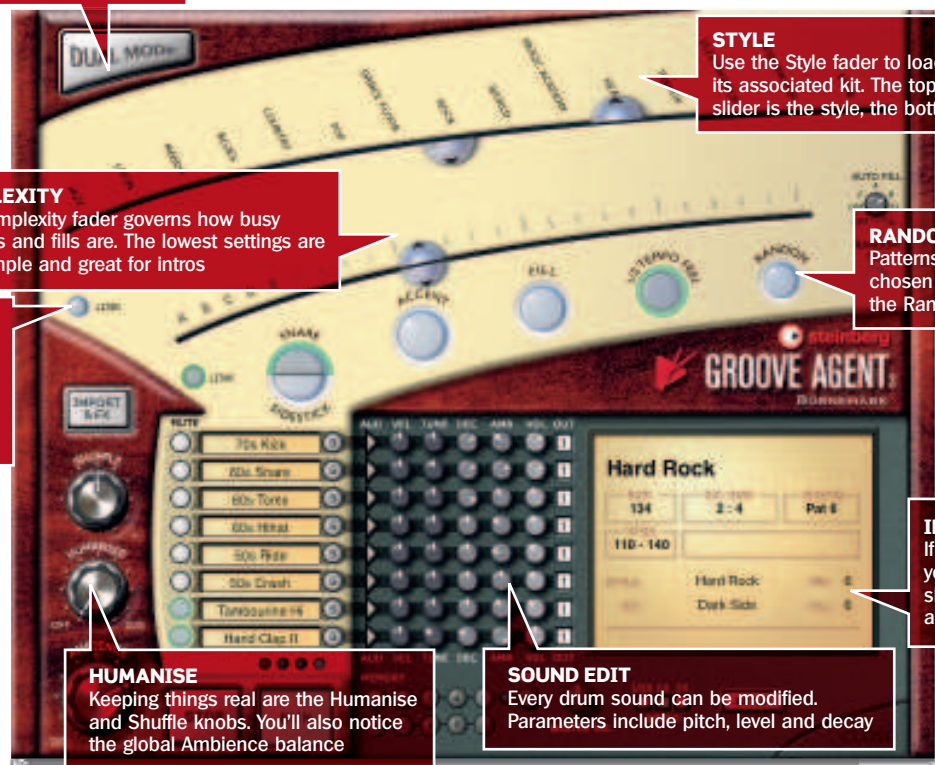
DUAL MODE
Access GA3's new modules using the Dual Mode button

STYLE
Use the Style fader to load a pattern and its associated kit. The top part of the slider is the style, the bottom part the kit

COMPLEXITY
The Complexity fader governs how busy patterns and fills are. The lowest settings are very simple and great for intros

RANDOM
Patterns and fills can be chosen randomly by clicking the Random button

LINK
Linking the fader knobs keeps styles and kits together, and patterns and fills on a par



HUMANISE
Keeping things real are the Humanise and Shuffle knobs. You'll also notice the global Ambience balance

SOUND EDIT
Every drum sound can be modified. Parameters include pitch, level and decay

INFO
If you're a bit confused as to what you're hearing, the Info window shows you which style, kit, pattern and fill is currently playing

On the DVD

AUDIO DEMOS
On the disc you can hear each of Groove Agent's virtual drummers playing in turn. See the text file for more info

STEINBERG Groove Agent 3

Steinberg's flagship drum module finally appears in its third guise, with a couple of all-new Agents in tow. But can it once again revolutionise the concept of auto-percussion?

- **SYSTEM REQUIREMENTS**
PC: Intel/AMD 2GHz, 1GB RAM, 4GB disk space, Windows XP, DVD drive for installation, MME- or ASIO-compatible hardware, compatible host (VST 2, DXI2 or ReWire), Steinberg Key dongle (not included) and spare USB port
Mac: PowerMac G5 2GHz or Intel Core Solo 1.5GHz, 1GB RAM, 4GB disk space, OS X 10.4, DVD drive for installation, Core Audio compatible hardware, compatible host (VST 2, AU or ReWire), Steinberg Key dongle (not included) and spare USB port
- **TEST SYSTEM**
Mac: Mac Pro Dual 3GHz, 3GB RAM, OS X 10.4.9, Logic Pro 7.2

Now at version 3, Steinberg's virtual drummer has carved out its own niche in a field dominated by large sample library players. Its ethos is to be easy to use and immediately accessible while still producing great results, even for those who know next to nothing about drumming or drum programming. The sample content still only requires 4GB of disk space, which isn't a great deal these days. In use, this translates into a bunch of styles and associated kits pretty much at your fingertips, and means that less time's wasted trying to program your own realistic-sounding beats. Inevitably there is a compromise, and in the past this has mostly been

down to the limited number of velocity layers (version 2 relied on a paltry 450MB library). **Stylish kits** GA3 supports VST, DXI, AU and ReWire, as well as coming as a standalone app, and it basically uses the same system as previous versions, which is built around styles and kits. This means a certain pattern will automatically load a particular kit (although they can be unlinked if you want), and the idea is you play or 'run' the pattern in real time and in sync with your host, adding fills and accents as you wish. There are various ways to modify this behaviour, such as the useful 1/2

Tempo Feel function, and a number of random options can be applied to both fills and patterns. As you may have gathered, though, GA3 basically supplies beats for you rather than expecting you to program them yourself. This is fundamental to the instrument's design and, coupled with the large Complexity slider, makes it easy to produce great performances. With 20 different complexities from which to choose, you build dynamics by changing this during a track (ie, via automation), and there are also Humanise and Shuffle controls to further enhance the 'as played' feel. In addition, both the Style and Complexity sliders can be unlinked, enabling you to select

unrelated kits and patterns or vary the complexity of your fills.

All in all, there are plenty of options, and when combined with additional kits (including some tasty drum machines), a couple of new player modules, better effects implementation and the option to import your own samples, Groove Agent 3 is clearly a more complex beast than its predecessor.

Dual to the death

GA3 adds its new modules by incorporating a new Dual mode. In essence, this means that although you can run it just like the previous versions in Classic mode (which uses preset patterns and multilayered samples to create its beats), to access the extra modules, you'll need to switch to Dual mode, where you can get at the two new 'Agents': Special and Percussion. This features

Agent is a slightly different consideration, but sees Mr Kihlberg on the case again, this time playing 18 percussion instruments, ranging from cowbells to tambourines, each with five levels of complexity. To be honest, the five complexity options are just different patterns, but with a variety of pieces used in each category you get some great variations.

Despite being recorded from live performances, both of these new Agents sync to different tempos, as the samples have been sliced up ReCycle-style.



“THE NEW MODULES CHANGE THE OVERALL IMPRESSION OF THE PLUG-IN, MOVING IT AWAY FROM INSTANT BEAT CREATION”

a split upper/lower window design with the potential to run any two modules at once. All the same features are there – they're just a little more compact, and you now get to take your pick of the three modules: Groove Agent, Special Agent and Percussion Agent.

The two new additions are pretty different to the original module, which is no bad thing. Special Agent adds 15 new styles, all performed on a real kit by Swedish session drummer Rasmus Kihlberg. These vary from jazz to funk to rock, and each includes 25 complexity levels, 25 fills and 25 half-tempo renditions. Percussion

Truly Special?

The new modules in GA3 seriously change the overall impression of the plug-in, moving it away from instant beat creation into the more realistic realms of FXpansion's famous BFD or XLN Audio's Addictive Drums. Switching between the original Groove Agent module and the new Special Agent one is particularly enlightening, as the latter simply sounds more realistic. The use of three kits on the recording sessions also means there's plenty of sound variation.

However, the routing is limited to kit and ambience, and there are no internal level controls for Special

Agent in the way that there are for the other two modules. This hinders your balancing options and – aside from tweaking the Ambience level – you essentially get what you're given.

On a more positive note, the new percussion module really rounds things off, giving you instant access to tempo-matched percussion, in the same way that Spectrasonics' Stylus does. Percussion Agent's sounds are less varied than that particular plug-in, but their live nature and original performance means tempo-matched patterns are a couple of clicks away.

Groove Agent 3 is a much better equipped plug-in than its predecessor, but, given its potential, it still seems hindered by the plug-in protocols it relies on. This is a shame, as your creativity can easily become dampened, particularly if you're not using a suitable VST host. **cm**

▲ New in GA3 is the ability to import your own samples, and improved control over effects

ALTERNATIVELY

XLN Audio Addictive Drums
cm110 >> 9/10 >> €235

If it's just drum kits you're after, Addictive Drums sounds excellent. It includes a number of great patterns too

DFH Superior v2
N/A >> N/A >> £166

A bigger and more open-ended library, this includes percussion sounds as well. Alas, the beat programming is entirely up to you

MIDI mania

With various complexities to choose from on the fly, GA3 can pump out some truly organic beats. However, capturing your performance varies considerably between sequencers and also between Groove Agent's modules.

In a VST sequencer, GA3 uses the MIDI and automation output facilities within the VST protocol to send data to the host. This means that in Cubase 4, for example, a MIDI pattern can be recorded by triggering a style. Alternatively, to automate parameters rather than tweak MIDI data, a new VST instrument track will do the trick. However, only Groove Agent generates MIDI, and not Special Agent or Percussion Agent, which could be a disappointment for those who were expecting them to.

Steinberg also make it clear in the manual that MIDI output pushes the limits of the VST protocol, and they only guarantee it will work correctly in Cubase and Nuendo. AU hosts don't support MIDI output from instruments, but even just using automation can be a minefield. In Logic 7 we struggled to generate automation data from the plug-in, resorting to drawing it in by hand. Our best bet for programming was triggering patterns via MIDI notes.



▲ Groove Agent 3's setup window – you can tinker with MIDI settings here

VERDICT

FOR

- + Instant, usable beats
- + Broad range of styles and sounds on offer
- + You can use two Agents simultaneously

AGAINST

- Patchy MIDI implementation
- Works best in a VST host
- Special Agent module lacks basic mixing options

Groove Agent offers great drums and percussion on tap and, thanks to the two new Agents, sounds better than ever. Cubase and Nuendo users will get the best from it, however

RATING

