

Roland Sonic Cell | £450

With audio interfacing, 'real' instruments galore and a useful file player, Sonic Cell seems a jack-of-all-trades. *Jono Buchanan* develops a split personality...



WHAT IS IT?
USB-compatible sound module and file player, for direct connection to your Mac or PC

CONTACT
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HIGHLIGHTS
1 Large selection of sounds
2 DAW compatibility via USB
3 File player supports a number of audio formats

Roland's General MIDI-based Sound Canvas modules have proved popular since their inception almost 20 years ago. Perhaps this is no surprise, as they provide the twin benefits of giving users access to Roland's famous warm sound collections, with seamless integration afforded by GM operation, allowing instant sound compatibility with sound sets from other manufacturers. But today, 'compatibility' is a word we

associate more with computer systems, with the ability to work with sounds within a host sequencer the priority for most. As stand-alone hardware modules lose appeal among users who favour this software approach, it's no surprise that manufacturers are looking to plug the gap with software/hardware hybrids.

Into this reality, Roland are looking to claw back some market-share with Sonic Cell, a sound module, audio interface and file player combined – a

true Sound Canvas for the modern world. So, what specifically is under the hood? Well, functionality is split into three main areas. For starters, there's a sound module with 128 sounds and scope to provide more via the SRX series of Roland expansion cards, of which there is room for two here. The sounds concern themselves principally with 'real' instruments, so there are simulations here aplenty with pianos, strings, basses, percussion and synth sounds covered in serious depth. Additionally, a GM bank throws up all the usual suspects.

Buy Cell?

Next comes Sonic Cell's audio interfacing capabilities. A rear-mounted USB port allows you to connect directly to your computer and a quick install of the bundled driver software instantly transforms the unit into an audio hub. You can record sounds directly through Sonic Cell to your Mac or PC and inputs are provided to cater for most needs. You've got stereo line in, an XLR input and a switchable Hi-Z input for guitar sources, with a rocker switch in place to confirm your input choice. You can also



Cell research

A quick spin of the bundled driver and editor software and Sonic Cell's integration into your computer set-up is achieved within minutes. Having connected the USB cable, Sonic

Cell showed up as my audio interface and a Roland folder appeared in my AU plug-in list containing the Editor. Firing this up establishes a USB handshake, with the current

hardware 'status' uploading to the computer as a starting point, leaving you free to edit. This is where the unit comes to life, with microscopic edit control available on every patch and performance.

You can tweak any aspect of a sound's basic architecture, its effect routing and balance in a performance set, via a dedicated mix page. There's a lot on screen but it's all here if you want it.



record through the lush-sounding onboard effects processors – of which more shortly. Lastly, you can use Sonic Cell as a playback module for a variety of audio and MIDI file formats. WAV, AIFF, MP3 and SMF file formats are

feature of the top surface. As with the JV and XV range of modules, you'll need the provided tool to gain access here.

Otherwise, dialling through sounds is achieved with the jog wheel, which can be pressed to confirm a selection.

the side of the front panel. Sorry Roland, but it's a terrible design.

The Sonic Cell achieves what it promises with a minimum of fuss. If you need a sound module with a wide range of sounds covering 'real' instrument

simulations and a few synth surprises too, then you'll find something here. There's little here that sets the pulse racing and there's no killer feature that sets it

There's no killer feature that sets it aside from the competition... I'd love Roland to throw in a few frills

supported and Sonic Cell lets you create playlists on the unit itself to organise playback. A 'flat' USB connection at the rear lets you do this direct from a USB drive or memory stick, which is a really handy feature. In this way Sonic Cell could, for instance, provide a keyboard player with a full line up of sounds for a live show while also providing the pre-gig backing music. Handier still.

Black and silver Cells

Of course, it all starts with sound module functionality and Roland have a proud tradition in this area. Rear-mounted MIDI ports let you connect directly to a MIDI interface or keyboard and you're playing in no time. In classic Roland tradition, the architecture is of the Patch/Performance type, whereby individual patches can be grouped into Performance sets of up to 16 instruments for multi-timbral playback. The unit itself has a slightly strange, retro-industrialist design with the expansion slot bay the prominent

The sounds focus primarily on synth recreations of real instruments and Sonic Cell does this very well. There's a fine collection of synth sounds too, including warm leads and icy pads in equal measure. The sounds are enhanced by Roland's truly wonderful effects sections, of which there are three separate systems. More basic Chorus and Reverb modules are joined by a powerful MultiFX unit, which contains 78 effect types.

These range from additional reverbs through flangers and phasers to distortion units and, rather than being there just to add a little spit and polish, they genuinely lift these sounds up to a higher place. Elsewhere on the box itself, a toggle switch on the front shifts sample rate if you're working in tandem with a computer. The options are 44.1, 48 and 96kHz and you'll need to match this to your DAW environment to avoid complications. Next to this is an über discrete volume dial, which is a highly unusual, small rotating dial buried into

aside from the competition. It's reliable, covers its sound base well and the software editor ensures you can build or tweak any sound to within an inch of its life. Roland-heads will recognise that this is much the same sound engine that's been propping up Roland synths since the late '80s. With more groundbreaking technology available throughout their product line, I'd love Roland to throw in a few more frills. **FM**

FutureMusic VERDICT

BUILD	■■■■■□□□
VALUE	■■■■■□□□
EASE OF USE	■■■■■□□□
VERSATILITY	■■■■■□□□
RESULTS	■■■■■□□□

Does what it promises to do very well but still leaves you wanting just that little bit more...

SPECS

Sound Generator: 16-part multi-timbral, 128-voice polyphony, 128MB wave memory, Two SRX expansion card bays

Preset Memory:

896 patches + 256GM, 32 rhythm sets and 9GM, 64 performances

User memory: 256 patches, 32 rhythm sets, 64 performances

Effects: MultiFX: three systems, 78 types, Chorus: three types, Reverb: five types, Input Effect: six types, Mastering Effect: 3-band compressor

Audio Interface: Stereo I/O, Hi-Z, XLR and stereo inputs, Sampling Frequencies: 44.1, 48, 96kHz

SMF/Audio File Player: Formats: Standard MIDI File: format 0/1, Audio file: WAV, AIFF, MP3

Display: 128 x 64 dots organic EL graphic display

Connectors: Output L, R; Headphone jack; Input/Output jacks, MIDI In/Out, USB connectors x 2

Dimensions:

294 x 175 x 55mm

Weight:

1.2kg

ALTERNATIVES



Novation X-Station 61

£395

If you don't mind sacrificing some polyphony, then this could be for you. Featuring great sounds, an audio interface, lots of FX and real-time tweaking possibilities, the five-octave X-Station has it all.

novationmusic.com



Edirol SD-20 Sound Module

£269

If audio interfacing is a feature you're prepared to do without, then this sound module from Roland's Edirol arm could be just the thing. Offering 64-voice polyphony across 32 parts, it's GM ready and features USB for editing and archiving sounds. And what's more, it's buss powered.

edirol.com