Elektron Machinedrum SPS-1 UW mk2 | £1,250

Is the latest version of the Elektron Machinedrum the most fully-featured modern drum machine out there? *Dan 'JD73' Goldman* busts the new groove

WHAT IS IT?

A fully-featured, 16-track, step/realtime drum machine/sequencer, replicating the best drum machines of yesteryear, coupled with physical modelling, built-in effects, realtime tweakabililty and sampling.

CONTACT

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HIGHLIGHTS

1 Sounds authentically old or contemporary as needed

2 Solid build with huge possible sound pallete

3 12-bit crunchy/punchy sound with versatile sound-shaping/effects

Swedish company Elektron have a great reputation when it comes to making drum machines. Hand-built and with a solid and heavy sound, previous incarnations of the Machinedrum have a loyal following among beat-makers and producers alike. This latest Machinedrum (the punchily-titled Machinedrum SPS-1UW mk2) is a subtle evolution of the previous model.

First off, build quality is solid and the unit is weighty and worthy of both stage and studio use, with its brushed aluminium top and rack-mountable steel case. Audio outputs include a main stereo output, along with four further individual outs for sending specific sounds in a kit to your DAW or mixer for processing. There are also two audio ins for sending audio through the effects and for sampling, MIDI in, out and thru, a headphone out and a 6 volt 'wall wart' universal power connector.

It's a shame that the headphone adapter isn't front mounted and that there's no USB port for sample transfer, as currently this is done over MIDI, though Elektron kindly provide a super-fast MIDI interface in the box for speeding up sample transfer.

Sound-wise, the Machinedrum is pretty unique and definitely up there with the best drum machines ever made, though sample memory is still low at 2.5meg. This may seem a little stingy initially but working this way forces you to think more about quality rather than quantity. At this price point though, a little more memory would still be a nice bonus.

Inside the machine

The interface itself is initially hard to get to grips with but gets much easier over time. It certainly exercises your brain! The manual is very well written, which is a good job as you'll be referring back to it quite a lot initially. Also, though the red display looks nice, it can be hard to read at times and crams a lot of info into a small space – maybe a white backlight would be much easier on the eyes.

The basic sound-hierarchy in the Machinedrum runs like this. There are four main types of MD percussion synths. TRX deals with Roland style drum sounds (such as those found in the 808 and 909 machines). EFM is an FM based drum synth, (great for metallic and chaotic sounds). E12 is based on samples taken from the E-mu SP-12/1200 12-bit sampler and the PI synth deals with physically modelled sounds (for realistic acoustic drums).

Finally, there is the GND synth that deals with noises, an INP machine for effecting the inputs (envelope follower plus gate) and MIDI/Control machines for controlling/sequencing external MIDI gear and internal parameters. The percussion synths all sound punchy,

realistic when appropriate and are highly useable for many different styles.

Within each MD master synth are separate 'machines' for creating kicks, snares, claps, hats, claves, bass and more. These can be assembled into kits and correspond to each of the sequencers' 16 tracks.

There are also RAM and ROM machines that deal with MIDI-transferred samples or audio coming into the unit via the two audio ins. ROM machines are for user samples and are retained in memory when powered off. RAM machines are for live capture of loops or sounds in real time. These sounds are lost when powered off. The RAM machines can also internally resample, complete with individual/master effects.

Comprehensive control

Control over the sounds is comprehensive, with each type of sound having its own specific set of sound shapers, controlled via the eight real-time dials or over MIDI. For example, the bass drum machine in the E12 synth has a different range of parameters when compared to the bass drum machine in the EFM synth.

Effects and More with the Monomachine

The Machinedrum not only features a vast array of percussive sounds and synth tones, it also features lots of sound shaping devices and effects that can be applied individually, to each of the 16 tracks or incoming audio. Available track effects include amplitude modulation, a 1-band EQ, a resonant 24dB filter with low-pass, high-pass and band-pass modes, distortion, LFOs and sample rate reduction. These are very decent effects that can add grit or polish but importantly retain the integrity of the sound being effected, unless of course you want to really mash up the sound, which you can do if so desired!

Master/global effects include a beat-matched echo/delay, a reverb with gate, hi/lo-shelf and parametric EQs and a 'dynamix' processor, which is a compressor with switchable sidechain that can raise the perceived level of material running through it or give the beat more punch or pump. In essence, everything to make fully finished and mastered beats is here. Get stuck in!

Parameters can include filtering, sample rate variation, LFOs (per track), attack, distortions and much much more. This is the deepest drum machine ive ever laid hands on!

The sequencer has grid/step (a la Roland 808) and realtime modes. Each

Conclusion

To sum up, the Machinedrum sounds stunning and though some may complain about 12-bit only operation, I love the sound it produces and many love the Akai MPC 60 and E-mu SP-1200 for the same reason. All the sounds are characterful, upfront sounding, punchy and very useable and the sound palette is vast, particularly when including your own samples or loops. There's just too much to cover in this review!

If you are on the lookout for a fully-featured and unique sounding/feeling drum machine then you've got to check out the Machinedrum SPS-1UW mk2. It'll certainly keep you inspired, sonically fulfilled and keep you on your toes for many years of enjoyable and deep beat making. **FM**
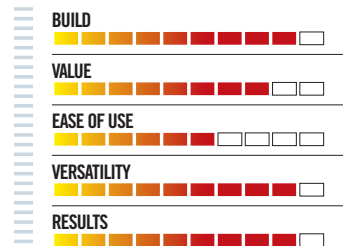
" All the sounds are characterful, upfront, punchy and very useable and the sound palette is vast "

of the square plastic pads on the bottom represents one of 16 sequencer tracks that in turn correspond to a type of machine (kick, snare, hat for example). Pattern mode allows the creation of 64-step chainable patterns, while song mode allows you to arrange these patterns into a full track or your final drum arrangement.

The function button accesses several sequence shaping parameters such as velocity-accents, muting, swing (which has a very nice feel) and slide, which allows a smooth slide between two parameter values instead of an abrupt jump.

This works great in conjunction with the parameter locks extended mode that locks a specific parameter to a specific sound in a pattern, making sonically evolving patterns very easy to create.

SPECS

Percussion Control
> 16-track percussion seq
> 64-step patterns
> 128 user programs patterns
> 32 user program songs
> Swing, slide, accent
> 16 x 24 parameter locks
> 16 x dual waveform LFOs
> Full realtime control
> Full MIDI support
> 384 x MIDI CTRL-change

Sound Generation System
> 5 x MD synthesizers
> 130 x individual MD machines
> 5 x track effects
> 4 x Stereo master effects
> 16-part MD synthesis
> 16-part track effect system
> 64 user defined kits

Effects
> 16 x amplitude modulation
> 16 x 1-band EQ
> 16 x resonant 24dB LP/BP/HP
> 16 x sample rate reduction
> 16 x distortion
> 1 x Rhythm echo delay
> 1 x Gatebox reverb
> 1 x Hi/Lo-shelf + Parametric EQ
> 1 x Dynamix processor

Hardware
> 128x64 Pixel backlit LCD
> 3 x MIDI In/Out/Thru
> 6 x 1/4" Audio Out
> 2 x 1/4" Audio In
> 1 x 1/4" Stereo Headphone Output
> 2.5MB sample memory
> Brushed aluminum top
> Steel casing

Dimensions:
340 x 176 x 68mm
Weight:
2.8kg

ALTERNATIVES

Apple Ultrabeat
£319
The nearest software alternative to the Machinedrum. Includes sample import, filters, step sequencer and physical modelling, all within Logic.

apple.com

Korg Electribe Emx-1
£389
Includes step sequencer, vacuum tubes for valve overdrive and warmth, 207 PCM sounds and 76 synth sounds built in.

korg.com

FutureMusic VERDICT

BUILD	
VALUE	
EASE OF USE	
VERSATILITY	
RESULTS	

A versatile and super-deep drum synth/sequencer. Its scope is huge and it's worth its price.