

cm mini reviews

A rapid-fire round-up of sample libraries, music apps and more

Retronyms

Tabletop £10.49

Format iPad, iOS 4.2

Contact support@retronyms.com

Web www.retronyms.com

Ever since the iPad was launched, many electronic musicians have been dreaming of a modular, Reason-style app for it. So when Retronyms announced Tabletop - billed as a modular audio environment - excitement levels were high (particularly since this was the company that handled the iOS conversion of ReBirth so effectively).

Open Tabletop and comparisons with Reason initially seem justified; it ships with a range of devices - including a pad sampler, a Tenori-on style 'tone matrix', a keyboard, a mixer, a sequencer and more - and these can be hooked together on a desktop with virtual patch cables.

The sound library has a minimal, slightly experimental feel (don't expect real instrument patches), but this fits with Tabletop's 'techy' design and image. However, elements of the feature set disappoint: the keyboard has just a two-octave range, and as yet there's no support

for external MIDI. You can't edit notes in your recordings, either, though quantise is an option.

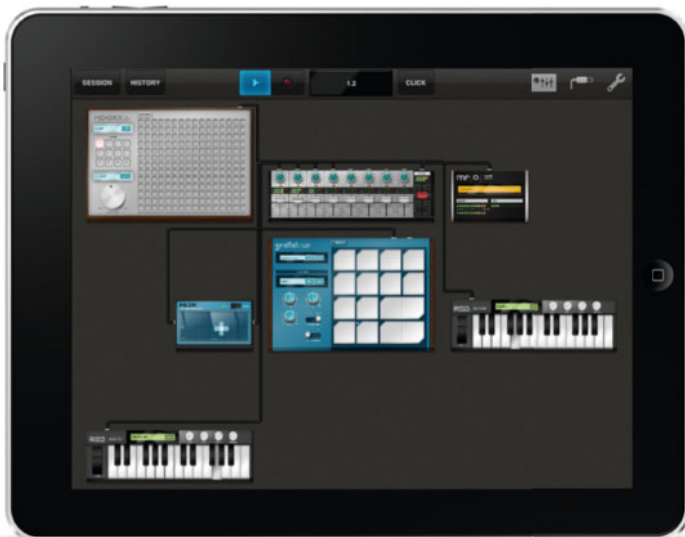
On a more positive note, it's nice to see support for Korg's WIST, which enables two iOS devices running compatible apps to be synced.

One controversial aspect of Tabletop is its in-app purchasing model; nine of the 15 devices available are included, but you'll have to pay extra to get the more fully-featured mixer and most of the effects (only a low-pass filter is bundled). You might feel that you need to spend more money immediately, then.

A greater range of devices wouldn't go amiss, either, though Retronyms say that more will be

forthcoming, and third-parties have been invited to contribute to the platform, too. Right now, however, Tabletop feels like less than the sum of its parts, and very much a work in progress, albeit a promising one.

6/10



Native Instruments

Studio Drummer €149

Format Kontakt 5 or Kontakt 5 Player

Contact via website

Web www.native-instruments.com

This virtual acoustic drum kit comprises three kits (with two snares in each) plus tambourine, cowbell, sticks and claps. NI's lossless sample compression crams the 17GB sample into a tidy 7.4GB disk footprint, and with up to 25 velocity layers and six alternates per hit, producing convincing drum parts is simple, as long as you know how to program them. If you don't, Kontakt 5's MIDI file playback capability means you can choose from over 3500 patterns and fills spanning 11 typical genres.

Spread across four tabs (Grooves, Options, Kit and Mixer), kit elements can be auditioned and tweaked from the main graphic on the kit page; options include Attack/Hold/Decay envelope, overhead and room send levels, and tuning. You can also select alternative snares and unload elements to save memory.

All kit elements get mixer channels, including stereo and mono overhead and stereo room. There's also an aux send with convolution reverb. Channel strips include four inserts (Solid

G-EQ, Solid Bus Compressor, Transient Master and Tape Saturator) with configurable order.

In use, the kits (Garage, Session and Stadium) cover broad territory and the powerful EQ and compression means you can do lots of sound shaping. The reverbs are also very serviceable (although editing them requires entering Kontakt's Edit mode).

Using the grooves is easy - just audition and then drag them into your DAW. Pattern swing, tightness and velocity can be adjusted (this modifies the MIDI data before you drag it), but there's also an adjustable 'live' randomiser (volume, velocity, time, pitch and tone) for adding feel during playback.

On the downside, we'd like a high-pass filter on the EQ and although there's control over

snare top/bottom balance, both sounds share a mixer channel, which is slightly limiting. Furthermore, there's no control over round-robin behaviour and kit elements can't be mixed and matched. Even so, we found Session Drummer very slick in use and speedy to tweak, with some excellent on-board grooves.

8/10



Best Service World Percussion £529

Format PC/Mac, AU/VST/RTAS/Standalone
Contact mail@bestservice.de
Web www.bestservice.de

At over 200GB, this is among the largest ROMplers we've encountered, and even more extraordinary is that it's devoted entirely to percussion. It uses the Engine sample playback engine and is supplied on a USB hard drive (you have to install it on a local drive, though).

So why's it so massive? Well, they've recorded over 80 instruments, with multiple articulations, up to seven mics, multiple velocity layers and up to ten round-robin alternates per sample. Of the latter, you can opt to load two or five instead (to save system resources), and you can load two, three or five mics for stereo use. Faders balance the mics in the custom Quick Edit view, along with level, pan, tuning and convolution reverb. For surround, you can load three or seven mics.

The instruments are from Africa, the Middle East, Asia, Europe and South America, including djembes, tuned percussion (eg, balafon), a talking drum, six gamelan instruments, finger

bells and congas. It's beautifully recorded, and the detailed sampling makes the instruments feel natural, responsive and 'alive'. There are velocity-sensitive MIDI grooves mapped to the lower octaves too, for instant inspiration.

Whether you use those or create beats by hand, it's hard not to hit upon the beginnings of an evocative film score, a dramatic bed, or even a pulsing loop to underpin a dance track. It's inspiring and easy to get going with - for pro composers, such factors may be as vital as the movie-ready sound quality.

The only criticism is that the selection isn't exhaustive. The European section is notably skimpy, with four snares, timpani and bass drum - they're brilliantly bombastic, but you'll need to



go elsewhere for cymbals, xylophone, etc. And there's no cuíca in the South American folder!

World Percussion is superb, but at this price, it's mainly for pro composers with RAM-stuffed computers. The good news is that a 7GB Compact edition is out imminently, priced £175.

8/10

Acorn Instruments Masterkey 49 £100

Format USB MIDI
Contact marketing@nektartech.com
Web www.acorn-instruments.com



Acorn's debut product is a no-frills, class-compliant 49-note USB MIDI keyboard that's aimed at the first-time buyer (a 25-note version is also available). It's very light, but well put together and reasonably sturdy. The key action is on the light side too, and this may or may not appeal, but it's smooth and playable. Other features include nicely weighted pitch and mod wheels, four securely-fitted knobs and a volume slider. Assignments and other adjustments are made via the Edit button and presses of the keys. There's a 3-digit LED display, though, along with octave up/down buttons and a sustain jack. Overall, the Masterkey 49 is unremarkable, but when pitched against other products in its class, it stands up well in terms of playability and ease of use. It comes with PreSonus' Studio One Artist, too, to sweeten the deal.

7/10

M-Audio Keystation Mini 32 £55

Format USB MIDI
Contact via website
Web www.maudio.co.uk



Here we have M-Audio's attempt to grab a slice of the burgeoning mini-keyboard market, and it gives you two and a half octaves of low-profile keys to work with. This means that you can just about get away with two-handed playing, though you couldn't exactly deliver a piano recital on it. The keys play pretty well, though, and assignable controllers include a pleasantly chunky knob and three buttons (these default to controlling pitchbend up/down and modulation). There are backlit octave up/down (with limited re-assignability) and sustain buttons, too, plus a further one for entering edit mode.

The Keystation Mini 32 certainly looks the part, and it performs well. It's priced to compete directly with Akai's LPK25, and while the Mini 32 lacks its rival's arpeggiator, its extra keys will be a deal-maker for some.

9/10

Soundware round-up

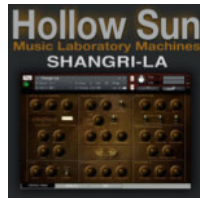
Hollow Sun

Shangri-la £5

The sampled Tibetan singing bowl market gets a boost with this Kontakt patch of spooky, sustained bell-style tones. It's not mapped chromatically, however - Hollow Sun say the bowls' natural pitches don't relate to typical tonality. You *can* fine-tune each bowl, though, so the lack of a chromatic patch is irksome. That aside, the ample controls mean you'll be sculpting ambience for hours.

www.hollowsun.com

8/10



Zenhiser

Studio Essentials Underground Techno £24

From the deeper, darker side of techno comes Zenhiser's latest, with 920 loops of growling bass, pounding kicks and sizzling FX. It's a full-on affair, and alongside the usual drum, synth and bass loops, there are kick-less tops, textures and plenty of percussive and musical one-shots. It's nothing revolutionary, but it is excellently produced and ticks all the boxes for a heavy club sound.

www.soundstosample.com

8/10



Industrial Strength Records

Sweep £18

Build-ups and drops are a huge part of modern dance music, but they can take time to create from scratch, hence this pack of 100 such samples. It's textbook stuff - sidechained, delayed and filtered white noise and pitch sweeps - but it's very useful for dancefloor regulars. There are also 30 presets for NI's FM8 and Massive - great for pitched effects.

www.loopmasters.com

8/10



Tom Pritchard Sound Design

Arps Volume 1 £10

This ReFill of sequences draws on the power of Reason's Thor, RPG-8 and Combinator to create evocative rhythmic passages. You'd never guess that the moody metallic percussion of patches like 'Bali' are the product of pure synthesis, and this sort of thing is the highlight of the pack, though there are some analogue-style patches too. Ambient guys and Berlin Schoolers will love this.

www.tompritchardsounddesign.com

8/10



Prime Loops

Vocal Allstars - Been A While £10

When you buy a Vocal Allstars packs, you're essentially buying one construction kit. While these can be flexible, when it comes to vocals, it can be hard to get too far away from the initial track. Still, it's well produced and is authentically commercial and radio-ready, but unless you want to recreate or remix the exact track, or mangle the vocals, it's probably most useful for its drums.

www.primeloops.com

7/10



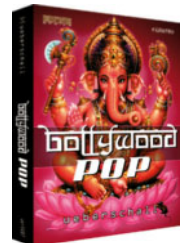
Ueberschall

Bollywood Pop €99

If you're OK with paying nearly a hundred Euros for samples you can't access in your own sampler, you might not be too disappointed with the actual sounds in this library, which runs only in Ueberschall's supplied Elastik Player. There's 3.4GB of classic Bollywood tones combined with analogue drum machines and a modern pop/hip-hop influence. Niche, limited and pricey, but a pro sound when you finally get to it.

www.bestservicede.com

7/10



Producer Loops £25

Commercial RnB: Trance & Dance Vol 5

Three radically different genres collide here, but that's nothing unusual nowadays - think Guetta, Calvin Harris, Jason Derulo and trance-tinged chart hits. There are five construction kits with plenty of huge synths riffs, giant kicks and sweeping effects. Forward-thinking pop producers will have plenty to choose from but if you're actually making RnB, this is a bit wide of the mark.

www.producerloops.com

7/10



Big Fish Audio

Coffee House £63

Another Big Fish construction kit extravaganza, this offers 32 construction kits of (mostly) acoustic guitar, piano, drums, djembe, etc. It ranges from introspective Scott Matthews-esque plucking to all-out strumming. The production is crisp and fresh, with over 5.6GB of content. Singer-songwriters might scoff, but for soundtrack or sync specialists, it's instant acoustic chill.

www.timespace.com

9/10



Puremagnetik

SixVoice \$12

The Korg PolySix was a huge success back in 1981 as one of the first affordable poly synths. Puremagnetik have multisampled it beautifully into a Kontakt/Live/Logic/Renoise instrument, with plenty of presets hinting at famous tracks. There are minimal editing options, and the impact disappears a tad as you explore the low end, but the presets are great and it sounds unique. For instant 80s sounds, this is a fantastic pack.

www.puremagnetik.com

8/10



Big Fish Audio

Pure Rock Hits £63

With 20 instrumental construction kits comprising (multitracked) drums, bass and rhythm/lead guitars, Big Fish aim to create the perfect ready-to-go rock pack. There's over 5GB of content, bearing the influence of artists like Matchbox 20 and Pearl Jam. It's totally authentic, inoffensive Americana that'd be ideal as the backing track to a teen drama series. It won't replace your guitar, but it's a superb pack of well produced prefabricated rawk. **cm**

www.timespace.com

8/10

