

NEW GEAR

EXCLUSIVE

THE NEW BADGE
is a tasteful design and isn't afraid to state 'Made in China'

The birch shells are excellent and the sound is exactly as you'd expect – immediately pure, punchy, dark and warm

THE BASS DRUM
has only eight lugs per head, where a pro drum usually has 10

YAMAHA STAGE CUSTOM BIRCH KIT



From £775 For the first time Yamaha offers 100 percent birch in the budget Stage Custom. Geoff Nicholls picks up the sticks...

Yamaha's current reputation was founded on birch drums, with the famous Recording Custom Series introduced at the close of the seventies. Although there was nothing new about using birch to make drums (European manufacturers have always done so), Yamaha cleverly promoted this beautifully constructed series as the ultimate recording kit. It also helped that Steve Gadd came on board as the company's ultimate endorser. Previously, Yamaha's Stage Custom Series, first seen here in 1995, had an oak or birch veneer over plies of Philippines mahogany and falkata. It's taken until now for Yamaha to make a budget kit entirely in birch.

Build

Yamaha offers three set-ups, with 'universal' size toms 24"x17", 12"x9" and 16"x16"; the review 22"x17", 10"x8", 12"x9" and 16"x16"; and 20"x17", 10"x8", 12"x9" and 14"x14". The 22" and 20" kits have a 14"x5½" birch snare, while the 24" has a 14"x6½" steel snare. You can extend your kit with individual add-on drums from a good range, which includes an 18"x15" bass drum and 18"x16" floor tom.

The talking point here is the all-birch shells and they're superb. Bearing edges are expertly cut, with a razor-sharp 45° to the inside and a smooth curve-over to the outer wall. There's a light seal on the pale honey-coloured insides, with a tiny bit of unsanded nap left for timbre. The grain

pattern of the birch is mundane as always, but the transparent lacquer over the cranberry red stain of the review kit was flawless. Yamaha badges always look corporate, but this new one is rather attractive – tasteful silver and grey on a black-backed plaque (try saying that with false teeth) that stoutly proclaims the kit as 'Made in China'. A few years ago, that fact would have been kept quiet, but today it increasingly denotes a well-made product.

One sign of cost saving is the presence of 16 rather than 20 lugs on the bass drum. There are also no plastic or rubber mounting gaskets beneath any of the lugs – a refinement we've come to expect. The lugs are now proper, low-mass, chromed-metal jobs, replacing the FRC (fibre-reinforced composite) of the previous incarnation.

Yamaha's YESS isolation mounts are small and relatively unobtrusive. Whereas RIMS-style mounts have extended brackets floating off the lugs, the YESS mount is simply held by two bolts, fixed at the nodal plane of the shell. While you may wonder about its strength, I've never heard of any breakages. Incidentally, the newly designed mini-floor tom leg brackets are also mounted at the nodal shell points for increased sustain. The full 700 Series hardware package that's included looks handsome and has all the refinements you'd hope for.

Yamaha's astute marketing of birch drums back in the eighties fostered – or, more

THE STAGE CUSTOM comes with a full 700 Series hardware package. It's lightweight, good-looking and it won't let you down

From the Horse's Mouth!

Gavin Thomas, product manager for Yamaha drums and Zildjian cymbals, Yamaha Music UK

What's the story behind the kit?

"In 1979, Yamaha made a 100 percent birch shell kit called the 9000, later known as the Recording Custom. It was a favourite of many drummers, including Steve Gadd. 30 years on, Yamaha is proud to introduce a new 100 percent birch shell at an affordable price."

Tell us about the three basic set-ups available.

"With 20" kick, 10" and 12" toms, 14" floor and 14" birch snare, the

first set is ideal for jazz to funk.

The next set is more versatile with a 22" bass drum, 10", 12" and 16" toms. Lastly, there's a set for heavier genres with 24" bass, 12" tom, 16" floor and 14"x6", 10-lug steel snare.

"All bass drums and toms have 'universal' depths for versatility. Add-on toms and snares are also available.

Is it proving popular?

"Yes, Yamaha's 700 Series is the choice of many pros. Its large-



Gavin Thomas

diameter tubing and leg spread make it sturdy and reliable.

There's also an impressive array of colours...

"There are eight new lacquered finishes, four metallics and four see-throughs."

YAMAHA STAGE CUSTOM BIRCH KIT



THE WING NUTS

have a snazzy, ergonomically shaped design that lends the kit a touch of class



CHOOSE FROM

eight new colourful and beautifully finished lacquers, including this cranberry red



BASS DRUM HOOP

claws are recessed to protect the bolt heads, but unlike lots of today's drums, they don't have rubber under-gaskets

ESSENTIAL SPEC



PRICES AND AVAILABILITY

Three kit configurations including 700 Series hardware pack: £775

KITS

24"x17", 12"x9", 16"x16", 14"x6½" steel snare
22"x17", 10"x8", 12"x9", 16"x16", 14"x5½" birch snare
20"x17", 10"x8", 12"x9", 14"x14", 14"x5½" birch snare

INDIVIDUAL DRUMS

18"x15" BD £204
18"x16" FT £204
16"x14" TT, £125
14"x12" TT £104
13"x10" TT £90
8"x7" TT £63
14"x5½" birch snare £109, 12"x5" birch snare, £109; 10"x5" birch snare, £104; 14"x5½" steel snare, £96; 14"x6½" steel snare, £104

SHELL MATERIAL

100% six-ply birch (plus steel snare)

FINISHES AVAILABLE

Cranberry red, dark blue metallic, silver metallic, gold metallic, natural wood, raspberry metallic, raven black, sapphire blue

HARDWARE

700 Series: two cymbal stands, single or triple tom mount, snare stand, bass drum pedal and hi-hat

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accurately, foisted - the idea that birch was the best choice of wood for recording, claiming that the RC-9000 sounded 'EQ'ed'. This is now also true of the Stage Custom. The snare comes with a ¾" (19mm) wide perimeter 'O' damper that effectively chops out the ring from shell and metal hoops, leaving you with a taut, dry and crisp beat. You just know a close-up microphone will deliver a sharp and punchy sound. Actually, for today's tastes, the complete 'O' is heavy-handed. A third or half circle is plenty to give you a dark, fat beat while retaining a healthy dollop of ambience.

Hands on

Fitted with clear Yamaha 250 Ambassador-type batters, the toms also sounded great straight away. The birch flavour is that little bit darker and more aggressive than maple to my hearing. You get a commanding slap, the sustain is just right and you'd be hard pushed to find a tom that gives you less grief to tune.

I admit to being overly familiar with Yamahas, having owned an RC-9000 for decades. In the interests of science, I set up my 9000, with its more rounded bearing edges and pre-YESS mounts, right next to the shiny Stage Custom. The toms sounded extraordinarily similar. The sharper bearing edges of the Stage Custom gave a fraction more bite to the tone, while the YESS mounts

offered a bit more sustain, but otherwise the tone of the Stage Custom is undoubtedly that of a top-class birch kit.

The bass drum has Yamaha's slightly unusual 17" depth, giving plenty of bottom without losing the definition. It retains an immediacy that starts to get lost as modern bass drums get ever deeper. I found it to be similar to the other drums - controlled, with good warmth allied to an impressive crack. The 16 lugs are just enough to hold the tuning

although the hoop-clamping screw underneath the footboard is awkward to reach. The felt beater is perfect for me, but others might have appreciated a double header with interchangeable plastic face. The hi-hat has a stepped tension ring, which does exactly what it's supposed to do. I particularly like the continuous screw-clamp tilter on the snare stand rather than the usual geared type. Some may think the latter more stable, but can you ever quite get the angle you want? Setting up and taking down is probably faster and more efficient with the Yamaha system than any other. The only downer is there's reduced lateral reach because of the YESS brackets. I don't think it troubles many people, but I've always thought it a minor design weakness in an otherwise exemplary set.

Verdict

What I like best about this kit is the classy, uncluttered design. The result of years of experience and refinement, the 700 hardware is simplicity itself, quick to set up and break down. The birch shells are excellent and the sound is exactly as you'd expect - immediately pure, punchy, dark and warm. The birch shells provide that extra touch of control that makes tuning easier. Any relatively inexperienced drummer coming to this kit can't go wrong really. Here's one budget kit that should never suffer the indignity of being plastered in tape in a clumsy effort to make it sound decent. **R**

Rating ★★★★★

Bearing edges are expertly cut, with a sharp 45° to the inside and a smooth curve-over to the outer wall

and aren't a great burden on the shell, so it feels more open and light.

The 700 Series hardware is sturdy without being over heavy. The single braced tripods of the cymbal stands may prove slightly wobbly if you're a brutal basher, but otherwise everything's dependable. The inclusion of two interchangeable straight/boom cymbal stands is generous and the tilter design has been improved, but there's a slightly superfluous memory-lock that slots into the top section housing to fix your boom extension. The chain-drive bass pedal is smooth,



TRY IT WITH...



A STEVE GADD DVD - hear what a Yamaha birch kit can sound like when it's in the right hands



ZILDJIAN K CUSTOM Session cymbals. Step up to a pro set of cymbals - this kit deserves no less



PROTECTION RACKET cases. That pristine lacquer finish ought to be cosseted in a woolly interior