Elektron Octatrack DPS-1 | €1,240

Having been knocked off its throne by software, the hardware sampler is in danger. *Greg Scarth* finds out if this Swedish challenger is the second-coming

WHAT IS IT?
Step sequencer-based performance sampler

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HIGHLIGHTS
1 Incredible real-time sample manipulation
2 Seamless time-stretching
3 Versatile step sequencer

FutureMusic
Platinum Award

From the outset of this review, it's only fair to state that I fundamentally disagree with Elektron's reason for developing the Octatrack. The Swedish company – better known until now for their drum machines and synths – have declared that sampling is a dying art. The Octatrack DPS-1, an eight-track dynamic performance sampler and sequencer, is intended to re-establish sampling as an art form. The problem is I'm not convinced at all that sampling is dead, just that it's changed. The reason most of us no longer use hardware samplers is that they were laborious and limited in comparison to software. Akai's MPC workstations still have legions of fans but the majority of us have moved to software samplers, hardware-software hybrids like Native Instruments'

Maschine or loop-based DAWs like Ableton Live. Even so, there's no doubt that the Octatrack takes a different approach to anything currently on the market. Perhaps the more important question isn't whether Elektron can reinvent sampling, but whether they can convince the average producer that dedicated sampling hardware is still relevant in the age of plug-ins, gigabytes of RAM and infinite track counts.

Features

The major selling point of the Octatrack is the fact that it's much more than just a sampler. As the row of 16 buttons along the bottom of the front panel suggest, the Octatrack follows in the footsteps of the Machinedrum and Monomachine with the inclusion of a step sequencer (there are plenty more similarities, but knowledge of the other Elektron products is not required to get to grips with the Octatrack). What's perhaps even more important is the fact that the Octatrack's sample processing engine is radically more advanced

MIDI Button
MIDI options lag behind the sample features slightly, but eight tracks of sequencing are a worthwhile addition. We expect the MIDI machines to develop significantly with future updates.

Arrow Buttons
During sequence playback, the right and left arrows allow the global tempo to be temporarily increased or decreased, CDJ-style, in order to manually align the sequencer with another beat.

Effects Button
Two effects can be assigned to each audio track. Longer effects chains can be created using the Neighbor machines, which route the out of one track to the input of the next.

than most hardware currently on the market. As hardware samplers were gradually usurped by their software rivals over the last decade, we came to expect a series of more advanced features. Independent pitch and time-stretching are now a mainstay of any software setup, but very few hardware units offer anything like the same level of freedom when it comes to manipulating loops and samples.

The Octatrack offers eight stereo tracks of samples plus eight tracks of MIDI step sequencing. Samples are stored on a Compact Flash card, with a maximum capacity of 64GB (the device's USB port is only used for transferring samples to the CF card from a computer). Each track is based around a 'machine' – Elektron's term for the virtual devices, which generate audio or MIDI data. For the eight sampler tracks, the main machines are Static and Flex. Static machines stream samples directly from the CF card, meaning that sample length is effectively unlimited. Flex machines load samples into RAM for more advanced real-time manipulation, but

Upgrade Path

Even at this early stage, Elektron have big plans for the future development of the Octatrack. The unit's processing power and upgradeable software mean that new features can be added with relative ease, and the company will accept requests through the elektron-users.com forum. A better polyphonic MIDI machine would be an obvious starting point, and we expect the MIDI features

to catch up with the audio capabilities relatively soon. The current crop of effects is versatile enough but it would also be nice to see a few more added. How about tape or valve saturation effects, or vintage sampler emulation algorithms similar to those found in the NI Maschine?

If Elektron really want to go all out, they could take note of the synthesis features on Akai's MPC-5000. Sample-

based oscillator machines with a few filter options would make the Octatrack even more versatile. Many of the settings already create synth-type effects, so why not take this feature to its obvious conclusion with a granular synthesis machine? We're sure Elektron don't want to overlap with their other products, but we can't help imagining the potential of an integrated synthesis option.

this does mean that the total length of Flex samples is limited.

Furthermore, Thru machines allow external audio to pass through the effects, while Neighbor machines take their audio signal from the previous track, allowing longer effects chains to be created. In use, the Octatrack's audio quality is clean, with neutral time-stretching algorithms (Normal for

melodic samples and Beats for rhythmic material) and highly-usable sample manipulation options. Each track offers loop slicing, retrigger options for Beat Repeat-style effects, reverse playback and adjustable sample playback start points. Tracks can be routed through two effects (or more with the use of Neighbor machines) chosen from a range

Tempo Button
The Octatrack can send and receive MIDI clock, but the inclusion of tap tempo means that you can effectively sync manually too. Great for live use.

Sequencer Buttons
The Octatrack's sequencer is much more than your average x0x-style 16-step affair. With independent track loop lengths, micro-timing and tempo multipliers, it's a seriously flexible setup.

including filters, EQs, compressors and reverb. Each machine's three LFOs and independent LFO designer (effectively a separate step sequencer for controlling parameters) allow settings to be automated in incredibly complex ways. Overall, the options are on a par with any hardware or software sampler we've seen. The versatile options are reminiscent of Xfer's excellent Nerve drum sampling plug-in, but crucially the Octatrack's effects all work in real-time without the slightest glitch.

In terms of hands-on feel, the Octatrack's build quality is outstanding. As on the other Elektron products, the rotary encoders offer dual speeds – twist to adjust a parameter normally or push and twist to adjust quickly.

Different parameters offer different levels of precision, with some requiring more encoder turns to take them from their minimum to maximum settings. As an example, adjusting the level of a track from 0 to 127 requires a turn of around 540° without pushing the encoder, and just 90° with it pushed. It's a perfect balance between precision and speed.

The Good and Great

Our three favourite things the Octatrack will bring to your studio

> The step sequencer approach might seem limited in comparison to a DAW piano roll, but it's a really intuitive way of working. With the addition of micro-timing features, the Octatrack doesn't limit you to a rigid note grid like some step sequencers would.
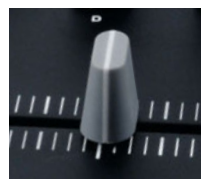
> The scene crossfader provides an incredible option for creating unique effects. We expect producers to love some of the sounds it can generate when controlling note retrigger settings and sliced loop start points.

> Elektron have clearly put as much thought into live performance as they have into composition. DJs and live electronic artists will love the Octatrack just as much as more studio-based musicians.

Sequencing

Let's cut to the chase: the Octatrack's step sequencer is, in a word, superb. We don't have space to talk about every detail but suffice to say pretty much everything you'd expect from any x0x-inspired sequencer is included here, plus much more.

The lengths of each track are independently defined at anything from 1-64 steps per loop, while a separate master length can also be specified, resetting all loops after a given number of steps. As a result, there's incredible potential to create complex polyrhythms – set up a straight kick and snare, add one or two percussion parts with different loop lengths, then sit back and let the sequencer do the hard work.

We could easily spend this entire review listing all the features of the Octatrack's comprehensive sequencer – it's an incredibly powerful setup. Micro-timing settings allow notes to be nudged backwards and forwards in 1/384th steps, while a tempo multiplier allows the track to be played back at various speeds from

USB Port

The USB port is currently only used for transferring samples to the CF card. We hope Elektron release a software editor to allow remote management of settings too.

CF Card Slot

Samples can be loaded into RAM or streamed directly from the CF card reader. When streaming, maximum sample length is limited only by the capacity of the card.

Live Performance

I'm sure that the Octatrack will find just as much use for live performance as it will in the studio. In fact, it's no exaggeration to say that the unit may change the way a lot of electronic artists approach live performances altogether, combining an Ableton-style loop-based approach with phenomenally versatile real-time sample manipulation.

The live sampling features are incredibly flexible, allowing inputs to be recorded, looped, pitch shifted and time-stretched while a sequence plays. Sounds can be captured from outside sources, re-sampled from the output, or fed through multiple effects chains using the Neighbor machines. Some of the most exciting options take advantage of the optical scene crossfader, which allows one bank of parameter settings to be morphed into another.

Up to 16 scenes can be defined for each track and parameters for each scene can be edited on the fly. The temptation is to move from one set of parameters to a drastically different set, morphing multiple pitch, re-trigger, speed and effect settings simultaneously, but in practice things tend to work a bit better when you morph just a few parameters at a time.

The crossfader can effectively be assigned to control absolutely any parameter on any track. You can expect to hear a lot of scene morphing effects over the next couple of years.

1/8x to 2x the global setting. The parameter lock feature – familiar from the Machinedrum and Monomachine – allows parameters to be set independently for each of the sample triggers (i.e. each active step).

In the week that I spent testing the Octatrack, I got the impression that I'd still only really scratched the surface of the sequencing options. It's a complex machine and it'll take a

audio sequencing features, MIDI sequencing is relatively basic. Each MIDI machine allows only one root note per step, although tracks aren't strictly monophonic since up to four notes can be triggered simultaneously by each MIDI machine.

At this stage it would be stretching the truth to suggest that MIDI sequencing was on a par with the audio capabilities, but the Octatrack's

Weaknesses

The only real weakness of the Octatrack is that it tries to do everything. That's not a problem if a piece of hardware works better than any alternative, but in certain areas it's clear that a bit more flexibility would be a benefit. The only major limitation of the hardware itself is the absence of individual outputs: with just one pair of main stereo outputs and one pair of cue outputs, the Octatrack essentially demands that you process all your samples internally. There's no obvious provision for any kind of expansion card, so unfortunately it seems unlikely that more outputs could be provided with an upgrade. Individual outs for each audio track would allow

> ## "It'll take a while to uncover all its possibilities, but it'll reward those who learn the intricacies"

while for users to uncover all its possibilities, but there's no doubt that it'll reward those with the discipline to spend time learning the intricacies of each feature. In comparison to the

existing features are effective and intuitive, making MIDI functionality a worthwhile addition to the bread-and-butter of sampling and sample-based sequencing.

Output Jacks

We're a little disappointed that the Octatrack doesn't include individual outputs for each of its eight stereo tracks. The internal effects sound good but it would be nice to route the outputs to a mixer for more versatile options.

much more scope for external mixing and signal processing. An opportunity missed. The biggest stumbling block for many users will lie in the fact that the Octatrack's user interface simply

editing parameters without the need to flip from one page to another. Programming the Octatrack involves editing up to sixteen individual tracks, each of which can contain multiple

similarities to the Ableton workflow but the Octatrack offers its own solution to sample-based composition, production and live performance. Despite our concerns about the lack of individual outputs and software editing, it's an incredibly versatile product which will reward thorough exploration of its many features.

With the promise of regular updates and new features from Elektron, things can only get better

isn't as immediate as a software equivalent. There'll always be compromises when everything has to be displayed on a small LCD screen and controlled with just a small array of rotary encoders. Thankfully, not too many parameters rely on the function (shift) button, and very few features require sub-menus, but I can't help but feel a software editor would make it much quicker to set up complex arrangements and sample settings.

The absence of an editor doesn't necessarily limit the potential of the Octatrack but it makes the workflow less efficient. Working on a big screen is simply easier than squinting at a small LCD. What's even more important is the ability to set up patches with ease, dragging and dropping samples into place and

scene settings. As a result, programming an entire project for a live set or studio session can take a significant amount of time. Surely a simple software editor would speed up the workflow? Hopefully one will arrive before too long.

Elektron legacy
Elektron may believe that sampling is a dying art but thousands of Maschine and MPC users – not to mention everyone else with a copy of Ableton Live – would surely disagree. Whether you buy into the marketing spiel or not, it's clear that the Octatrack takes a unique approach and it's a credit to Elektron that it succeeds. Either for studio-based production or for live performance, the Octatrack is an incredibly exciting tool. There are

With the promise of regular updates and new features from Elektron, things can only get better. We're convinced the Octatrack will change the way a lot of people create and perform music. **FM**

FutureMusic VERDICT

BUILD
VALUE
EASE OF USE
VERSATILITY
RESULTS

Elektron's reimagining results in a unique approach to sample-based composition and performance.

Crossfader
The optical crossfader can be assigned to practically any parameter using scene settings.