

Alesis SR18 £190

After 17 years the SR16 gets an update, but is it enough to keep the humble drum machine relevant? *Robbie Stamp* beats the pads to find out.



WHAT IS IT?

Programmable high-definition stereo drum machine with instrument input

CONTACT

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HIGHLIGHTS

- 1 Impressive, quality sample list
- 2 Separate percussion and bass parts
- 3 Rugged construction

ince the SR16 came out in the early '90s, technology has set some serious challenges for the humble

drum machine. Though there is a market in 'retro' (i.e. before 2000) drum machines, one might be sceptical about the relevance of a non-sampling hardware drum box.

Obviously Alesis don't suffer from such cynicism and have updated the stalwart SR16, doubling the number of sound samples and preset slots, adding an instrument input and utilising 24-bit output DAC resolution. I found a review of the original SR16, buried in the sands of time, bemoaning the lack of battery powered operation and lighting for the LCD screen.

After about 17 years of consideration, Alesis have taken note, adding a bay for six AA batteries and a backlit LCD. Now that's progress!

After a quick perusal it becomes clear that SR18 is ostensibly the same as it's ancestor, but considering the amount of time that model has been selling for, you'd wonder what needed changing. Space is at a premium at the rear of the module, so to fit the new instrument input in, the two Aux output jacks have been shrunk down to a TRS stereo jack.

SR16+2=?

Though the main outputs are unbalanced, a stereo jack is not a very popular option, necessitating a splitter (or a bit of soldering) for connection to most equipment. Whether the instrument input is a worthwhile addition for this annoying sacrifice will be dealt with later.

The usual offenders are also found lurking around the back: MIDI In and Out/Thru, two footswitches (for start/

stop and fill/pattern toggling), volume knob, headphone jack and power switch with DC input. On top the rubbery knobs are pleasingly tactile yet durable and the LCD is now well lit and substantial enough to make it visible from a distance. The casing may be plastic, but the SR18 feels weighty and rugged enough to endure a constant, long term beating.

If you've ever used a drum machine before, most of the controls here will be familiar: Step Edit, Roll, Fill, Tap Tempo, etc. Maybe it's some kind of residual memory of programming the now archaic Alesis HR-16, but creating, editing and arranging patterns is simple, though step editing is still a bit of a battle compared with modern programming methods. There are plenty of preset rhythms on offer, which can range from the surprisingly good to the frankly cheesy (you know you wanna bossanova!) What is impressive is the sheer number of drum kits ready and waiting for you to bash around.

The sounds are generally of a good quality, free from any nasty digital noise artefacts and the range is definitely an improvement on previous models. The standard pitch and envelope controls help tailor the hits just enough to give them flexibility, though not with so many options you get lost spending hours just









Why Use A Drum Machine Anyway?

In the age of software samplers and Ableton Live, you could be forgiven for wondering why anyone would want a hardware drum machine. For live performers computers and laptops can still be a source of much headscratching and periods of silence while a crashed system is rebooted. A well-developed drum machine, such as the SR18, doesn't crash (at

least this one didn't) and if there is a power failure getting back to the beat is just seconds away.

I spend many hours programming beats with a mouse in the matrix MIDI editor, and though I've got used to it, there is still something satisfying about building up a beat in loop record mode on a drum machine. Maybe it's the non-visual aspect, as the lack of a grid places the

emphasis on how you hear the rhythm, and not how it looks on screen.

One major reason why drum machines can be the preferred option is that many just don't like making music with computers. For songwriters just wanting a rhythm tool without booting up, loading software, selecting kits etc, it takes up substantially less valuable writing time.

programming the snare drum.

Acoustic drum samples in drum machines are often a bit ropey, but there are some very useable sounds here, especially on the percussion side. Despite this, the velocity varied acoustic drums (especially the snares)

usable, adding some groove to the drum patterns. The bass is not going to put dedicated synths out of work, but as a quick performance and writing tool it does a fine job.

Sound processing, beyond the pitch, filter and envelope controls for

brought right down. If we accept there are people that still view the drum machine as a viable source of rhythm programming, and the longevity of the SR16 seems to indicate there are, then why would they buy the SR18?

Obviously some have driven their '90s rhythmic pit-pony into the ground and just want a replacement. The addition of percussion and bass instruments will expand the programming range of the unit, and the 571 sounds, 175 preset rhythm patterns, 100 drum kits and 50 different bass sounds is impressive, yet not too overwhelming.

Ride your pony

The SR18 is an improvement on its predecessor and has been given a considered update without going overboard, keeping an essentially simple and effective tool. Though I'm not that convinced the instrument input is worth the removal of an output

jack. I can see, however, that the drum machine still has a use for those not wanting to spend hours wading through thousands of drum hits only to

have the computer crash on them.

It's quick, simple, less likely to break than a laptop, and now it's battery operable with a display you can see when the stage lights drop. FM

FutureMusic VERDICT BUILD VALUE EASE OF USE VERSATILITY RESULTS

The SR18 won't start a revolution, but it does live up to it's predecessor's good name.

SPECS

Audio Outputs: 2 x TS 1/4" jacks (Main), 1 x TRS 1/4" jack (Aux), 1 x TRS 1/4" jack (headphones)

Instrument Input: 1 x TS 1/4" jack

Footswitches: 2 x TS 1/4" jack (one for Start/Stop, one for playback control)

Pads: 12 x velocity sensitive (eight 'loudness' levels)

MIDI: 1 x In and 1 x Out/ Thru on 5-pin DIN

Polyphony: 32 voice

Digital Resolution: 16-(samples) & 24-bit (DAC)

Timing Resolution: 96ppq

Sync: Internal or MIDI clock Tempo Range: 30 to

300bpm

Kits: 100 user assignable and 100 preset

Sound Samples: 571 (32MB) drum, percussion and bass sounds

Effects: Reverb, EQ and Compression

Display: Backlit LCD (80mm x 48mm)

Dimensions:

240 x 190 x 45mm

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weight 900g

The casing may be plastic, but the SR18 feels weighty enough to endure a long-term beating

still lack the ability to roll convincingly.

The non-real-world drum sample collection covers all the classics as well as many handy hits and effects for a whole host of genres, but with the addition of percussion and bass samples/patterns the most significant changes become apparent.

Two less musicians

While the original SR16 allowed only one drum kit to be programmed, the SR18 has been expanded to feature a percussion kit and bass instrument. These additional two instruments can be programmed in the same way as the drums, with the percussion utilising 102 root sounds and the bass offering 50 different basic instruments.

The percussion sounds are highly

each hit, comes in the form of 22 reverb presets (with a global send level) and 14 EQ/compression presets. There's nothing to jump up and down about with these processes, but they are adequate to give the overall tone a bit of shape and space.

The final addition to the SR18 is the instrument input, for which the aux output has been cut down to a stereo jack. This is an attractive feature for those guitarists/bassists who want to practice their chops or work out a quick demo. The downside is that there is no gain adjustment (or output assignment), and even a relatively low output guitar can overpower the drums and percussion level, with an active preamp bass causing heavy distortion unless the instrument's volume knob is

ALTERNATIVES



Akai XR20

£219

Most of the XR20 controls and I/O are identical to the SR18. The only differences are that the instrument input is a microphone input on the XR20 and the soundset is less 'acoustic' based.

akaipro.com



Boss DR-670

£220

From the classic Dr Rhythm stable, the DR-670 may have half the number of root sounds, but there are four more pads on offer. On the downside there's only a stereo output, no backlit LCD and no dedicated percussion instrument.

bossus.com

FutureMusic 89