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Toontrack PC MAC

Superior Drummer 2.0 £189

It's taken quite a while for this follow-up to materialise, so can it prove its superiority in today's crowded drum ROMpler market?



System requirements

PC P4/Athlon 1.8GHz, 1GB RAM, 25GB HD space for full install, Windows XP/Vista, RTAS/VST host for plug-in use

Mac Dual G4 1.25GHz, 1GB RAM, 25GB HD space for full install, OS X 10.4, RTAS/AU/VST host for plug-in use

Test system

Mac Apple Mac Pro Dual 3GHz, 3GB RAM, OS X 10.4.11, Logic Pro 8

> It's been four years since Toontrack released their original dth Superior drum ROMpler. Since then, other similar instruments have appeared (BFD2, Addictive Drums and Strike, for example), and Toontrack have even released their own affordable, more intuitive alternative: EZdrummer. However, there have been no major changes to the original plug-in, and it's fair to say that it definitely lost its edge somewhat. So maybe it's appropriate that Superior Drummer 2.0 not only marks the first phase of Toontrack's New York Studio Legacy Series library, but also the release of a completely overhauled program.

The big news with SD2.0 is that it follows the now industry-standard layout, with separate drum kit and mixer views. If you do feel nostalgic for the original version, the 'main' super-pad screen or 'classic view' can be selected instead, though they've done away with the convoluted construction pages. All kit-building now takes place in the main interface, with microphone bleed levels handled on a fader-by-fader basis in the mixer window - clicking the Bleed selector next to a fader opens up an additional Levels tab.

In terms of kit construction, SD2.0 includes a

few basic layouts, and beyond that you can also augment kits with so-called X-Drums. These are essentially extra instruments that you define and allocate samples and mics to - they then appear in the main kit window with a graphic. You can have a total of 45 kit positions, including those in the presets list, which is pretty impressive and enables truly monstrous designs.

New York, New York

SD2.0 ships with the first volume of Toontrack's New York Studio Legacy Series library, which was recorded at NY's Avatar Studios (formerly The Power Station) by Pat Thrall, Neil Dorfsman and drummer Nir Z. It's a 60GB library, reduced to 20GB on disk using lossless data compression. There are also three slimmed down installs available, 4GB being the smallest.

With the full install, you get to choose which sticks (sticks, brushes, rods or mallets) and kick beater (wood, plastic or felt) to use. The basic kit comes from US company GMS, but is augmented by additional pieces. You get three kicks, seven snares (including a Ludwig Black Beauty), three hi-hats, four rides, five cymbal sets, two types of

“You can have a total of 45 kit positions, including those in the presets list, which is pretty impressive”

tom and a cowbell. For added variety, the kit sample recordings include some additional microphone options. These were processed at source to retain phase coherence, and include an 1176-processed snare mic and another with Shure Green Bullet-recorded room ambience, processed via a Boogie amp.

Finally, as well as overheads, there are five room mic options, recorded with Coles, U67 and C24 mics, among others. However, given the additional memory required, not all of these load automatically, even when you fire up the full kit. Once we got the hang of this, the level of variety available – even before we reached for the onboard effects – became apparent.

Tub thumping

In use, although the window itself is dominated by either the drum kit or the mixer, the bottom quarter of the screen remains constant at all times. Here you'll find memory status, master volume, and detailed parameters for each instrument, including velocity parameters and key assignments. The instrument section in the right corner is the best place to audition kit sounds, as it's context-sensitive – alas, the main kit graphics aren't.

SD2.0 is fully compatible with previous Toontrack libraries, including dfh Superior and EZdrummer, although you can't mix and match kits freely. You can, however, add X-Drums to combine elements of different libraries.

Out of the box, SD2.0 is as easy to program as any other drum ROMpler, and with extra snare and hi-hat articulations on separate notes, in time, you'll learn to create convincing drum parts from scratch. However, if speed is of the essence, the included EZ Player Pro plug-in instrument includes a large library of MIDI grooves. It also has its own multi-layer arranger, and it will even convert its MIDI mapping to match other popular drum ROMplers, such as BFD and Addictive Drums. Its drag-and-drop functionality enables you to simply import grooves onto SD2.0 instrument tracks for instant results.

In addition to being used for programming realistic percussion tracks, drum ROMplers are



When you touch the Bleed control, a further strip full of levels pops up, enabling mic-by-mic level adjustment



SD 2.0's built-in effects come courtesy of Sonalksis, and they sound as slick as they look

Get your beats bouncing

Superior Drummer 2.0's mixer is incredibly well-equipped. With five inserts per channel, 16 routable busses, phase reverse, and mute and solo on all channels, it feels much like a typical DAW. It's worth mentioning that the mixer retains the Bounce facility. This includes various options for rendering SD2.0's audio output to a set of individual audio files.

Factor in the five Sonalksis-designed effects (filter, gate, EQ, compressor and transient) and you can do much of your sound-shaping within SD2.0. In typical DAW style, each effect opens its own small window, which floats within SD2.0's mixer page. All five have familiar

interfaces, and wouldn't look out of place in Cubase or Logic. We were particularly impressed by the fact that you can sidechain within SD2.0's effects using channels and busses.

Although there's nothing immensely complex about any of the effects, in use, the compressor sounds particularly good. It's also nice to see a transient-tweaking processor, as these are great for shaping both close miked hits and drum ambiences. In terms of sheer power, the filter's Rude setting allows for some very aggressive sound-shaping. Actually, we wouldn't mind seeing these effects made available in good old VST/AU format!

also employed as instruments to be triggered live by drummers playing electronic drum kits.

Although designed primarily as a plug-in, SD2.0 includes a standalone host app called Toontrack Solo, and this is your best bet when using an electronic kit. Select the E-drum preset from the MIDI/controller list and you'll get mapping suited to most mainstream digital drum hardware. If you have electronic hi-hats, you can even fine-tune the response with the CC offset option.

Operationally, SD2.0 is much slicker than its predecessor, and this isn't just down to the more logical workflow – the engine also seems to have been improved. With instruments of this type, shifting such large amounts of data sometimes results in the odd buffering click or pop, but we experienced none of that with SD2.0.

Ultimately, if we do have any criticism, it's that there is a 'sameness' to the sound of the library, no doubt imparted by the studio room itself. Even so, with Volume 2 available next year, you'll be able to add the sound of Allaire and the Hit Factory to the mix. Overall, then, SD2.0 is considerably better than its predecessor, and arguably the best in its class. **cm**

Contact Time+Space, 01837 55200
Web www.toontrack.com

Alternatively

FXpansion BFD2
cm124 >> 9/10 >> £199
This includes 55GB of sounds and built-in pattern playback

XLN Audio Addictive Drums
cm110 >> 9/10 >> £170
Cheaper and simpler than SD2.0, but sounds great nonetheless

Verdict

For Slick performance
Library sounds fantastic
Useful included MIDI library
Top quality mixer and effects
Good standalone option for e-drummers

Against Library sounds a little samey
MIDI patterns not integrated into plug-in

Easy to use, slick as you like, and with a 'superior' sound, SD2.0 has beaten back the competition to claim its place as perhaps the best drum ROMpler going

9/10