WHAT IS IT?

A versatile plug-in drum synthesizer with in-built Softube effects

CONTACT

Who: Softube
Web: www.softube.com

HIGHLIGHTS

1 Great sounding, easy to manipulate sound parameters
2 Extensive Velocity routing capabilities
3 Effects aplenty and unique Auto Layer Machine generator

Softube Heartbeat | $219

Softube's first plug-in instrument is a drum synthesizer with its focus equally divided between the past and the future. *Jono Buchanan* skips a beat

Think of Softube and your thoughts may leap to effects plug-ins. Through their own emulations of compressor classics such as Tube-Tech CL1B, and in partnership with companies including UAD and Abbey Road, Softube's excellent effects-building reputation is well deserved. So the news that Softube have branched out to create their very first instrument has been greeted with understandable excitement. The result is Heartbeat, a drum synthesizer which combines a predominantly synthesized approach to sound design with extensive effects capabilities and some interesting, leftfield tricks.

Heartbeat's generously-sized GUI sensibly splits its options into different sections and the action starts on the left-hand side, where a 'channel strip' of relevant parameters lies in wait for each drum kit sound source. Heartbeat is almost exclusively a drum synthesizer, employing an analogue modelling approach, so this isn't a traditional drum sampler which comes packed with a multi-gigabyte library. Instead, to take one sound as an example, Bass Drum 1 offers a Decay dial at the top, Attack, Attack Type, Pitch and Bend dials, as well as another to control the Harmonic footprint of the sound. Despite these meagre seeming controls, a staggeringly wide collection of kick types can be generated, from quasi-acoustic ones to lengthy, sub-heavy electro kicks which echo classic drum machines of old.

To the right, the other sounds ensure that a full Heartbeat instance contains two Bass Drums, Snare/Rim and Snare/Clap, Hi-Hat, Percussion 1, Percussion 2 and a Cymbal. The SD/Rim, SD/Clap and Hi-Hat instruments all allow for a blend between in-built sampled waveforms and a Synth engine, with a crossfader to set the balance of your choice between these.

Each sound source can have its Pitch and Decay Time independently adjusted, while the Type rotary scrolls through a small pool of samples (Wave) and Oscillator waveforms (Synth). Again, the range of sounds which can be produced is impressively broad.

Also noteworthy are the assorted ways in which Percussion sources can be configured. For these, you'll find different sound generator types, with the Single, Dual, FM, FM+N(oise) or Noise control dial yielding Decay, Pitch, Tone, Time and Range sliders. Pitched, bass-y or synth-like stabs, frequency modulated blips or elongated white noise ramps can be created. Each sound source can be triggered from the green triangle at the top, or from a mapped MIDI note, from C1 upwards.

Mixer and effects

Below the sound generation parameters in each channel strip, a Mixer offers volume balance sliders, pan dials and rotaries to send each sound source to

The Velocity routing capabilities in Heartbeat are highly impressive.

the Echo and Reverb modules. Additionally, there's a single EQ dial for tone modification, as well as a Ping or Pong dial which, when initiated, progressively pans alternately triggered hits left and right. As a result, you can

> ## From the sublime to the ridiculous, Auto Layer Machine introduces a layer of controllable mayhem

have sounds jump right across the stereo image, or do so more narrowly.

To the right, you'll find the Auto Layer Machine (see *I Speak Machine*) and, below that, Heartbeat's effects processors. The first of these is the Dyna-mite Buss Compressor, which affects the whole output signal when

switched on. Then come the two effects processors which can be accessed from each channel's Mixer sends: Filter Echo and a version of Softube's own Tsar-1D reverb. The Delay provides a Resonant filter, Time controls (in milliseconds or sync'd to tempo) and Feedback, while the reverb is more extensive, offering PreDelay, Reverb Time, Density, Tone and Filter sliders. The output channel strip on the far right provides a Saturation dial to make everything grittier, global output EQ, a Master Output fader, plus – brilliantly – a Width

dial for stereo image enhancement and a Mono Cut dial, which decreases the 'mid' portion of the output signal.

Palpitation station

Under the instrument Mixer, you can also get busy with Velocity assignments. Alongside the traditional 'velocity to volume' approach, you can also route it to control Pitch, Decay and Attack Times. This works on every sound, so if you assign Velocity to Pitch and don't want to hear your Bass Drum changing, make sure each kick velocity is uniform. The fun of this feature can't be overstated and it adds a significant sound design layer to Heartbeat's capabilities, particularly on Percussion sources.

For a first instrument plug-in, Softube have created something compelling with Heartbeat. It's not perfect; it would be great to be able to scale Velocity layering on a per-sound basis, while more per-sound EQ options would be welcome. However, the sheer range of drum sounds to be extracted here is extraordinary and, thanks to the carefully chosen and deliberately limited parameter set for each sound, you'll soon be making bespoke kits of your own. Add in the surprises of the extensive Velocity control options and the bonkers Auto Layer Machine and there's enough here to ensure Heartbeat occupies some unique ground. **FM**
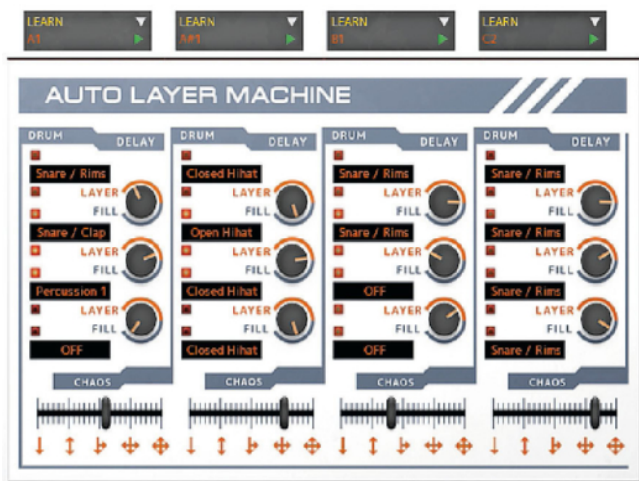

I Speak Machine

Heartbeat has no pattern sequencer, relying on your host DAW for beat programming. But it has the Auto Layer Machine which is unlike anything I've come across before.

This offers four trigger keys – notes A1, A#1, B1 and C2 – each of which can layer up to four of your sound sources via

sound slots. The trigger keys then play all of the assigned sounds at once but you can offset each step using the Layer/Fill rotary. This does anything from slightly smudging the playback of the sounds assigned below through to creating quasi 'patterns', where sound sources seem to bounce

off each other. A Chaos slider controls how the sounds will be prioritised, with 'regular' up and down modes slowly giving way to increasingly unpredictable behaviour.

From the sublime to the ridiculous, Auto Layer Machine introduces a welcome layer of controllable mayhem.

FXpansion Tremor
£99
Tremor combines a synth drum machine with pattern sequencing and effects processing. It doesn't contain Heartbeat's more esoteric features but it's a great plug-in nonetheless.
www.fxpansion.com

Rob Papen Punch
149 euros/$179
Offering a blend of synthesized and sampled drum sources, this is a popular pro drum machine plug-in.
www.robpapen.com

AudioSpillage DrumSpillage
£75
Now at Version 2, DrumSpillage provides 12 modelled drum synths in one instance. Lacking Heartbeat's effects but offering extensive modulation capabilities instead.
www.audiospillage.com

FutureMusic **VERDICT**

BUILD

VALUE

EASE OF USE

VERSATILITY

RESULTS

A drum synth with versatile Velocity assignment, high-quality effects and some interesting trickery.