

cm mini reviews

A rapid-fire round-up of sample libraries, ROMplers and more

CME Xkey £89

Web www.cme-xkey.com
Format PC/Mac/iOS/Android

Right from picking up the box, CME's new compact Xkey MIDI keyboard makes a great impression. It's clear that they're angling for a spot in the Apple Store, with that minimalist white packaging, aluminium frame (concealing a black plastic base underneath) and quirky orange USB cable, and in terms of fulfilling the aesthetic requirement, we'd say they deserve some shelf space.

Compatible with Mac, PC, iOS and Android, class-compliant (so no drivers required) and USB bus-powered, the Xkey manages to be very low-profile (a mere 16mm deep) yet still retaining a decent amount of key travel, making it surprisingly playable. The keys themselves are standard size and you get two octaves of them. The black keys are very slightly raised above the white ones, and all of them trigger consistently along their entire length - again, this can only help in terms of playability.

Perhaps the biggest selling point of the Xkey



is its ability to transmit polyphonic aftertouch. While this particular function isn't the rarity it once was, it is still pretty impressive on a keyboard in this price range. And it works well, too, introducing an extra layer of per-key expression when triggering aftertouch-compatible instruments.

A series of rather oddly labeled buttons arranged down the left-hand end of the 'board handle octave up/down, modulation, pitchbend and sustain on/off. The octave shift and sustain toggle buttons do exactly what you'd expect, but the pressure-sensitive pitchbend and

modulation buttons are a little less straightforward. They all work, certainly, with increased finger pressure deepening the up/down bend or modulation, but achieving any real degree of accuracy is pretty much impossible, since maintaining an intermediate level of finger pressure between 'none' and 'full' is a haphazard exercise at best.

That aside, the Xkey is a stylish, full-featured MIDI keyboard that plays very well, fits in a (large) laptop bag and comes in at a price that can only be described as very reasonable.

9/10

Native Instruments Drumlab €99

Web www.native-instruments.com
Format Mac/PC, Kontakt 5/Kontakt 5 Player

Adding to their already extensive range of drum ROMplers, Drumlab has NI bringing together acoustic and electronic sounds in an instrument library that prides itself on being "mix-ready".

Presented in a tile-based layout, each of the main kit pieces (kick, snare, hi-hats and three toms) features an acoustic layer and an electronic layer, while peripheral to these are tiles holding various single-layer acoustic cymbals and percussion. The bottom panel gives access to various sound-shaping parameters, including the acoustic/electronic mix. The acoustic layers of the main pieces also feed to an overhead/room mic channel by a user-adjustable amount, while the kick and snare feature Top/Bottom and Out/Sub balance and a Trash control, which dials in a lo-fi close mic channel. The electronic layers, meanwhile, feature a combination low/high-pass filter and up to 50ms of offset from the acoustic layer (although only in one direction). Volume shaping is on hand for all layers of all pieces via AHD envelopes, and although there's no

dedicated mixer page, each tile hosts solo, mute, level and pan controls - although the fact that you have to select the tile, rather than just roll over it, to make them visible is annoying.

The now standard array of high-quality NI effects are on board - reverb, transient shaper, compressor, EQ and saturation - available to each drum and mic channel, as well as the master output.

The sounds themselves add up to 58 multisampled acoustic instruments and 80 electronic layers, and a library of 60 kit presets is included to get things moving. Handily, you also get over 100 single drum presets, which load as individual Kontakt instruments.

While you can of course trigger Drumlab via keyboard or e-drums, it ships with a library of 900 excellent MIDI grooves that, although not



editable within Drumlab, can be dragged out to your DAW or desktop.

Drumlab squarely hits the sweet spot between sonic flexibility and ease of use, and the source sounds, though low in number, are superb. Obviously, we would like to be able to import our own samples, but even without that, Drumlab's well-realised concept is a success.

8/10

Toontrack Rock! EZX £52

Web www.timespace.com

Format EZdrummer, Superior Drummer 2

Toontrack's biggest EZX expansion for EZdrummer and Superior Drummer 2 yet, Rock! consists of eight five-piece drum kits, each with three crashes, ride and hi-hats, all of which are freely mix-and-matchable via the menus on each kit piece in the main interface. The 1.7GB sample bank draws on (and adds to) the countless multisample recording sessions done by Toontrack over the last decade or so in studios including Blackbird (Nashville), Allaire (New York) and 2kHz (London), for the production of Superior Drummer and its various expansions. Rather than just port all this good stuff straight to EZdrummer (which would still have been pretty cool!), however, Toontrack have handed them back to original engineer Neil Dorfsman (whose other credits include Dire Straits, Paul McCartney, Sting, Bruce Springsteen, Bobs Dylan and Marley, and many more) for recompiling, remixing and general overhauling. The result is pretty special.

Perhaps the most remarkable thing about the eight kits is the breadth and variety they offer. From the massive attack of Bright Ambient, through the vibe and grit of Vintage Punch, the dirt and clatter of Ringy, and the slamming power of 80s Rock, to the funky edge of Tight Punch, the dark, snares-off bounce of Woody, and the thoughtfully-included blank canvas of Classic Dry, it really is all killer. The mixer includes both dry and compressed channels for the kick and snare, as well as Ambience, Drive and SubSqueeze channels for adding room, distortion and SSL Buss compression to the whole kit, all in parallel.

The usual song-based roster of grooves and variations is in place, ably performed by Martin Kristoffersson and giving non-drummers a solid



set of authentic beats and fills to drop into their tracks. Drummers, meanwhile, will find Rock! every bit as playable using triggers or e-drums as the other members of the EZX family. Big, bombastic and beautifully produced, this is a must-have for EZdrummer users, and worth a serious look even from Superior Drummers.

10/10

HoRNet TrackShaper €15

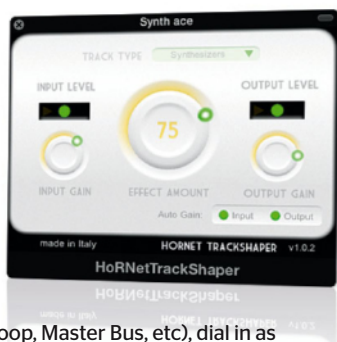
Web www.hornetplugins.com

Format PC/Mac, VST/AU

A "mix on autopilot" plugin that, via the operation of just one central knob, claims to be able to improve the sound of individual instruments, busses and even full mixes. Simply load it onto a track or buss, select a suitable algorithm from the Track Type menu (Kick, Snare, Synth, Drum Loop, Master Bus, etc), dial in as much Effect Amount as you feel works, and set the Input and Output Level controls to level things out or click the Auto Gain Input and/or Output buttons to have it done for you automatically. Each algorithm applies a dynamically responsive 'secret sauce' of EQ and compression, and while obviously, the sonic tastes of the developer govern the process, it does smoothly boost the presence and energy of the source material to often impressive effect.

TrackShaper is a useful and cheap tool for getting good demo mixes together quickly - just don't expect miracles.

7/10



Impact Soundworks Juggernaut \$179

Web www.impactsoundworks.com

Format Mac/PC, Kontakt 5/Kontakt 5 Player

A 4.5GB sample library made up of 100% synthesised sounds (but no drum machines, interestingly) and aimed at media composers and electronic musicians, Juggernaut is split into two instruments: Bass and Drums/FX. The former comprises over 50 categorised source sounds, processed with eight effects modules and rhythmised with the onboard step sequencer. Drums/FX is built on about 450 samples (with ten round robin variations each), split into drum, percussion and FX categories, and brought together in a 32-channel mixer. Audition mode maps your selection across the keyboard, helping you explore each instrument category.

Sound-wise, Juggernaut is hard-hitting, high-impact and unapologetically 'electronic'. While it might not boast the most extensive sample set we've ever heard (particularly with the Bass instrument), what it has sounds very good, and the editable parameters and effects allow decent customisation.

7/10



Soundware round-up

Big Fish Audio

Spark £85

Comprising almost 600 samples, Spark is a deep, dark collection of ambiences, drones, textures, impacts and more for sound design. Many of the sounds are satisfyingly lengthy, although ironically, some of the impacts seem to be cut short. Sonically, the mood is cinematic and predominantly 'sci-fi', and for musicians, this would make a great FX and 'background' library.

www.timespace.com

8/10



CFA-Sound

Massive Electro House Tools €23

A well presented library of 65 patches for Native Instruments' Massive synth, accompanied by eight MIDI file construction kits – simply point each track to a Massive with the specified patch loaded. The setup works well and the patches are fantastic – tough, characterful, on-trend and making good use of Massive's macros to enable quick but effective editing.

www.cfa-sound.com

8/10



5Pin Media

Deep House Groove Elements £35

Produced by Adam Shaw, this 1.3GB grab-bag contains so much stuff that it's hard to know where to start. A ton of Bass, Drum, Groove and Music loops are supplied, split between 120 and 123BPM folders, while one-shots, MIDI files, multisamples, a Live Pack and more should keep any house producer busy for the foreseeable. The production quality is high and the funk is strong.

www.loopmasters.com

9/10



Samplestate

Deep House, Garage & Nu Disco £30

This 2GB package from Leeds-based label Love Not Money capably spans its three named genres but doesn't really attempt to cross-pollinate them in any radical new way – not that it necessarily should. The drums, basses and vocal loops stand out, the production shines, and there's certainly nothing here to complain about, but it's all a bit predictable.

www.loopmasters.com

7/10



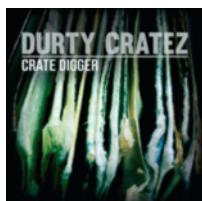
Raw Cutz

Crate Digger £15

Crate Digger opens with a set of ten vintage-style drum loops before moving on to 74 "raw" one-shots (presented twice, in B⁺ minor and A minor) and 58 drum hits. The loops are rather over-vinyl-ified but otherwise tasty, and the one-shots – taking in guitars, stabs, horns, keys and general miscellany – could find a place in any hip-hop/breaks producer's sample library.

www.rawcutz.com

8/10



Luxonix

Toys In Wonderland \$49

154 Kontakt instruments built on 41 multisampled toys and gadgets including bells, fans, marbles and "four toy analog synths". The scripted interface just gives you Delay, Reverb and Convolution depth to play with, so it really is all about the sounds themselves – thankfully, they're excellent. Fun, weird, creepy and beautiful are just some of the adjectives that come to mind.

www.luxonix.com

8/10



Noisefirm

NF-01 \$49

Yamaha's dinky 1982 CS01 monosynth is brought back to life in 102 Kontakt patches, as well as instruments for Live and EXS24, and multisamples of each patch. Featuring six tunable and mixable waveforms (including noise), and a clear, fuss-free interface, it's easy to use and definitely has a sound of its own. The jury's out on whether the price is a bit high, though.

www.noisefirm.com

7/10



Puremagnetik

Harpsikord \$12

Possibly Puremagnetik's most elaborate collection of Live Racks yet, Harpsikord delivers various configurations of a multisampled "18th century-style" double manual harpsichord, including 50 clips with which to trigger them. While the straight-up emulative Racks are ace, it's the electronica-minded Zynth Racks that we suspect most users will gravitate towards.

www.puremagnetik.com

9/10



Sample Magic

Ambient & Chill £35

1.3GB of mini construction kits, loops and one-shots catering to a very particular (and musical) style of chill-out. The Inspiration Loops are genuinely inspiring, the drums are surprisingly edgy and the melodic elements are evocative and versatile. Overall, A&C's warmth and analogue 'crust' are what set it apart, and although the whole thing feels stylistically rather niche, the individual samples would slide easily into many genres.

www.samplemagic.com

8/10



Drumdrops

70s New Wave Drops £30-50

Available as multitrack projects for various DAWs, stems and mixes, or straight-up loops, Drumdrops' latest sees Elvis Costello drummer Pete Thomas laying it down across 13 tracks, largely based on actual Costello numbers. The performances and production are top-notch, and the kit is kept appropriately dry apart from the sound of the recording room. It's just a shame you don't get a multisampled version of the kit to go with it.

www.drumdrops.com

8/10

