cm mini reviews

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

ESI
U46XL £125

Format Mac/PC, WDM/ASIO/
CoreAudio, 44.1/48kHz, 16-bit, USB 1.1
Contact Time+Space, 01873 55200
Web www.esi-audio.com

ESI's latest desktop interface offers a step up from their previous U46DJ box, with improved audio circuitry and an XLR-equipped phantom-powered mic preamp. Its 4-in/6-out design uses USB 1.1, and the unit can be powered via USB or external PSU (not included, incidentally). All line-level ins and outs are available on the back panel via phono (RCA) plugs, but additionally, there's a Mix Out port on ¼" jacks, carrying the sum of all six outputs. The front-panel headphone feed receives the same blended signal. Finally, on the front panel, you'll also find a high-impedance instrument input for guitars.

The U46XL is simple to set up, feels very solidly built and behaves as you would expect. However, in use, it's worth noting that selecting the mic and instrument inputs replaces pairs of line inputs (1/2 and 3/4 respectively). PC users benefit from ESI's DirectWire system for routing between applications, as well as a control panel, which enables the balancing of inputs and DAW streams to the Mix Out. However, Mac users will have to settle for the standard CoreAudio setup options. Also limiting are the lack of MIDI or digital connections, but so long as you're aware in advance of such potential drawbacks, the U46XL is a solid enough buy.

8/10

Ultimate Sound Bank
Percussion Store £118

Format Mac/PC (AU/VST/RTAS/Standalone)
Contact Time+Space, 01837 55200
Web www.uvisoundsource.com

Ultimate Sound Bank's latest library for use with the UVI Workstation ROMpler software, this 3GB pack includes 53 different percussion categories, covering everything from afoxé shaker to yoruba tambourine. Each category comprises a selection of patches (over 150 in total), often including multi-sampled variants, as well as 'menu' patches for triggering single samples via key zones – useful for consistency.

The focus is on ethnic percussion rather than studio kit, and world music lovers will be thoroughly bowled over by the range of exotic instruments on offer.

Although the selection of instruments and the quality of recording is superb, in practise, some of the patches are a little lacklustre and occasionally ill-conceived, particularly the single-sample shakers. This makes it necessary to resort to the menu patches, which is a pity.

These niggles aside, Percussion Store is a high-quality collection of ethnic instruments that for the most part takes advantage of the powerful UVI Workstation software.

7/10
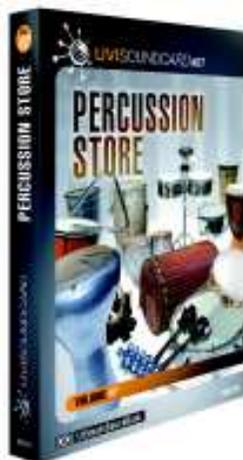
### Frozen Ape
Euphonics £0.59

Contact feedback@frozenape.com
Web www.frozenape.com
Format iPhone/iPod Touch

Euphonics is an ambient music creation app that sits halfway between the freeform floatiness of Brian Eno's Bloom and the more traditional angle of something like Mini Piano. The main screen is divided into three sections: an arpeggiator, a chord selector, and a keyboard. These are used to control the software's four musical elements: a pad, a bass, an arpeggiated synth sound and a sampled piano. The chord selector sets the tonality of the pad and arpeggiator, and defines the bass note.

The polyphonic piano-playing keyboard only displays a single octave, but the instrument has a three octave range that can be scrolled by tilting the device left or right.

Euphonics is pretty simple and has a couple of interface problems (it's hard to bring up the options screen or stop the music without inadvertently changing chord or adjusting the arpeggiator), but it's a pleasing diversion and cheap as chips – cheaper, in fact.

7/10
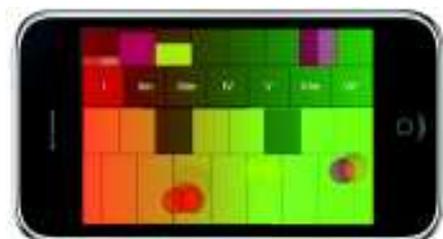
ProjectSAM
Orchestral Brass Classic £335

Format Mac/PC, VST/DX/AU/RTAS
Contact Time+Space, 01837 55200
Web www.projectsam.com

Netherlands-based ProjectSAM produce libraries aimed primarily at orchestral, soundtrack and TV music producers. So far, they've concentrated on wind, brass and percussion, often in GIGA format. Their latest package, Orchestral Brass Classic, is a re-issue of existing sample content but combined into a single package, and it uses the ever-popular Kontakt Player 2 engine from Native Instruments.

The sample set includes trumpets (B flat and piccolo), trombones (tenor and bass), French horns, tuba and cimbasso, and the whole library has 'close' and 'stage' varieties, recorded with mic distances of 2 and 7 metres respectively.

All instruments, apart from tuba and cimbasso, come in both solo and ensemble form, and patches typically cover one articulation (sustain, espressivo, staccato, etc). Where required, certain articulations (mute) are specific to certain instruments (trumpet). In addition, you also get some patches that load multiple articulations, using keyswitching and/or the modulation wheel for articulation selection.

Sonically, Orchestral Brass Classic delivers more variety than you may expect, with regular sounds (sustain, staccato and so on) augmented by a number of effects patches (falls, trills, glissandi, clusters, runs, intervals and wild phrases). Additionally, they've made good use of Kontakt to include options such as legato, repetition, artificial reverb, master EQ and octaver. So, legato is effectively a monophonic mode, while repetition augments the standard round-robin sample selection to alternate between neighbouring velocity zones as well.

Finally, it's worth noting that they've also added sample looping for sustain sounds, which works better for some instruments than others. All told, though, for orchestral and soundtrack producers, this is an essential bundle.

9/10

Spectrasonics
Stylus RMX 1.8 £269

Format Mac/PC, AU/VST/RTAS
Contact Time+Space, 01837 55200
Web www.spectrasonics.net

Stylus RMX is a "real-time groove module" featuring a large library of pre-sliced, multitrack audio beats. Fundamental functionality includes altering the pitch; applying envelopes, LFOs and filtering; playing back eight parts (beats) at once; and the grouping of slices for individual processing via the onboard effects.

The package scored 10/10 in **cm**82, but the recent v1.7 and 1.8 updates mean it warrants a second look, due to some significant additions. The biggest is the Time Designer page, which gives precise methods of rhythmic manipulation (as opposed to the random variations of the Chaos Designer). Basic functions include halving/doubling time, shifting the timing behind or ahead of the beat (in 16ths and/or milliseconds), changing the time signature (there's a reasonably broad predefined selection), and selecting alternative patterns.

Time Designer's Groove Lock panel offers numerous groove templates, including some from hardware like Akai's famous MPC range, and others extracted from real drumming performances. Increasing the Strength slider makes slices gravitate towards the grid, while decreasing it means they move away and become looser. You can even lock the groove of one part to that of another, which is extremely useful and highly effective.

There's a Swing knob and the unassuming but powerful Simplify control, which, when increased, progressively removes slices to seamlessly thin out the rhythm. Thanks to MIDI Learn (which now works in the same way as it does with Spectrasonics' Omnisphere synth) and real-time response, you can automate such parameters, for quick idea-building, dynamic composition and live performance purposes.

In use, it's surprising just how easy it is to create bespoke, great-sounding rhythms using Time Designer, and you can always drag the beat's corresponding MIDI clip into your DAW, for manual fine-tuning.

Other niceties for 1.8 include Host Sync, support for 64-bit Windows hosts, and six new effects: Formant Filter, Smoke Amp, Ultra Chorus, Retro-Phaser, Retro-Flanger, Chorus Echo. These processors are useful additions, if not exactly mindblowing.

The real standout aspect of this update is, without a doubt, the addictive Time Designer. Now, you can pick beats that you like the sound of, *then* twist the rhythm to your requirements, which vastly boosts the potential and flexibility of this already excellent package. (Note that the price given here is for the Xpanded bundle.)
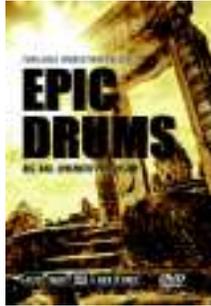
10/10

Soundware round-up

Big Fish Audio
Epic Drums £72
Contact Time+Space, 01837 55200
Web www.timespace.com
Format Acidized WAV, WAV, Apple Loops, REX, Stylus RMX

Epic Drums packs over 1250 samples into 40 well-labelled construction kits, each of which consists of individual percussion loops and single hits, and comes with an elaborate demo. The mood of the sounds is strongly suggestive of scenes in high-paced action films – you can almost taste the adrenaline. The only slight drawback is that the samples have been quite heavily processed with effects, and we're unsure that this has necessarily improved the raw performances underneath. It's still a fantastic collection, but it leans slightly more towards the B-movie market than that of the big-budget blockbuster.
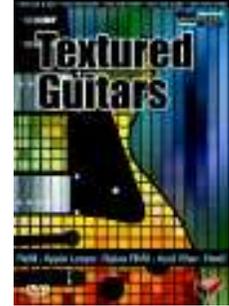
8/10

Nine Volt Audio
Textured Guitars £70
Contact Time+Space, 01837 55200
Web www.timespace.com
Format ReFill, Stylus RMX, REX2, Acid WAV, Apple Loops

As the title hints, the sounds on this disc originate from guitars, and they've been played using various techniques through a selection of amps and effects chains. It's a collection of 43 suites, made up of over 500 unique samples, at tempos ranging from 74 to 135bpm. What's most fascinating, however, is how stunning and diverse the results have turned out. And, as part of the BPM Flex series, the formats contained on this disc enable all the samples to be stretched far beyond their original boundaries. So this is a must-have release for both lovers of rich sonic textures and far-out guitar tones.
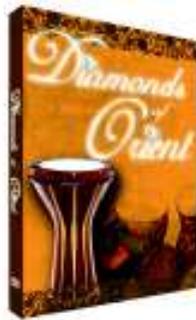
9/10

Best Service
Diamonds Of Orient £75
Contact Time+Space, 01837 55200
Web www.timespace.com
Format WAV, AIFF, REX2, Stylus RMX

This collection of roughly 900 sounds showcases a selection of superb rhythms, performed by native musicians from Azerbaijan, Turkey, Persia, Chechenia, Turkmenistan, Bulgaria, Greece, Iraq and Macedonia. The performances are split into 113 categories, some of which contain construction kits and others that comprise single instrument loops. All of the sounds are as authentic as they come, and our only concern is that the recording techniques used during production may not have been optimal, as not all of the nuances of the instruments have been as well captured as they might have been.

8/10

Gold Baby   DOWNLOAD
Vinyl Drum Machines $34
Web www.goldbaby.co.nz
Format WAV, Guru, Battery 3, ReFill

We were somewhat surprised to learn that this pack is made from samples that have been cut to vinyl, then resampled. However, it actually makes a lot of sense, as the process of sampling drums (or anything!) from vinyl has a definite positive effect in terms of warmth, particularly. There are 14 drum machines' worth of sounds (plus some bonus sounds), with each hit sampled via three different turntables, but this has left little room for variations – not enough open hi-hat variations, for example. Also, we're not convinced that the cutting process was 'perfect' – there's more missing treble than we'd have expected. More samples per machine and a better cut could have made this pack perfect. (Note that the WAV pack is $29.)

7/10

Loopmasters   DOWNLOAD
House Improvements Vol 2 £20
Contact info@loopmasters.com
Web www.loopmasters.com
Format WAV, REX, EXS24, HALion, Kontakt, NN-XT, SFZ

This edition in the House Improvements series is packed with over 550 samples for the production of fresh music – Loopmasters say it's ideal for "deep, chunky, funked up and glitched out house". It's all here, from single drum hits and FX shots to full instrument loops and everything else in between. Each sample is labelled with the appropriate root key and tempo to make for easy integration into your projects. The overall quality isn't the best we've heard – many of the samples feel a little rushed – but if you're patient, you'll find these useful elements to be perfectly up to the job of creating decent tracks.

7/10

Push Button Bang   DOWNLOAD
Urban Technology £30
Contact info@loopmasters.com
Web www.loopmasters.com
Format WAV, REX2, Acidized WAV

A collection of 1800 samples, over 1000 of them drum loops. The beats range in tempo vastly, from 88bpm to around 190bpm, so it's just as well that everything in Urban Technology is superbly categorised – they're all labelled with tempo and root key where appropriate, too. The loops are quite well done, although none of them exhibit any pronounced character of their own – on the whole, they could be described as a touch on the bland side, but they're still perfectly useable across a variety of styles. On the other hand, the non-percussive samples in the collection tend to be extremely atmospheric, so you may well find more inspiration lurking in the musical loops, FX and synth shots than the drums.

7/10

Drum Drops DOWNLOAD
In Dub Vol 2 Pack 3 £13
Contact info@loopmasters.com
Web www.loopmasters.com
Format Apple Loops, ACID WAV, REX2

The classic Drum Drops In Dub series has been split into mini download packs for convenient, affordable access to its sounds. This one borrows from live drum recordings originally performed by reggae/dub legend Horseman. The playing is excellent and the sound is bang-on authentic – if you don't find yourself skanking whilst auditioning these samples, you must be rhythmically challenged! However, the recording quality isn't totally consistent. The loops are split into two tempo categories, 78bpm and 82bpm, with single hits to match. There are 45 unique loops and 55 single hits in total. Also available is the full multitrack version, downloadable for £18.

7/10

Arksun DOWNLOAD
Zebra 2 Arksun Soundbank €25
Contact info@arksun-sound.com
Web www.arksun-sound.com
Format Zebra v2.3 or later
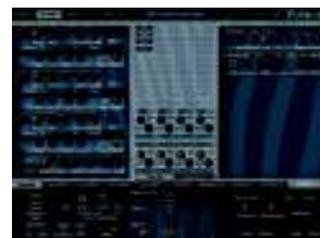
Arksun's Zebra 2 soundbank features 128 new presets for u-he's semi-modular beast of a synth. The patches are divided into various categories: arps, basses, drums, FX, keys, leads, organs, pads and sequences. The vibe is predominantly dance and electronica, and the quality is consistently great. In fact, some of these patches are absolutely superb, really showing off Zebra 2's flexible sound design capabilities. Arksun Soundbank represents good value for money and is certainly worth your time – you might well learn a thing or two about sound design from these beautifully made patches.

9/10

Dusted William Sounds DOWNLOAD
Super Funky Dope Ass Drum Loops $30
Contact derikw@gmail.com
Web www.dustedwilliamsounds.com
Format WAV, REX2, SFZ, MIDI
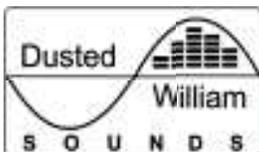
This collection comprises breakbeat-style drum loops in tempos ranging from 61 to 138bpm. The feel is predominantly funky and the recording quality and playing aren't too bad. However, all the samples are mixed in a very similar way, and they aren't that slamming either, so as a collection of breakbeats for electronic music, it doesn't cut it. And since you don't get multitracks, and each loop is so short, it's not ideal for projects where a semi-realistic drum performance is required, because the repetition becomes apparent. The collection is by no means without merit, but its lack of flexibility makes it hard to recommend, even at its reasonable price.

5/10

Prime Loops DOWNLOAD
Moogalicious Funk Loops £13
Contact via web
Web www.primeloops.com
Format Acid WAV, Live, Reason, Apple Loops, MPC, RX2

A collection of loops from, presumably, a Moog synth, Moogalicious Funk Loops' features riffs, chord progressions and basslines from 90 to 130bpm. The samples all fit into a vaguely funky theme, and there's some inspirational stuff here if dance or urban music is your particular flava. Not every single loop is a winner, but you get about up to 280MB of content per format, so the pack is reasonably priced. We'd rather have seen a more fleshed-out package with multisamples and so forth, but as it stands, this is a solid, quality library.

8/10

Creature
Electronic Critters III: The Creaturephonic Workshop £25
Contact steve@hauntedhouserecords.co.uk
Web www.hauntedhouserecords.co.uk
Format WAV

The third instalment in this series is something of a departure from the first two, including folders of construction kits and loops, as well as the usual soundscapes and FX. The subject matter this time around is Radiophonic Workshop-inspired sounds, although most of it relies on processed recordings rather than *Dr Who*-style synth workouts. Helpfully, the library also includes a folder of raw audio material (including noise, speech, Theremin and Doppler ultrasound recordings). This library doesn't quite tickle us like the first Electronic Critters did, but fans of strange noises will definitely find something.

7/10

Puremagnetik DOWNLOAD
B System: Percussives $12
Contact info@puremagnetik.com
Web www.puremagnetik.com
Format Live Pack, Kontakt, Logic

Created using a Buchla 200e "Electric Music Box" modular analogue synth, B System: Percussives is a collection of 650 samples organised into 10 percussion kits. The content comprises exactly the kind of blippy, clangourous, swoosh-infused noises one might expect from such a device, and many of the sounds are more like short effects than your typical percussion hits. They're really good, too, although not particularly spectacular. As a bonus, the Ableton Live version includes 40 extra Live clips, while the Logic version has 40 extra Apple Loops. For analogue noise lovers, B System: Percussives is a safe bet.

7/10