

Roland SP-404

With the SP-404, have Roland improved their winning SP formula? **Tim Oliver** wears fingers to the bone to investigate...

DETAILS

PRICE
£280

CONTACT
Web: www.roland.co.uk

SPECIFICATIONS
Maximum polyphony: 12 voices
Sampling frequency: 44.1kHz
Signal processing: 24-bit AD and DA
Connectors: Line Input and Output L & R RCA phono
Headphones: Stereo 1/4" jack
Mic input: 1/4" jack MIDI In
Power supply: External DC 9V AC adapter or 6 AA batteries
Dimensions: 178 x 257 x 72mm
Weight: 1.3Kg

THERE'S NO PRIZES for guessing that the SP-404 follows in the footsteps of the 202 introduced in 1997 and the 303 in 2001, and this new arrival continues to cement the SP family's position as a creative tool that slots comfortably between DJ and musician. It's equally at home on stage or in the studio, as both a performance instrument in its own right, but also as a hands-on cog in the studio machine, allowing much more expression than with a mouse and screen.

Primarily it's a sampler, but it lets you program up your samples into patterns as a sequencer does, although operationally it's more in the style of the old skool drum machines. On top of that, you have a choice of 29 effects to wreak havoc on your unsuspecting sound files.

The shape and form owes more to a DJ mixer than anything studio-bound and the RCA phono connectors on the rear for audio line in and out ally it more to that world. Although you can't plug a deck straight into it for level

reasons, you can happily connect it as an insert loop to your mixer, sampling the feed from the decks for your creative pleasure or simply adding effects to the external input 'on the fly'

Alternatively, if you don't want to do any 'live' sampling and can get by with only one deck, plug the stereo output into one side of the mixer for cross-fade action.

Features

The SP-404 is a chunky beast with a metal surface and solid plastic base that's sure to withstand the rigours of stage use – the big rubber pads and sturdy knobs feel like they'll cope with the continual hammering and twiddling of a late night jam session. They're also back-lit, which, together with the large-scale LED display and blue pulsing metronome, make working





Despite the phono-only connections the 404 offers great sound quality...

in low-light conditions a breeze. Sample time for the new model has been upped to 5mins at full bandwidth on the internal RAM (double that at low resolution), which includes the samples that come shipped with it. A very necessary CompactFlash slot gives you expansion options up to 386 minutes for a 1GB card and the card samples can be spread across any of the eight sample banks, with two other banks assigned to the internal RAM. There are 12 samples per bank, one for each of the 12 trigger pads.

Sampling is performed simply within the 404, using either the signal to the line input (from deck, CD player, iPod or whatever else is connected), the integrated microphone or a microphone plugged in to the mic input on the front. Start, end and level editing lets you refine the sample. Alternatively you can import 44.1kHz .aiff or .wav files directly from the CompactFlash card if you have a means of getting them on there in the first place. A sample can be looped or held to let you over-play other samples from different banks or add machinegun-style rolls.

Once you've got a bunch of samples together, go into Pattern mode and record them into quantised sequences. The only

problem here is that the tempo isn't fixed for a pattern, so if you're using loops and switching between different patterns with different tempi, you have to find the old one again.

Have a play

The great thing about the SP-404 is that you really do want to play with it: the way it's laid out, the big flashing pads, the control knobs – it's just asking for it, and once I got my head around the distinction between sample and pattern playing, the rest is totally intuitive. And then, once I'd got into playing with it, the potential for it to be a highly expressive 'instrument' is clearly obvious if I had the time to put in the necessary practice.

Throwing effects into the equation is simplicity itself and being able to resample with effects opens up new avenues of invention for the sonic adventurer. I'd love to have seen a small ribbon slider up the side or even a small matrix pad like Korg's Kaoss Pad that could be assigned to an effect parameter or two: it would really enhance the playability of things like the filter or scratch effects. Nonetheless, the three effects knobs are spaced well for 'easy access' and they do the job.

The blue pulsing metronome light looks really good as well as

giving you the necessary timing info visually, and the large LED display is unavoidable, but with only three characters, it's sometimes hard to understand what it's trying to tell you.

Sound quality is excellent (as you'd expect these days) and belies the lowly RCA connectors. A headphone socket on the front lets you practice in private or line up samples 'off-line'.

Natural selection

The 404 is a natural evolutionary step on from its predecessors. There are no giant leaps of innovation here, but the new developments keep it comfortably ahead of its competitors.

New effects, like BPM Looper and Sub-sonic, make it even more DJ-friendly than before, and with the expanded sample time and CompactFlash capability its playing horizons are broadened.

The SP formula works well but I'd love to see some brave moves: more expressive performance features, such as a tracker pad for the effects, and how about the USB gubbins needed to link to a laptop? But for the time being, this revision does the business within a very accessible price tag. **FM**

ALTERNATIVES



KORG ELECTRIBE ES-1 MKII

£259
Packs all the punches of the SP-404 in a more orthodox drum machine shape.

www.korg.co.uk



AKAI MPC1000

£699

A more professional unit and a corresponding price tag, this is the Hip Hop work-horse!

www.akaipro.com

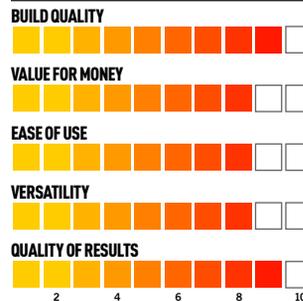
Effects

ONE OF THE features that make the SP-404 so appealing to live players is the ease with which effects can be applied to samples, and the fact that an effect can be applied to just one pad at a time (although you can't have more than one effect on the go simultaneously). Moreover, if you like a particular sample/effect combo you can re-sample it together to free-up the effects section.

Effects parameters are assigned to the three active control knobs, so (with the Filter for example) you have control of cut-off, resonance and drive at your fingertips, and the knobs are far enough apart for comfortable twiddling.

The effects on offer are geared toward the DJ set-up and the three new ones further that bias: Subsonic adds in a low-frequency sine wave, whose volume is dependent on the Effect Send volume, and whose pitch is controllable. BPM looper takes a cut of the input signal and 'machine gun' loops it in time (check it out on the DVD). And lastly, DJFX Looper lets you do something akin to scratching on a deck as you wind forward or backward through the sample.

VERDICT ROLAND SP-404



A robust sampler with great effects that's perfect for a studio or live set-up.