



Steinberg PC MAC Groove Agent 4 £146

This veteran software drummer has been brought right up to date. Will we be more impressed by its charms this time around?

> Seven years ago, the third in Steinberg's long-running Groove Agent (cm119, 7/10) drum instrument series delivered a solid, creative, pattern-based experience, despite its rather clunky interface. With more than 22,000 all-new samples (7GB), over 3800 patterns and a totally rebuilt GUI, Groove Agent 4 (VST/AU/Standalone) is essentially a completely new instrument altogether.

Rather than continuing the relatively inflexible 'virtual drummer' theme of earlier versions, GA 4 combines ready-made drum kit and percussion patches with a proper sampling engine and an extensive pattern library. The interface is far more contemporary and slick, and much more functional than before. There are fancy playable drum kit graphics, proper drum machine Instrument Pads, Pattern Pads for triggering MIDI patterns mapped across the full range of 128 MIDI notes, an integrated Keyboard, MIDI Pattern recording, a drum grid

Pattern Editor, and a full Mixer with four insert Effects per channel and four Auxiliaries.

However, what remains of the Groove Agents of old is that all-in-one rhythm machine ethos, whereby both sounds and patterns are loaded, edited and played back entirely within the instrument itself. To that end, GA 4 includes three Instrument types (or Agents), named Acoustic (three kits), Percussion (20 kits) and Beat (100 kits), which can be freely assigned to the four available Kit slots. Each Kit has its own Pattern section, and for the Acoustic and Percussion Agents this also incorporates Styles, which are rather like the feature of the same name from Groove Agent 3 (see *Pattern o'clock*).

Kit and caboodle

The acoustic kits offer a reasonable level of variety, with two snares and kicks each, plenty of velocity layers and round robin playback. For its open sound, the Vintage kit is our favourite, but

all three will have their uses, the other two being tight and controlled (Studio), and bright with a couple of bold, ringy snare drums (Rock).

The Beat Agent kits lean towards urban and electronic styles, offering good starting palettes for tweaking and/or adding to. There are also a few useful 'soundtrack-style' presets, but little in the way of more leftfield or unusual ethnic sounds. Meanwhile, Percussion Agent patches range from typical Latin styles to dance, pop, funk and soul, and include a good selection of crisp instrumentation, including timbales, congas, triangles, shakers and more.

Each Agent offers its own feature set. The Acoustic and Percussion Agents get a knob-laden Mixer with fixed insert effects (EQ, Compressor, Tape Saturation and Envelope Shaper), while Beat Agent's Mixer includes fully assignable effects for its four inserts (from a list of 29 processors). All Kits get four Auxiliaries with four effects slots each, however, as well as

“Drop samples into Beat Agent’s Instrument Pads – where you drop them determines how they’re handled”

their own output channels feeding the Master output fader.

Editing of Acoustic and Percussion Agent’s underlying sounds is limited to amplitude envelopes, tuning and send levels to their respective room and/or overhead channels. There’s also no sample import. However, these are precisely the areas in which Beat Agent excels, being essentially a conventional drum sampler hosting up to eight samples per pad, with adjustable velocity range and keyspan, three envelopes (pitch, filter and amplitude), real-time timestretch (AudioWarp), sample looping, sample slicing and MIDI effects (Rudiments and MIDI Delay).

Secret Agent

Steinberg cite Cubase integration as one of Groove Agent 4’s marquee features. You can drag and drop MIDI Patterns to and from the DAW: dropping a single MIDI pattern onto a Pad replaces the incumbent one, while dropping multiple patterns arranges them across multiple Pads. You can also drop samples into Beat Agent’s Instrument Pads, and where you drop them within the Pad determines how they’re handled: add (top), replace (middle) or map across multiple Pads (bottom). Beat Agent also imports REX files and slices loops in other formats, mapping them across multiple Pads.

As we discovered through testing GA 4 in Logic and Live, this drag-and-drop functionality works in other DAWs, too – although getting MIDI into Groove Agent required us to create MIDI files and drag them from the DAW’s browser or Windows Explorer/OS X Finder.

Before we wrap up, let’s quickly run through the less-fundamental new additions. Jam Mode lets you select Patterns sequentially in real time, setting them to follow certain behaviours, such as play Next, Stop at end and Return to previous. The bit depth can be set to 16- or 24-bit independently for each Kit, which is useful when conserving memory usage. And finally, as the



Beat Agent can import loops, slice them at their transients and map them across the Instrument Pads



Groove Agent includes some powerful genre-based pattern manipulation options

Pattern o'clock

Groove Agent 4 incorporates both genre-specific Styles and regular MIDI Patterns. For Acoustic Agent Kits, each Style preset (Britpop 02-131, for example) loads a set of related patterns (Main, Fill, Intro and Ending), mapping them to MIDI notes and the corresponding Pattern Pads. Each pattern can be modified using the Style Performance parameters, which include an X/Y pad for Complexity and Intensity, as well as Swing, Quantize, Auto Fill and Auto Complexity controls. Should you wish to then work on the Pattern’s notes, you can either drag it into your DAW, or

convert it to MIDI within GA, at which point you exchange the Style Parameters for a regular drum edit Pattern grid.

The situation is rather different for Percussion Agent, as its Style Performance section comprises a set of separate percussion parts, each of which has its own editable performance parameters (Complexity, Intensity, Groove Offset and so on). However, you can still render to MIDI in the same way as you can with Acoustic Agent, and edit in the Pattern grid editor. Should you wish, the edited MIDI Pattern can then also be dragged into your DAW.

128 Pattern Pads are shared across all four Kits, with, potentially, one Pattern from each Kit assigned to each Pad, there’s a Pattern Overview screen to provide quick feedback on allocations.

Agent of change

Groove Agent 4 is a powerful drum sampler, virtual drum kit and percussion ROMpler with a huge library of patterns, capable real-time performance features, good onboard processing and a stylish, highly interactive interface, but there are a few issues that need to be raised. The MediaBay Browser is great, but certain genres are notable by their absence (no jazz kits, for example). Let’s hope further content becomes available in future.

Also, as much as we love the Acoustic Agent Kits, they offer less editing flexibility than you’ll find in the best drum ROMplers. And there’s no MIDI output, although we understand that it’s due to be added soon.

In summary, Groove Agent 4 aims considerably higher than its predecessor, and succeeds in juggling the many requirements of a modern drum instrument, resulting in a powerful percussion production system that’s more than just the sum of its parts. **cm**

Web www.steinberg.net
Info Upgrade from Groove Agent 2 or 3, £82

Alternatively

Native Instruments Battery 4
cm192 » 9/10 » £169

NI’s drum sampler is a superb choice for urban and electronic beats and sample manipulation

XLN Audio Addictive Drums 2
cm207 » 9/10 » From £110

Lots of sounds and patterns, and plenty of tweaking, but lacks Groove Agent’s sampling

Verdict

For Massive improvement over GA 3
Well-implemented acoustic kits
Excellent Beat Agent drum sampler
Good pattern library
Flexible pattern integration

Against Steep learning curve
Sound library could be more adventurous

GA 4 is so well-improved they could have renamed it. It’s an impressive, powerful and versatile solution for drum tracks of all kinds

9/10