Pioneer DJ Toraiz SP-16

£1,279

Pioneer take a bold step into the production world. **Si Truss** asks
if this is the standalone sampler we've been waiting for...

CONTACT **WHO:** Pioneer DJ **WEB:** www.pioneerDJ.com **KEY FEATURES** **SAMPLING:** 16 sample tracks with up to 30 seconds sampling per-track **MEMORY:** 8GB built-in, plus USB flash drive input **I/O:** Outputs: 8 assignable line outs (1/4-inch jack), headphone monitor out (1/4-inch jack), MIDI out. Inputs: 2 line ins (L/Mono & Right, 1/4-inch jack), MIDI in. USB I/O. Pro DJ Link LAN port.

THE PROS & CONS

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It has a fun and intuitive workflow

Flexible connectivity makes it great for both live and studio

Dave Smith filter sounds great

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Built-in effects are fairly lacklustre

Lacks some deeper features, while others need refinement

For some time now, there's been a bit of a gap in the market for a decent, fully-fledged standalone sampler. With 16-channels, each capable of sampling up to 30 seconds, plus a step-sequencer, performance pads, touchscreen control and an analogue filter courtesy of Dave Smith, it looks tentatively like Pioneer's Toraiz SP-16 could be the standalone machine that old-school MPC fans

have been dreaming of for the past few years.

The first thing you notice upon unboxing the SP-16 is that it looks like a bit of a Frankenstein's monster of other production gear – which is because that's sort of what it is. The 16-step sequencer along the bottom of the unit is exactly the same as that found on Roland's TR-8 drum machine, the 4x4 pad grid owes an obvious debt to NI's Maschine, and it wouldn't take a great leap to imagine its touchscreen might be inspired by Akai's MPC Touch. Even the Dave

Smith filter, although official, is simply lifted from the Prophet-6, complete with DSI-style knobs and branding. That said, none of this is exactly a bad thing from a user's point of view – each is a winning element – and remarkably, despite this mixed pot of influences, the SP-16 still looks smart thanks to its sleek chassis and customisable backlit pads.

In use, the SP-16 has a very fast and fluid workflow. The combination of the velocity sensitive performance pads and step sequencer make it exceptionally easy to input, play, record and tweak sequences. Sample browsing, loading, recording and editing functions are mostly handled by the touchscreen and surrounding rotaries. Mercifully, the SP-16 doesn't force you to use the touchscreen – it can be used whenever convenient, but more often than not parameters can also be controlled via the rotaries when a more precise touch is needed.

Generally the digital interface is very intuitive. Each channel has a corresponding module on the screen. Here you can load a sample from the internal 8GB memory or a connected USB drive, set up to record from the line-in or resample from your current project. These channel windows also

offer sample/loop editing, an amp envelope (Attack/Hold/Release), an effect slot and a sequence edit window in which it's possible to nudge triggers off the grid, move the sequence around and set up beat-repeat style retriggers.

There is also a global mixer window, from which you get deeper control of track levels, including setting up an effect send and assigning individual track routings. Meanwhile, BMP/Quantize and a general settings windows allow the rest of the SP-16's global setting to be configured. Finally, there's an extensive arranger window in which Scenes can be sequenced to create full song arrangements.

There are number of smart workflow-enhancing features included on the SP-16. For one, the way the sequencer automatically duplicates 16-beat sequences when you extend them (up to the maximum 64 steps) is very handy. There's a solid Parameter Sequencing function too, which allows automation to be inputted to the step sequencer, although it's a shame this can't be automatically recorded in the style of Korg's Motion Sequencing. The Slice beat slicer comes across from

PAD GRID The backlit, velocity sensitive pads can have their colours customised, which is great for grouping sounds together.

SEQUENCER The SP-16's 16-step button-style sampler owes more than a slight debt to Roland's TR-8. It works nicely though.

TOUCHSCREEN The SP-16's screen is used for configuring and editing the 16 sample channels, as well as using the mixer and editing general settings.

DSI FILTER The Drive, LPF and HPF circuits come from Dave Smith's Prophet-6 synth and, as you'd expect, they sound fantastic.

Pioneer's DJ gear, along with a Scale mode allowing samples to be played melodically using the pad grid. The quality of the built-in warping/ timestretching isn't exactly pristine at extreme settings, but has a not-unpleasant old school charm. Finally, there's a touchstrip too, which can control a Pitch, trigger repeats, or be assigned via two User modes.

Then there's the DSI filter section. Here we get a LPF with cutoff, drive and resonance, accompanied by a one-knob HPF. It's the filter circuit from DSI's Prophet-6, so naturally it sounds fantastic; the drive is great for adding warm analogue crunch to the sound of the SP-16. At first it might

appear that having just a global analogue filter is a touch limited, but Pioneer have smartly applied it only to the master output (channels 1 and 2), with the remaining six analogue outputs bypassing it, making it easy to route certain sounds through the filter while leaving others clean.

Unfortunately, there are also a few problems with the SP-16. For one thing, the touchstrip doesn't function as it needs to. Currently, the Pitch and User modes seem to deactivate once a sound has been sequenced or recorded, which pretty much nullifies its ability to add variation during live performances. Secondly, the built-in effects are fairly lacking. Each

channel has one effect slot which can host a filter, 2-band EQ, chorus or flanger, which are okay, but a little unrefined. The Send effect options, meanwhile, are limited to just reverb and a pretty standard delay. Finally, I'd like to see some more Amp Env options – you really need an ADSR included for the flexibility a sampler like this needs. An assignable LFO would go a long way too.

It's worth noting that all these things could be fixed via firmware updates. Pioneer have a decent record in this department too. The SP-16 needs a bit of refinement to justify its top-end price, but there are still a lot of reasons to like it. The hardware itself is great, the general workflow is a lot of fun and it does a very good job of bridging the gap between the studio and live/DJ. **FM**

IN & OUT

The SP-16 is well connected. It features eight analogue output channels, along with a stereo input that can be sampled or routed through to the mixer. There's MIDI I/O – currently only for sync, but expanded MIDI sequencing is promised in the future. A USB connection allows computer sync, with further interface options promised in future updates too. A second USB port, meanwhile, allows for extra memory for samples and projects. Finally, Pioneer's Pro DJ Link allows for a LAN hook-up to CDJs or DJ mixer, so the SP-16 can be tightly integrated into DJ sets.

FM VERDICT

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Some firmware refinement is needed to justify its price, but there's a lot to like about this inspiring and intuitive standalone sampler.

Maschine Jam vs Toraiz SP-16: in the studio and on stage

They might be very different products at different price points, but both NI's Maschine Jam and Pioneer's Toraiz SP-16 are both pitched as hardware devices that will bridge the gap between studio workflow and live performance. Work out which will suit your workflow with our comparison guide…

Pioneer Toraiz SP-16

On stage

THE GOOD:
Fast and fun workflow – plug in a memory stick of samples and away you go. Pro DJ Link allows seamless integration with industry standard DJ gear. Looks great on stage. No laptops!

THE NOT-SO-GOOD:
Built-in effects are a little limited. Touchstrip isn't very effective at the moment. At the time of writing, it doesn't MIDI sequence (this is hopefully coming in a future update!).

In the studio

THE GOOD:
Hook the input up to a turntable/synth/interface for an old-school MPC workflow. Run things through that gorgeous DSI filter. Inspiring sequencer/pad workflow.

THE NOT-SO-GOOD:
Lacks a few of the deeper sample edit and automation features of modern software samplers. DAW integration is fairly minimal right now.

Value
It's quite an expensive bit of kit – the hardware is quality but the firmware could use some polishing. Doesn't require you to buy a laptop for performances though.

Who'll get the most out of it?
DJs looking to bridge the gap between their studio workflow and club performances. Beatmakers looking for that all-in-one MPC-style magic.

NI Maschine Jam

On stage

THE GOOD:
Touchstrips are fantastic for effect and parameter tweaking. The new arrangement control is great for triggering beats, loops and melodies. Great for on-the-fly step-sequencing.

THE NOT-SO-GOOD:
You'll need to rely on a laptop/screen. Relies on other hardware to sync up to external gear. Can be sync'd with Traktor for DJ performances, but the integration isn't hugely tight.

In the studio

THE GOOD:
Gives you access to the excellent Maschine production environment with all you need to make tracks. Great for step-sequencing instruments and recording automation.

THE NOT-SO-GOOD:
It can do all you need on its own, but for the best experience you'll want to couple it with a Maschine MkII, Mikro or Studio for browsing and sample editing.

Value
At under £400 and including lots of great software, it's a very good deal. Of course, you'll need to buy a laptop too though.

Who'll get the most out of it?
Current Maschine users wanting to create a live set-up or enhance their studio experience. Newcomers after a convenient all-in-one studio/stage package.