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REVIEW

BY GARY ESKOW

Sonoma Wire Works DrumCore 4

Depth and breadth combine in this powerful rhythm creation software

Back in the early days of MIDI, the drum sound on every song where a particular drum machine was used would be identical. Man, those toms sound great! Let's use them again! As we all know, the Phil Collins gated snare sound was an attempt to break through that wall and deliver a unique timbre to a specific track. The vortex immediately sucked it in and it became ubiquitous.

Today, a multitude of drum machines—hardware and software—are available (see Darwin Grosse's overview on page 26), and the variety of approaches they represent would have been hard to conceive of a few decades ago. Sonoma Wire Works recently released DrumCore 4, which offers a combination of audio loops, MIDI performances that replicate the audio content, drum kits, and effects. It's an approach that allows the user to interact with some of the finest drummers in the world. Let's take a look.

Delivery and versions

DrumCore 4 comes in three different versions; the Ultra version, which I worked with, is delivered on a 120 GB USB3 Solid State Drive. That means that the 50 GB of content which it ships with won't take up space on one of your system's internal drives. The Ultra version doesn't ship with all of the content that's available for DrumCore 4; the extra 70 GBs allow you to purchase additional audio and MIDI files which will be sent directly to this drive (providing you have it attached to a USB port on your computer).

The lighter versions (Lite, with 4 GB of content, or Prime, with 20 GB) can be delivered on flash drives or downloaded via the web. The same delivery procedure applies; if you bought a flash drive and choose to add more material, it will be installed onto that medium.

DrumCore 4 works with all of the major DAW platforms. Cubase 8 had no problem recognizing the plug-in; I simply added an instrument track within a project and began working.

Grooves and GrooveSets

GrooveSets are the point of entry into this plug-in. I couldn't find "GrooveSets" anywhere on the GUI, so I was initially confused as to what they were, but it's actually quite simple. If you scroll down to the Funk category in the Browser, for example, you'll see a list of drummers who have contributed to this style (a complete list is available on the Sonoma website). Click on the photo of one of the drummers you will be partnering with and you'll see a list of GrooveSets that he has created. Under Ben Smith's pretty face, for example, there's a list of five. BS Oil tops the list, and when you click on it, then choose either Audio or MIDI, you'll have access to a set of grooves that work together easily. Voilà, your GrooveSet. Nothing keeps you from assembling a track that combines material from different GrooveSets, however, so have at it!

The fundamental aspect of DrumCore 4 that you won't find anywhere else is this: you can build rhythm arrangements on the plug-in's Timeline (which we'll discuss in a moment) using only the Audio or MIDI loops, or you can combine the two. If you choose to combine audio and MIDI, your performances will complement the audio created by these mondo talented sticksters.

Paranthenically, another option is to drag a bunch of MIDI loops directly to your DAW's sequencer and modify them, bypassing the Timeline entirely. The audio loops were recorded multiple times, at different tempos. DrumCore4 recognizes the tempo of your sequencer and selects the audio that was recorded most closely to it.



Question: if you're combining audio recorded in a studio with MIDI kits you're processing in your environment, how does the sound match up between the two? I was surprised that the application does not clearly indicate the kits used to record the audio. For example, if you go to the Prog Rock category, choose Terry Bozzio, and then load up the menu of grooves labelled TBZ 5/4, which of the multiple Terry Bozzio kits should you load if you want to integrate your own sterling performances along with his? I couldn't tell. On the other hand, when I chose Alan White under the Funk category and loaded up the Six Gun GrooveSet, a drum kit with that label was waiting for me.

As it turns out, this inconsistency is due to the fact that the DrumKits were created over a number of years by Submersible Music. According to Sonoma, Submersible refined its process as they created the collection, modifying and improving things over time. That's fine, but if you're a purist looking to replicate the audio with kits to match, be aware that it won't always be possible without a fair bit of auditioning different kits.

I really enjoyed pushing elements around within the MIDI files and seeing exactly where the feel began to change from the groove that the drummer laid down by comparing an altered MIDI track and the original audio loop. For example, in the Alternative category I called up Ben Smith's BS Oil track and set my sequencer to 120 BPM. The audio is stretchable, but for this test I felt it was best to stick to the original tempo. I started out by taking the snare sitting on two and four and pushing it back in time to give a slightly more laid back feel. How interesting! At about 20–25 MIDI ticks, the difference in feel began to be apparent. Quite a useful lesson there.

The MIDI files weren't derived from the audio loops, however. They were created by Gary Thompson, who tried to match the feel and timing of the recorded material. According to Sonoma, Thompson didn't hard quantize the MIDI files, but did adjust the timing of his MIDI performances. A lot of the parts are suspiciously within a tick or two of the nearest 16th note, but the grooves kick!

How much time you spend building rhythm arrangements using the Timeline depends on your workflow. You may simply want to drag a couple of audio or MIDI loops to your sequencer as you develop a song or cue, and add a few MIDI turn-arounds and fills when the other parts are

completed. If you prefer, you can construct an entire piece in the Timeline and then render it to an audio file that you drag into your DAW.

Kits and final touches

Do you enjoy spending time layering sounds and creating your own drum kits? If so, you will love this area of DrumCore 4. Start out from scratch, or use one of the kits that ships with the program and begin swapping out samples, adding velocity layers, customizing the output assignments to make processing easier... it's all there. You can import any samples on your computer, so the sky's the limit. Me, I prefer to call up a great kit—there are many here—and start playing!

The mixer that works with the kits is straightforward; the audio loops, being stereo mixes themselves, do not require a mixer. You are able to treat the loops using the Master FX section.

I'm not the most engineering-savvy musician on the planet. Having said that, the effects—both those that can be applied to the samples played via MIDI, and the effects that can be strapped across the main mix to work with the loops as well—are outstanding. Compression, EQ, Delay and a bit crusher can be added to individual MIDI channels; all are available in the Master FX section as well, except for the bit crusher.

Conclusions

My only complaint lies with the manual. It's relatively long, with lots of chapters and multiple listings within each. However, no page assignments are given, so I had to keep fishing around to home in on a specific topic. A better-organized reference for such a fabulous product would be most welcome.

I initially found DrumCore 4 a bit daunting, particularly since I couldn't quite get my head around the idea of mixing audio recorded live in a professional studio with MIDI drum patterns played in a home studio that require ambience. Surprisingly, it wasn't that hard to pull off. I'm looking forward to working on more music that combines DrumCore 4 with multiple tracks of non-percussion material! ➤

Prices: DrumCore 4 Lite, \$49;
DrumCore 4 Prime, \$249;
DrumCore 4 Ultra (as reviewed), \$639

More from: Sonoma Wire Works,
www.sonomawireworks.com

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