Storm Drum 2: Part 1

By Peter Lawrence Alexander / August 10, 2008

As a former percussion major and as someone who's spent many an hour on the scoring stages of Los Angeles with some of the best percussionists in the world, I am mightily impressed. But as someone who writes and produces, I am grateful, because what I'm hearing in Storm Drum 2, just with the percussion, and not the MIDI performances, is the caliber of percussive sound I've heard so often at Fox, MGM, Universal and Warner Brothers studios that I can now use in my music.

As a composer, Storm Drum 2 is the percussion section I always wanted as a composer. I'm confident that if Jerry Goldsmith were alive today, he would echo my sentiments, as so many of the sounds I'm hearing I've heard live in many memorable sessions.

This is a great collection that offers no end of possibilities for those involved not only in dramatic scoring, but who also want one crackin' good drumset that can handle a variety of musical assignments.

There's also the matter of sound quality. PLAY sounds great. In fact, I like the sound of PLAY much better than I do Kontakt as it's a little brighter and clearer. I like Kontakt, but I always felt the audio sound of GigaStudio was far superior. The PLAY audio engine is in that tradition. The clarity and precision sound is just outstanding.

My Setup
I'm running Logic 8, the most current version, on a Dual 2.7GHz PowerPC G5 with 4GB of RAM. I'm listening through an RME Fireface 800 and KRK VXT8s.

Installation
The installation is very quick. But I have a few minor critiques I hope EW will consider in future updates. For installation, I'd like to see a procedure paragraph in the manual for those not familiar with using iLok right upfront under a new header called Pre-Install. The three procedural points I'd like to see clarified are:

• Install

• Insert iLok

• Open PLAY

Count your USB connectors – On my G5, I have three: one in front and two in back. One's taken up by the keyboard mouse and one by my MIDEX8 MIDI interface. That leaves one open. Depending on how many different companies you're working with on one system, consider a USB hub.

Two Manuals
One manual is for the program you bought, the other is all purpose. Both are required reading and you need to print them and get them into a 3-ring binder.

Here I have a critique.

Readership studies for decades have been showing that sans serif fonts (fonts with no hooks) are difficult to read. I found that to be true for the manual especially where you're using it open onscreen. I found it very eye fatiguing. For what it's worth, readership studies have found that people can read a 5" wide column in a single glance.

Since you're going back and forth between the manual and PLAY, a more gracious layout better designed for such online use is suggested.

The writing, however, is very good. Manuals are tough to write. I'm finishing a new one now and it's an art in itself. John Philpit, who wrote the manuals, did a most excellent job.

One other thing I would have appreciated, and this has nothing to do with John's writing or the layouts, was having pictures of the various instruments, and for the Black Sabbath drum set, an overhead picture of what drums are in it, their positions, and the position of the cymbals. Zildjian used to put out a little booklet similar to this. Ethno World 4 has four-color pictures of the instruments recorded displayed in their manual. The pictures are a treat because not only do you get more excited by seeing the instruments, you get a much stronger sense of how they might be performed, short of going to YouTube and hoping to find videos.

Registration
The registration was very easy, much more so than trying to register with Native Instruments. While I wish we didn't need iLok keys, we do, and it's not a big deal. Under five minutes and I was done.

Update Notice
I've read a number of criticisms online about PLAY and certain bugs it has. Well, PLAY automatically tells you that an update is available. Update!

One thing that did trip me up about the Update notice was that I thought after I clicked OK, I would immediately go to the Soundsonline.com download area. No, it only reminds you an update is available. So you'll just have to key in the URL and go there manually! It's a little confusing, but hardly a deal killer.

Opening PLAY Inside Logic
Two important points: when you open PLAY inside Logic, you're opening it as a Software Instrument. If you're setting a MIDI Performance, or if you want multiple parts, you're first setting up a Software Instrument that's multitimbral.

There are two screens you work with. Here's the first.

When PLAY opens up, it's a big graphic that's easy to see, mostly easy to read. To bring in sounds, click the Browser button at the top.

This is the Browser. It's set up in panes similar to the Apple Finder. Here I have my most serious non-musical criticism – small white print on a black background is hard to read. The biggest complaint with NI was that the print was so small. The same is true here. There's enough room in the panes to go up a couple of point sizes with the text.

With the average age of most purchasers being in their mid-forties, the psychology of printed text should be considered: big means easy, small means hard.

Even so, the sounds are listed for you. Just double click. When you do, a dialog box pops up asking if you want to Replace or Add. Replace, as in many sequencers, means overwrite. Add means you're adding in sounds to create a performance.

Once the sound is loaded, white keys show where the sounds are located for keyboard performance. Yellowed keys mean no sound. Blue keys mean keyswitches.

Black Kit

As a percussion major, I loaded Black Kit first. The first things I went to were the ride cymbal and the bass drum. As a drummer, I'm picky on ride cymbals. I want to hear a "ping" so that if I wanted to actually "ride" the cymbal, I could.

I don't know who makes Metallica's drums, but that bass drum reminds me of the Sonor set I had years ago. A little tuning, a blanket, head off the front, wooden beater – what a great sound. As a drummer, these sounds are done so well I want them for my own drum set.

MIDI Performances
The final thing I tested out for this first review was the MIDI Performances. My reason for trying that early is because of the number of complaints I've read from customers online who were having problems with PLAY, some of whom went out of their way to be, for me, way overly critical.

On a G5, SD2 is best run in standalone mode using Soundflower. Otherwise, the sheer size of the MIDI performances really brings Logic 8 on a G5 to its knees. This is not the case on the 8 Core Mac Pros.

But you do need the RAM, and you should have no less than 4GB if you're going to use the MIDI performances.

Buy it!

Candidly, there have been some very critical comments online that now, after installation, and working with PLAY (and Storm Drum 2!) I find are really unjustified.

If you've been holding back because of various forum comments, don't. Read the 64-bit specs article written earlier and double check the Soundsonline.com website.

Also, take the very few minutes to download the tutorial demos created by Nick Phoenix and go through them.

What's great about PLAY, is that it's not hard. Yes, if you're brand new to this, you do have to learn a few things which I'll cover in next week's continued review.

But don't let that hold you back. You don't need a machine with 128GB of RAM! Just having 4GB is a great start, and you can add later.

Conclusion: Storm Drum 2 sounds great and it's ready to go. So get it already.

This article was previously published at the SonicControl website.