Insights: Chinee Orchestra

By Jose Herring / October 29, 2012

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My mother grew up in Puerto Rico. My father grew up tending fields in North Carolina, but my heart has always been Chinese. No civilization has been through what China has. From the lowest sufferings of human misery to the highest levels of cultured society. Though that kind of rising and falling of culture may be hard for the human condition, it's great for music as all that pathos, joy and sorrow is reflected in the music and instruments of China.

Luckily for us sampled based composers, the good folks at Kong Audio have meticulously sampled the gamut of Chinese instruments. Well performed by experts on these instruments this product captures the heart of China. From the bright joyous wind instruments, to the melancholy strings, to pounding war drums and percussives, it's all here.

Powered by their own proprietary native player, the Qin Engine (VST and PC only – sorry Mac guys!), the instruments are smartly arranged in a cleverly designed browser that displays the name and a graphic of the instrument.

I know for me, how something looks has become as important as how something sounds. I'd like to be a purist, but in all honestly staring at ugly GUI's with a multitude of numbers and dials, really kills the creative flow. Fortunately, that's not the Qin Engine!

Pressing the browser button in the player brings up a nice graphic of the instrument, which gives a certain tactile sense to the instruments that you're using. When not too familiar with an instrument, it's good to look at it to see how it might be played, leading to more realistic programming as you can then sit and imagine based on the image what the instrument is capable of.

Seems like a small point, but you don't know how many times I've had to do internet searches to at least get an idea of what some obscure instrument looks like in order to make performance decisions. So this is a *welcome* component of Chinee Orchestra.

Following from right to left of the player.

The instruments are loaded on the left. The player is 16-part multitimbral and there are 16 stereo pairs of outputs. So plenty of routing possibilities come with this player.

In the center section is where the patches for your selected instruments are loaded. Each instrument has a lot of variation, from straight tones to vibrato tones, to various performance options like bends, grace notes, etc., making it very easy to program realistic performances.

Finally on the right you load your effects. There's a delay and reverb effect, filter effect and distortion. Mostly I used the reverb and delay. Very convincing effect for placing the samples in a simulated room. Also adding the delay makes for a very authentic sounding instrument. Since the samples are very close mic'ed and dry, this is a very clever way to get the instrument into a room if you don't already have other room simulation options. From there you can route the instrument out for further processing.

All in all this is a very impressive set of samples. The drums especially can be used in any style production. The other instruments of course impart and very Chinese flavor when you need that type of sound.

Another thing that I found interesting was selecting multiple instruments and running them on the same MIDI channel. It was very easy, surprisingly, to get a full Chinese orchestra going.

The different types of attacks of each instrument and the widely different timbres make this possible without getting that organ effect. So in a pinch, when you need that sound, you'll be able to play in whole sections very convincingly. When I did this of course, I couldn't help but play Kung Fu panda type themes. Very fun.

To sum up, the main parts of this library are excellent indeed. The Drums menus make programming drums a breeze. Mapped out across the keyboard you can bang out drums parts in one go. And it all sounds good. The melodic instruments take a little getting use to, but it only takes a couple of passes to figure out each patch. I really liked all the instruments, some are harsh at first, but once you put a delay and some reverb, those instruments fit into a modern production very nicely.

I almost hate to mention anything negative, because there is so much to like about Chinee Orchestra, but it does have a few shortcomings.

Some of the patches don't fully function as they should, and some of the keyswitch patches aren't fully programmed leading to some pretty odd results. I'd also like to see better portamento implementation especially on the solo strings. But, these are things that Kong Audio is working to improve upon. They have a passion for accurately sampling the instruments of China and I'm sure they won't stop improving on the great work they've already done.

All in all, the expressiveness of the sampling and the ease of use make Chinee Orchestra a really, really nice instrument to have to hand.

This article was previously published at SonicControl.tv