

Storm Drum 2: Part 2

By Peter Lawrence Alexander / August 10, 2008



In the past week, I've had more time to work with *Storm Drum 2*. As a general comment, people coming into my studio are mightily impressed with the quality of sound EastWest has achieved in these recordings.

System Specs

Although I've covered this previously, I want to review a few points. First, regardless of the platform, you need 2GB of RAM if you're using the Instruments internally within a sequencing program. To take full advantage of what SD2 can do, or really any of the other PLAY libraries, you need 4GB or better.

On the Mac, you should run PLAY products in standalone mode using Soundflower. On the PC, there are issues with individual sequencing programs that are moving to 64bit. However, whether it's PLAY or the Vienna Instruments, issues are minimized when either of these programs are run on a separate farm system.

Given the impact of the Writer's strike (no bucks, no Buck Rogers as they say at NASA), composers today aren't flush with cash.

So what do you do?

Answering that question for myself, I came up with several answers. If you're on a Power PC G5, max out your motherboard to 8GB. In short, bloom where you are.

If you're buying a new PC system, you have two options. One is to get a system that handles up to 8GB of RAM. Depending on the source, that's \$2500 or so.

But in looking down the road, a more wise purchase is getting a motherboard that can handle 16GB to 32GB of RAM. For the PC, this means a server board.

Today, a reasonably priced server motherboard that handles up to 32GB is the Asus DSBF-D 5000P Dual-Core Xeon FBDIMM Video Dual Gigabit SATA 3Gb/s RAID with a street price of about \$475. Note: I'm not endorsing this board because I haven't tested it. I call it to your attention for price point only.

This Asus motherboard has eight slots. That means it can be either 6GB or 24GB depending on how you configure the RAM. There's dual channel (for up to 16GB) and quad channel for 32GB. To plan ahead for 32GB, you need two (2) 4GB RAM sticks to start off with 8GB of RAM, which is about \$600 street price. You can get a Dual Core Xeon for about \$275.

Right here you're at \$1350US plus the case and drives. Video is on the motherboard which is OK for a farm system.

If you plan your system this way, then as the number of PLAY products expand, expand your RAM as needed.

Back to SD2

As I experimented in loading MIDI Performances it became clear that the experience of others is correct: inside Logic you run out of RAM. So, that just means you download the freeware program called Soundflower. It takes a little to grasp it. But it's not a hardship to download and install. So look at doing that to really maximize the opportunities of SD2 on the Mac.

How the SD2 Sounds Are Organized

There are seven categories of SD2 sounds each with one to several dozen mini-categories in each:

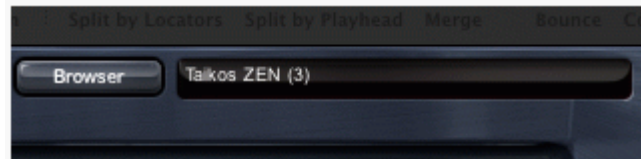
- Drumkit and Related
- Ethnic Drums
- Ethnic Metals
- MIDI Perf multis
- Sound Design Percussion
- Woods and Shakers
- Zendrum Programs

Setting Up

Setup is very similar to Kontakt in that in one instance you can have from one sound up to 16 loaded. (by comparison, VSL's Vienna Instruments player is modeled after the Logic EXS24 with one sound or performance per instance – two totally different concepts). I set up a three-instrument performance: Malaysian Djembe, Cajun Triangle, and Taiko.

Setting up Performance is easy as pie. In the Browser section of PLAY, click the sounds you want. For each new sound, click Add. Then you must assign them to a MIDI channel in the Player. This is a two-step procedure.

In the player, click on the window below and bring up the sound you just loaded. Once you've assigned the MIDI channels (see next paragraph and screenshot), you'll come to this drop down window to move between sounds and add effects.



Under Channel, make the MIDI Channel assignment. Now set up your sequencer accordingly.



Applying Reverb & Other Effects

For each MIDI channel/sound, you can assign individual reverb along with other effects. Also, you can turn on and off the Reverb, Stereo Spreader, Delay and Filter (which is a low pass band filter). Warning! Bring the volume down as you assign reverb in PLAY as some of the percussion sounds are so reverberant that I can see the cones on the KRK VXT8s bulge out!

Nick Phoenix said in the tutorials that he thought the Impulse Responses for the included convolution reverb were very good. He's right. They are. And you get very, very practical IRs that have a very clean sound.

I also want to clarify about why some of the effects are labeled L, R or LR.

Said EastWest's Jonathan Kranz, "Basically the responses that have L, R, and LR settings pertain to where in the space that IR is recorded (from the player's perspective). The L is an IR taken from the left side of the space, the R from the right side, and the LR is the center. Note that these swap when playing back (because it is the player's perspective). This gives the user that much more ability to place the instruments in the mix where they want them spatially, with realistic impulses from that part of the space."

Delay

The delay is very good. But I have a minor criticism here of the controls for both delay and reverb. You have knobs to make changes but no numeric calibration to tell you what the settings are. It's all by feel. With reverb, that's OK to a point, but given the mathematics behind delay, you need more. So if you want delay, experiment here, but consider using the digital delay in your main program for more finesse.

Stereo Spread

For this I'm quoting from the manual, "The knob in this set of controls affects the apparent width of the sound of the instrument within the soundscape. Turning the knob all the way to the left makes the sound seem to come from a specific location as indicated by the Pan control. The more this knob is turned to the right, the wider the apparent source of the sound, making it harder to pinpoint in the stereo field. The Left and Right buttons specify the source of the input for this control, the left or right channel. Note that by clicking the button that is on, you can turn it off, which means that neither channel is selected."



Sensitivity (see earlier screenshot)

Says the manual, "This control defines a mapping between the velocity of the MIDI notes and the velocity of the notes that sound. Being able to control the sensitivity is primarily useful when playing live, for example on a keyboard, drum pad, or Zendrum."

"Suppose you want to use mostly percussion sounds at the high end of the velocity range (maybe 80 to 120, out of 127) for some instrument, but find it difficult to play the keyboard in a way that lets you consistently play the sounds you want. Drag up with the mouse over the Sensitivity graph so the graph looks like the picture at the left. A medium touch on the keyboard sounds louder than it would otherwise and a wider range of touches will all generate sounds in the louder range you want. Conversely, drag the graph downward to gain more control over the lower half of the velocity range."

Lack of Programming Features

Some on the various forums have criticized that PLAY does not have all the programming editing controls they'd like to see.

In working with what's here, I think you have to keep in perspective that EastWest has focused on the four most important features: the sound, the selection, the reverb, and ease of use. Those are the four most important quality control points and they did them all outstandingly, if there is such a word.

Special Note: MIDI Performances and Logic

If you're sequencing in Logic, to bring in a MIDI Performance, just drag and drop it in place. Don't Open or Import. If you do, Logic assigns GarageBand instruments to each track of the MIDI Performance. Dragging and Dropping lets you bypass that.

Conclusion

If you're doing Film/TV work, ya gotta have it. The sounds are really that amazing.

This article was previously published at the SonicControl website.