

Yamaha DTX Multi 12 Redux—Scott Holder

We reviewed the Multi 12 in January 2010 so the focus this time will be on ease of use, playability and how the capabilities of the unit translate into what most edrummers generally want in a percussion pad.

Out of the box, the Multi 12 has a fantastic array of percussive voices bundled into 50 preset kits, most of which are aimed at hand drumming or percussion work. All sound wonderful, thus, if you're looking to expand both a live and studio percussion repertoire, this unit delivers. We particularly liked a couple of kits that featured tympanis tuned to various notes: you literally have an orchestra at your finger or stick tips. It has, by far, the most tweakable effects, all bundled into a number of presets.

Another plus are the patterns, of course this depends on whether or not you actually use or need preset patterns. Nonetheless, within 15 minutes I was integrating hand beats to the preset conga patterns on that kit. Then I switched to Kit 22, "Traxmaster!" and it's a wonder I ever dragged myself away. You can literally create and perform techno, dance beats all with your hands on the Multi 12. They can be controlled via a foot switch or turned on and off via a tap on the pad. As an edrummer and not a percussionist, I got sucked into many of these percussion kits and what they could do turned out to be very, very addictive!

The 2-4 preset kits that approximate a "regular drum kit" are just okay. This is not unusual given that no manufacturer seems to put any effort into setting up good preset drum kits for any of their modules. Yamaha is no different in that they did not do this on the older DTX III or the newer DTX 950. The raw materials are there but it's up to the user to create a nice kit, a very daunting task. However, Yamaha has created 20 user drum kits available for free download:

http://download.yamaha.com/search/product/?category_id1=16244&category_id2=16392&product_id=1048808

These range from jazz to vintage to rock and come complete with layered samples for many of the voices. These are fantastic kits that will make you think twice about using the Multi 12 as a mere MIDI controller. In fact, with all of these kits, it's now tempting to take a module and use it as the MIDI controller for the Multi 12. So I did by hooking up my Roland TD-12 and was very pleased. Everything worked immediately except the HH. As we've said many times before, HH rigs tend to work best when paired with their manufacturer's module. Further below, we'll discuss how to fit a square peg into a round HH hole and the mixed results we obtained.

As a MIDI controller, you can change virtually every setting possible to the extent that it will overwhelm the MIDI newbie. Nevertheless, it was plug and play when hooked up to EZ Drummer or my Roland TD-12. As we noted in the earlier review, using the Multi 12 as a mere MIDI controller under represents the capabilities of the unit. That being said, when plugged into EZ Drummer and you select one of the preset kits on the Multi 12, then strike a pad with an assigned, preset pattern (it's associated with the preset kit), the resulting drum track on EZ Drummer is something to envy. Thus, if you want some very nice drum tracks and don't have a drummer handy, or in my case, a drummer who might take a year to learn that track, this is very powerful.

Yamaha touts the unit's layering capability (something built into Yamaha's "Motif" family which you'll also find in older DTX III and new DTX 950 drum modules). In fact, the drum kits available for free from Yamaha feature several voices that are layered. For example, snares consist of two layers. You can setup a pad with 4 layers and the possibilities of what you can do are endless. If you want to play three notes simultaneously to create a chord, you can. If you want to have successive notes played by tapping the pad, you can. Something more basic would be a percussive voice, think of one that goes "click" and the other that goes "clack". Assign the layers to one pad and you're set. The biggest downside to layering is simply learning how. The manual does not make this easy and there's nothing close to a quick, step-by-step guide on how to do it. We have instructions posted separately on the web site if you're interested.

The sequencer is straight forward in that you can record and store up to 50 of your own patterns. You can quantize the pattern, set a tempo and audible metronome (click) to play to.

If you need a unit that can store a variety of sampled sounds for one-shot or looping, the Multi 12 works quite well. The storage limitations (64mb) means you won't load a multi-layered kit built around your own samples onto the Multi 12. Nonetheless, sample importation is easy once you realize that you can only import 16bit/44.1kHz samples.

The unit is compact and yet, the six main pads don't feel small. The six "bar" pads (or "ridge/edge/rim" pads as we termed them in the initial review) are nicely placed. In fact, the ergonomics of 12 pads in something this compact is very impressive. The tiered structure makes for incredibly easy playing be it with stick tips, stick shanks or your hands.

The pads are different in that they are soft-ish and take into account the hand percussionist as much as the drummer. By "soft-ish" we don't mean overly cushy like cymbal mutes but nothing like a hard rubber pad. Their bounce was on par with the Pinteck cymbals we reviewed (<http://www.digitaldrummermag.com/Cymbal%20noise%20detailed%20results.pdf>). The pads are fine for stick hits for things like cowbell, etc. It just takes some effort and change in technique in order to get fast rolls and even then, if you're used to the bounce of mesh and move over to these pads, you're in for a shock.

That being said, the pads do a credible job with nuanced stick hits, cymbal swells and snare hits, for example, both for the preset kits and the imported kits have positional sensing characteristics (modified by using the "Input gain" setting). You can also work on pad sensitivity and change the pad's "trigger setup": the Multi 12 has 5 settings, three related to stick play, one to hand play and one to finger play. We found that the stock hand play and finger play settings worked fine but when it comes to trying extensive stick work, all five basic settings with subsequent modifications on the pad setup helped somewhat with flams and rolls. It's not what you'd find on harder pads but again, trying to make a pad that's easy on the hands while being perfectly responsive to stick action is impossible.

The effective "strike area" on the larger pads in the center does not extend out as far as either the Alesis Perc/Sample Pads but again, that can be changed by playing with the settings. Unlike the Alesis Performance Pad, the effective strike area wasn't restrictive even with stock settings. Pad settings are

done on a by-kit basis. One final note: the sound triggered by a pad strike is truncated if you then immediately switch to another kit.

As mentioned in the original review, the three external trigger connections are universal: I plugged in Roland, Yamaha, Kit Toys, Hart, Concept 1 and Alesis pads and all worked without a hitch. The foot switch input was also pretty adaptable to my HOSA switch and even my Hart Epedal Pro II HH pedal. However, the actual HH control input pretty much requires a Yamaha pedal in order to work. One way to get around this is take another module using it as the MIDI controller and the Multi 12 as the external sound module. However, it's an imperfect solution and fairly complicated in that getting all the MIDI note assignments to the proper part of the HH, ie., HHOpen, HHClosed and so on. Or you can mess with it on the module side, in my case tweaking the always-confusing Percussion Pattern area of my TD-12. It's far easier and more reliable to simply stick with the HH brand of the module. Still, the temptation to use the Multi 12 as an ultra-portable edrum rig is tempting given the overall number of pads/triggers that it accommodates.

The button-driven Interface and navigation is okay: a limited interface for a fairly complicated device is by far the weakest part of the unit. The button sequence in many places is cumbersome and you need to plow thru many layers with an arrow button to get to a particular destination, again, it just doesn't seem to be as easy to navigate as the other multipads and many edrum modules. The manual could be better if it provided some clearer step-by-step examples. For example, when trying to figure out Layering, you had to puzzle out the instructions on page 34 but then be aware of a couple of frustrating configuration "gotchas" that are only stated in a footnote section on page 63. It makes for a steeper-than-desired learning curve when trying to unlock the Multi 12's numerous features.

There's a ton of "gee whiz" capabilities in the Multi 12, how many of them you need obviously depends on what you do. One thing it shares in common with the more expensive multipads and high end edrum modules is complexity. Yes, there are plenty of things these units do right out of the box but the nuances of what they can do can literally take a year to figure out. And there might be one really specific thing that's life or death to what you want to do and it's impossible to know or document those for a review like this. In that regard, the Multi 12 is no different than Roland's SPD-30 and SPD-SX.

So You Want to Use Samples. Alan Parsons Speaks.

Alan's best known for his work with Pink Floyd and along with co-founder Eric Woolfson, the Alan Parsons Project. Back in the late 70s and early 80s when the Project produced a string of elaborate and intricate albums, the band didn't tour precisely because Alan wanted to bring that elaborate sound to the stage and it just wasn't possible. By the mid-90s, that had changed. Alan's toured since then using a variety of Yamaha Motif synthesizers. Given the commonality of capability of the Motif and the Multi 12, we asked Alan what he used live and how since that might help anybody thinking about integrating samples into a live show.

DD: What samples do you load into the Motif for a Live Project show? For example, we know you use a backing track for "Games People Play".

AP: I load probably a dozen or so samples and loops as PATTERNS into the Motif for each show from a USB stick. I still ask for an ES on our rider but the XS and XF work well too. As soon as the XF is readily available from backline rental companies I will start specifying it. One difficulty is that no one sells low capacity USB drives any more so I can't make a backup or modify files without erasing the old one until I can find a 2 gig or less drive which is all the ES will recognize!

DD: Are these samples looped in any way? Are they one shots (ie, single sounds like an explosion or glass breaking as generic examples)? Are these samples short length (4-16 measures) bits that are triggered once then play out until finished? Do you use a sample that is turned on and off at different points during a song?

AP: All the loops are recorded into the Motif as continuous audio, even though some of them could be 2 bar sections looped in the Motif. I just found it easier to do that way and it doesn't take much memory space. The sirens for 'Psychobabble' are simply played out as audio, as is the orchestra intros for 'Damned If I Do' and 'Old And Wise'.

DD: How about layering? The Motif/Multi 12 have the capability to assign different sounds to a single key/pad and play them in a variety of ways. Does any of that enter into a Live Project show?

AP: I have other sounds saved as part of a PATTERN that includes the samples or loops which are played together. [I do] no other "layering" of multiple samples.