

SOUNDLAB

Yamaha DTXtreme III Special

By Norman Weinberg

I enjoy being around luxury. I can't always afford it, but when I feel that I deserve it, it's time to splurge. It may cost a little more, but I won't go to a movie theater that doesn't have stadium seating and the very hippest digital sound system. I enjoy a great steak dinner at a fine restaurant to celebrate my birthday. And I really like drums. Great drums! Especially really great electronic drums! It may be time to splurge again.

The chance to review Yamaha's new flagship kit, the DTXtreme III Special was a no-brainer. The last great advance in high-end kits from Yamaha came with the DTXtreme II. What a difference four years makes. I saw the kit at NAMM and knew that it was going to up the ante in Yamaha's electronic-drumming stable. It has a totally new rack, some new pads, and a fully redesigned brain. So let's dive in and see what's up.

THE RACK

Those of you who have read my previous electronic kit reviews know that I'm not a huge fan of rack systems. Being an old-school, one-drum-on-one-stand kind of a guy, I always seem to have trouble getting the drums and cymbals to sit exactly where I want them. The HXR4LD has changed my mind. Without question, this is the most flexible electronic drum-mounting platform I've ever tested.

Absolutely rock solid, this hex-style, all-metal system looks and feels as if it was designed by the same folks at Yamaha who make

350HP outboard motors. Come to think of it, maybe it was. Once you've set the rack up, it's actually very easy to make any type of adjustment: the angle and direction of the toms, the spacing between the toms, the spread between the snare and the floor tom mounting arm, and even the angle and tilt of the brain. And, once you've put everything where you want it and give the wing nuts a finger-tight twist, nothing's going to move on you. *Nothing.* This rack isn't designed to quickly fold up and move to your buddy's house for some half-baked jam session. It's an advanced piece of machinery. That being said, it's not any more time consuming to break down and set up than a traditional kit with several heavy-duty drum and cymbal stands.

The snare drum stand, hi-hat stand, and bass drum pad are free standing, so the rack doesn't have to support any of those items. In many ways, this is a blessing rather than a curse. The bass drum pad was totally stable both on a hard floor using the rubber feet on the support spurs, or on carpeting using the spurs' metal points. All of the cymbal posts are booms. A longer CH755 model and two shorter CH750s are included, making just about any cymbal configuration possible.

THE PADS

Speaking of cymbals, the DTXtreme III comes with Yamaha's new cymbal pads. The two crash pads are the 13" PCY135 models, and the ride is the 15" PCY155. All three use the same system that Yamaha has been using for years in order to keep the position of the

pad stable without turning on the stand. It's a good, reliable method that works just fine. The new pads have a great natural feel and just the right amount of "swing" after the stroke. I had zero adjustment to make with my touch.

These pads are as versatile as anything on the market. Plus, they all have three distinct zones rather than two. In tandem with the DTXtreme brain, both models will fire independent voices on the edge, bow, and bell of the pad. Grabbing the edge after a stroke will choke the sound, and playing the pad while holding the edge section produces yet another sound that Yamaha calls "mute." And, Yamaha has been able to do all this with a single stereo cable. Very impressive indeed.

There's nothing new on the drum pad side of things. The TP100 tom pad and the TP120SD



PURE DIGITAL
INDULGENCE

snare pad were first introduced in Yamaha's DTXtreme II around four years ago. If you're not familiar with this pad, here's a brief description. Yamaha uses rubber pads rather than the mesh heads of its major competitor. The construction of these pads is both rugged and solid, with a very substantial feel. The main playing surface sort of "floats" to give the feel of an acoustic head, and the rim surface (as you might expect) is significantly harder to better approximate the feel of a metal edge. The drum pads are also three-zone pads, offering surface, rimshot, and cross-stick sounds.

I like the feel of these pads. They are responsive without getting mushy, and they track like a dream. I had no problem getting a very soft buzz roll to sound clear and clean. Plus, there is zero crosstalk between the head and the rim surfaces. I assigned a snare to the pad and a cymbal to the rim, making any crosstalk obvious. Even when slamming the pad with full force, there is no bleed between the triggers. However, there were some minor crosstalk issues between the toms that share the same suspension bar, such as the two mounted toms and the two floor toms. Keep in mind that this crosstalk was due to vibrations moving through the rack, not within the pad. With all the advanced features of the DTXtreme III brain, however, clearing up this crosstalk issue was pretty easy.

The most interesting feature of these pads is the control function knob. On the snare, the factory kits often use it to engage or disengage the snares, while the toms use the knob to adjust tuning. When you're designing your own kits, you can have the knob do a number of different things so that you can make tweaks to the sound without having to go back into the edit modes in the brain. In fact, you can even assign three different sounds to a pad in the "snares on" setting, and a separate set of three sounds in the "snares off" setting. How cool is that?

The KP125 kick pad is a huge improvement over Yamaha's older KP65. Not only is the playing surface larger to better accommodate

DETAILS

MODEL DTXtreme III Special Electronic Drum Set

LIST PRICE \$5,299.99

GEAR

Brain: DTXT3
Rack: HXR4LD
Pads: 1 - PCY155 3-Zone Cymbal Pad
 2 - PCY135 3-Zone Cymbal Pads
 1 - RHH135 2-Zone Hi-Hat Pad
 1 - TP120SD 3-Zone Pad
 4 - TP100 3-Zone Pads
 1 - KP125 Kick Pad
Hardware: 1 - CH755 Cymbal Holder
 2 - CH750 Cymbal Holders
 1 - SS662 Snare Stand
 1 - HS740A Hi-Hat Stand
 All necessary cables and manuals

FEATURES

Drum Pads: Three-zone

Cymbal Pads: Three-zone
 Tone Generator: AWM2
 Polyphony: 64 notes
 Voices: 1,115 drum; 211 melody
 Kits: 50 Preset, 50 User, 1584 stored off-line
 Songs: Demo: 3 songs, Practice: 44 songs, Pad song: 40 songs, User: 50 songs
 Effects: 9 Reverb, 19 Chorus, 51 Variation, 51 Insertion, 9 Master, 5-band EQ
 Sample Time: 44.1kHz: 6 min. 20 sec., 22.05kHz: 12 min. 40 sec.
 Sample Length: Mono: 32MB, Stereo: 64MB

CONTACT

Yamaha Drums
 714-522-9011
 yamahadrum.com

a double pedal, the entire system is much more physically stable. The feel of this pad is also better than the previous version. Not too soft and not too hard, the KP125's surface feels just about right for a bass drum head in terms of give in the playing surface and responsiveness of dynamic contrast. While some

drum companies don't give too much thought to the response of a bass drum trigger, it's an integral part of a player's feel and groove. This one seemed to catch the spirit. If you want to use dual bass drums rather than a double pedal, the KP125 is ready to respond. An input jack reads the signal from any external trigger and keeps it unique from its own signal. This way, you can control two different sounds through the brain's single kick drum trigger input.

The RHH135 hi-hat pad fits on a normal acoustic hi-hat stand. The unit consists of two parts: a pressure-sensitive bottom plate and the top cymbal pad. As is typical for hi-hat pads, this one requires two cables. One is connected to the hi-hat pad input in the brain, and the other connects to the hi-hat controller input. In conjunction with the brain, the hi-hat system responds to open and closed notes played on the bow and the edge of



the plate. It also reads foot-closed notes as well as foot splashes. As a hi-hat must be, this one is responsive and natural feeling.

When playing the DTXtreme III, the acoustic volume of the kit is about the same as playing on "real-feel" pads — maybe just a tad more. It's not as quiet as a mesh surface, but it's not nearly as loud as a Remo-style pad. Even in an apartment, I can't see how playing on this kit would disturb the neighbors.

THE BRAIN

From the very first look, you can see how the DTXtreme's brain has matured. The face of the brain is full of buttons and sliders, but it's laid out in a manner that is both ergonomically and functionally organized. The center of the brain contains a large 240 x 64 dot graphic LCD display that serves as your window into the machine's operation.

To the left of the display are eight mode buttons (Yamaha-speak for the editing areas such as kit, song, click, trigger, file utility, chain, and sampling). Below the LCD are six dedicated soft-function buttons that select operations within a mode and six dedicated soft-sub-function buttons. While this might sound a little confusing, it's really quite simple: call up the mode; call up the function; call up the sub-function; and you're pretty deep inside the machine with very few clicks. The bottom-left of the machine is where you'll find the transport and click controls. The bottom-right contains a large data wheel, up/down/left/right

buttons, and buttons for increment, decrement, enter, and exit. The whole thing is clear, clean, and functional.

The module has plenty of input and output jacks for all your connectivity needs. There are 15 trigger inputs. Each one, except the kick drum, accepts a standard stereo phone jack to accept trigger signals from the head, rim, and cross-stick

on a single cable. The bass drum input jack will also accept a stereo signal, but it's naturally doubled as two separate triggers (for double bass drum performance) rather than head/rim. There's also a dedicated hi-hat control input. In total, this gives you the chance to include all the surfaces in the entire kit and add four additional stereo triggers.

Of special note is the input jack labeled "aux in/sampling in." This jack also accepts a stereo signal and is used for mixing the sound from an auxiliary audio device, such as a CD player, computer, iPod, or DVD player, into the main mix. It's also the jack you'll use to sample sounds and put them into the brain of the DTXtreme.

Outputs include the obligatory main left/right (stereo with a mono signal merged to the left-side output), and a headphone jack, as well as six assignable, individual outputs. If you run



digital in the studio or the stadium, you'll appreciate the included S/P DIF jack. The back panel also includes a MIDI-In and a MIDI-Out jack so you can connect the brain to another MIDI device or use the brain as an external drum module for a computer-based sequencer or keyboard. There are also two USB jacks on the DTXtreme III. One is labeled "to device" and the other is labeled "to host." More on these USB jacks soon.

In terms of kits, there are 50 faculty preset kits and 50 user kits. The preset kits include plenty of Yamaha's acoustic kits, such as Oak, Maple, Birch, and Beech Custom Absolute, along with a pretty complete selection of percussion, electronic, and ethnic-sounding kits. With so many at your disposal, you shouldn't have any problems getting through any gig or recording session with options to spare.

The kit's module is chock full of great sounds, and many of them are brand new to the DTXtreme library. All sounds are 16-bit PCM format, and there are more than 1,100 drum and percussion voices along with 211 melodic sounds that can be used for playing backing tracks, sequencing, and even assigned to pads for melodic drumming. If you're familiar with the sound set from the DTXtreme

II, you'll immediately hear the difference in quality. The drums are powerful, the cymbals are stunning, and the percussion voices have an air of authenticity that was missing before. You'll also hear a huge improvement in the melodic sounds. While the previous module's offerings were somewhat cheesy, this is anything but. The module has a polyphony of 64 notes (which means they can all sound simultaneously), so even the fastest snare and tom fills won't steal decay from your cymbals.

Editing kits and voices is now much easier with graphic information displayed on the LCD along with the function and sub-function buttons. This machine is pretty deep, and you'll benefit from going through the manual. But, once you understand how to get to each of the parameters, programming is pretty straightforward. Rather than go through a list of available editing possibilities here, suffice it to say that the DTXtreme III has all the necessary adjustments for even the most ardent tweaker.

The faders on the DTXtreme III serve as a mini mixing board. There's a master fader that controls the output of the stereo mix, and a headphones fader to adjust this volume independent of the main mix. There's a fader to con-

trol the volume of the click, and one to control the output of the "accompaniment." The accompaniment is Yamaha's term for all the sounds that are not assigned to MIDI channel 10 in song playback. In other words, anything that's "not drums."

For the kit itself, there are faders for the kick, snare, toms, cymbals, hi-hat, and miscellaneous voices. This is a well-designed system, as these instruments would often be sub-mixed in a studio setting. However, if you don't like the assignments, you can override them and have any pad routed to any fader.

The DTXtreme III comes with a huge selection of audio effects. There's reverb, chorus, and something Yamaha calls "variation." Don't let these broad classifications lead you to believe that the choices are simple and one-dimensional. The variation block includes compressors, harmonic enhancers, lo-fi and other audio degradation effects, flangers and phasers, and distortion and wah effects. The reverb and chorus blocks contain even more fun house mirrors for your sounds: cross delay, stereo tempo delays, ring modulators, frequency isolators, talking modulators, and voice slicing. With each effect, there are a number of editing parameters. For example, calling up the rotary speaker emulation, there are controls for the volume balance between the horn and the rotor, and rotor/horn speed controls for both the fast and slow settings.

THE OUTSIDE WORLD

One important note concerning how the DTXtreme III deals with getting information in and out of the machine: Since all external files are stored in DIMM memory, everything is lost once you turn off the machine. For this reason, it's imperative that you grab yourself a USB thumb drive and format it for this machine. Now that large flash drive prices are falling through the floor, it's time to invest in a drive and fill it with all the great sounds and MIDI files that you can pull down from the Web, or create from other music software you own. You're

also going to need the required DIMM memory cards that hold this information in the brain, as it can't stream data directly off the USB drive. These DIMM cards are not included with the kit, but Yamaha sent two along for the review unit. To get the most from this machine, I recommend you purchase a set of DIMMs that fill up the available memory.

After popping a flash drive into my computer, it was only a matter of minutes before I grabbed some sound effects off the Web, captured some snazzy vocals from a brief iTunes demo, and created a nifty loop in Reason 4. It was actually a thrill to blow these voices into the DTXtreme and fire them from the pads. While nearly everyone interested in buying a kit like this will own their own computer, everyone may not have the necessary software to create the sounds they need. No problem, as the DTXtreme III has onboard sampling capability with pretty sophisticated editing.

With both DIMMs installed, the DTXtreme III will store up to 6:20 of CD-quality stereo audio at 44.1kHz. If you need more sampling time, you'll have to lower the sampling frequency. But, for many types of drum and percussion sounds, a lower sampling rate isn't a huge sacrifice. In addition to sampling sounds from a microphone or a line-level signal, you can resample the signal coming from the DTXtreme's output. Once you've created your sample, you can trim the start and stop points and even reverse the sound or create a loop. Other sampling features of the DTXtreme III include normalizing, time stretching, and changing the pitch.

But wait, there's more. Download the USB driver from Yamaha and plug the DTXtreme III directly into your computer! If you want to use this brain to fire voices and kits from any software program such as Reason, BFD, Superior, Ocean Way, Evolve, or whatever, you're good to go. While you can do this with just about any drum brain by using a MIDI interface attached to your computer, the DTXtreme III does it without any additional necessary hardware

— just the brain's USB out to the computer's USB in. As a bonus, USB is typically faster than MIDI, so lag time and latency may be better with this system than with any other. If you really want to have some fun, take the audio output of your computer back into the DTXtreme III's aux input, and you'll be able to blend onboard sounds with the computer's sounds. And, in case you're wondering, yes, this is the only high-end kit that has the ability to send its MIDI messages out through USB.

EXTRA BELLS & WHISTLES

For those of you who might be thinking about using the DTXtreme III as an advanced MIDI controller or for "textural drumming," you're in luck. The brain allows for an alternate of up to 100 events, each with its own MIDI channel, note number, and gate time between 0.0 and 9.9 seconds. If you want to use percussion sounds exclusively, or mix and match with other instrumental voices, you can

do it. You can even mix stacks and alternates together. For example, the first strike of the pad can fire three events, the second stroke can fire three different events, and so on. If your creative sparks are starting a brushfire, I understand.

Yamaha's DTX series has long included a number of features that can be used as important educational tools, and this new incarnation is no exception. There are plenty of play-along songs in a number of different styles such

as funk, rock, shuffle, pop, dance, jazz, bossa nova, reggae, and even second line. Using the volume faders, you can drop out the drums to play along or drop out all the other instruments to study the drumming that fits the style. If you need more practice songs, you can roll your own as there's room for 50 additional user songs in the brain. There's a sophisticated metronome, and Yamaha's well-known and sometimes humiliating "groove-check" feature. For your

own creations, there's a two-track sequencer that can be used to record drum tracks with or without the play-along songs.

Yamaha should be congratulated for offering a great user web site at dtxperience.com. From this site, you can download new MIDI songs and samples, and take part in forums specific to this instrument. Other Yamaha sites offer video tutorials for using the kit from basic setup to voice editing. **■**

VERDICT

One of the important features that I haven't yet mentioned is the speed of the system and the way the entire kit felt under my hands. The triggers all have lightening-fast response, and playing the kit while listening through phones made me feel totally at one with the instrument. I can't ask for much more than that. Closing my eyes, I felt that I was in a high-end studio hearing my drums through a well-equipped recording console manned by a world-class engineer.

With all the great onboard sounds and the unlimited flexibility of sampling and loading in new sounds and songs, this unit won't show its age for

a good long time. In fact, if you own high-quality music software on your computer, this machine will never sound old or out of date.

But, alas, nothing is ever totally perfect. In a perfect world, the USB drive and all the sampling and storage memory would be included. In a perfect world, I wouldn't lose my customized information when the machine shuts down. Even though there is an "auto-load" feature that takes care of the process for you, it's a little bit of a hassle. Honestly, folks, when looking for faults on this machine you've got to look really hard and you've got to get pretty picky. It's just that good.

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