

Scarbee Imperial Drums XL

This remarkably detailed 11-DVD, 48GB drumset library has both ready-to-play GM kits and totally unprocessed multi-mic kits that you mix as if the tracks had been recorded with a live drummer



Review by Nick Batzdorf

Scarbee Imperial Drums XL,
\$299

Sonic Network (Sonic Implants), 561 Windsor St. Ste. A402, Somerville, MA 02143. 617/718-0202, 888/577-9629. www.SonicImplants.com

Formats: Steinberg HALion Player, runs on Mac OS X and Windows XP—VSTi, Dxi, Audio Units, stand-alone with ReWire

Copy protection: USB dongle (Syncrosoft).

Considering that the hi-hats alone have as many as 2712 samples, it might be fair to say that Scarbee Imperial Drums XL is a detailed library. Actually, it's one of the most sophisticated and meticulously sampled libraries of any instrument.

SID XL is producer Simone Coen's updated version of the original SID. But at 48GB it's a few times the size, it adds several additional drums to choose from (each captured by 50 billion samples), as well as more features than you can shake a drum stick at—or brushes, rods, mallets, or any other one of the dozen weapons played by drummer Elio Rivagli.

SID XL comes in a disk-streaming Steinberg HALion player. Rather than loops or grooves, this is a library of individual hits for you to play/program. However it does come with a huge selection of great MIDI files from Rivagli. Those are well worth checking out for ideas even if you don't use them.

The concept

SID XL has samples of a large variety of drums, including a DW kit with two different bass drums, four toms, DW and Ludwig snares, a Yamaha snare, Remo Rototoms, both 13" and 14" hi-hats, all kinds and sizes of cymbals including China and sizzle rides, Ludwig Vistalite toms and bass drums...again, all struck with a myriad of different sticks and tools.

There are a few ways to use SID XL. The simplest is just to load ready-to-wear,

processed programs into available slots on the HALion player and put together a kit.

("Programs" are individual drums; "Banks" are complete kits.) There's a gigantic variety of different sounds, from the barely-processed to electronic-sounding.

But the pièce de résistance is the roll-your-own, completely unprocessed Multimic Drums. The idea is that you get to mix the individual drums yourself, just as if they'd been recorded at an actual studio session. Extensive mic positions are available—inside and outside the bass drums, underneath and on top of the snares, overheads, and so on.

The drums were recorded superbly well in a nice-sounding room, always in their real position so you get sympathetic resonances from the rest of the kit. You can add reverb if you want more thunder, and if the room is too small you can combine the recorded early reflections with the tail from an external reverb unit. And of course you can combine processed and unprocessed drums in a kit.

All this is in addition to the controls programmed into the HALion player. Please refer to the screen dump. Each Program (i.e. each drum instrument) in a kit brings up different parameters to the onscreen knobs above the keyboard.

In this case, a lower-memory (L) version of the DW wood snare is selected; you can adjust the overhead mic volume, ambience level, top and bottom head mic volumes, release time (you can "gate" the snare with the DCA—digitally-controlled amplifier), and then you can tune the instrument. If we were to select the bass drum, the parameters would include levels for mics inside and outside the bass drum, bleed into the snare mic, and so on.

In addition to being completely flexible, this is a great practice tool for improving your mixing skills, in fact it would be ideal for production courses. Furthermore, the PDF manual includes an excellent tutorial on mixing drums. It's succinct—only a few pages—but it's actually more insightful than anything else I've read on the subject.

There two kinds of mappings in the library: "95% GM-compatible" ones, designed to work with Roland V-Drums; and the library's own more advanced mappings. The latter are intended to be played from a MIDI keyboard,

which of course has dozens of keys rather than just a few pads.

SID XL's own mapping takes advantage of keyswitches, MIDI controllers, sustain pedal and mod wheel cymbal-choking, and spread-out instruments that couldn't fit into the GM standard. For example, snare ghost notes are on their own keys. Also, the mod wheel is used to move the stick closer to the center of various cymbals and hi-hats; different wheel positions have their own complete set of velocity layers at different cymbal locations. (That's how Coen was able to get the reported 2712 hi-hat samples on just two keys; I promise I didn't count them.)

The GM mappings use sample alternation to avoid repeating the same samples, while the standard mappings have so many samples that this is unnecessary—you won't hit the same one twice.

The player #1

As we discuss the features of this library, it's important to mention the most important one: Elio Rivagli's control and ability to play such a huge number of different velocities on each drum. That—one assumes along with his creative input into what to record with what weapons—is what makes SID XL capable of so much subtlety.

Even though MIDI has 128 discrete velocity values in its spec, this aspect of the library is actually ahead of most if not all MIDI con-

trollers' ability to take advantage of it. For this review I used a weighted Kurzweil K2500 keyboard and an Alesis Photon X25 unweighted keyboard, but unfortunately not Roland V-Drums, which one would expect to fare considerably better. Still, it's good the library has the overhead to capture the most response your controller has to offer.

The huge number of velocities in SID XL also allows you to get a lot of different sounds out of the drum instruments, which makes them fit different contexts. One of the first surprises for me was that the most powerful, resonant sound you can get out of a bass drum is several notches below the maximum velocity.

The player #2

Once installed, the HALion player has been solid. Its streaming performance is fine, and it has some nice features. One of these features is RAM Save, which listens to your sequenced drum part and unloads all the samples that weren't triggered to save memory. Given that the full-memory kits can easily take up 250MB, that's very useful.

But alack, the praise comes with a caveat.

Now, I've installed other HALion players and Syncrosoft dongle-protected software on Windows XP machines with absolutely no problem.

However, installing this one on the Mac G5 used for this review was not smooth sailing.

Whether that was entirely due to bugs in the Syncrosoft system or to the player itself is hard to say, but I'd actually thrown in the towel and reviewed the library in the full version of HALion (which did install properly, to compound all the mystery); it was only a few days before we went to press that I was able to get the player to work without simply crashing on launch. Hopefully that coincided with the latest version of the Syncrosoft and/or the HALion player software, but I can't really explain why it decided to work all of a sudden.

It's a testament to how great this library is that I'd still recommend it to G5 users in spite of that.

Unbeatable drums

After playing SID XL for just a few minutes, some excellent drum libraries pale by comparison. Subjectively, the biggest difference with SID XL is the cymbals, which are usually the instrument that gives it all away. But you just play these cymbals while moving the mod wheel to vary the stick position, and they sound amazingly realistic.

The last Scarbee library we reviewed was his Vintage Keys Gold bundle (9-10/05), about which I commented that this is what sampling technology is all about. Scarbee Imperial Drums XL is in the same league. At \$300 it's a no-brainer. **vi**

The Slamming "New York Drum Sound"

random
tip

Nobody knows why it's called the New York drum sound, but there's an old engineering trick that will make drums of all kind (drum kits, taikos, congas...anything) sound like they're being slammed by a huge gorilla as hard as he can. You can use it to get the pounding movie trailer percussion sound, or just to punch up percussive sounds in general.

Now, compressors are signal processors rather than effects, meaning that it's normal to route the entire signal through them rather than using them on a send-return path; they're intended to shape and control the dynamics of a signal (after all, they're essentially super-fast volume reducers). But you don't have to use them that way—you can combine a drastically compressed version of the original back in with itself. The source track retains its dynamics, while the compressed track adds slam.

There are no painting-by-the-numbers compression settings for this or any other trick. But in broad strokes, you probably want the compressor to have a moderate attack time (maybe 100 milliseconds as a starting point) so the transient gets through.

The release time depends on the drum and what you're trying to achieve. A relatively fast release time will give you a "pssht" sustained sound, for example, but you really have to play around with the settings.

If your compressor has hard and soft knee settings, pick the former. Soft knee means the gain reduction ramps up gradually as the signal approaches the threshold, but you want it to clamp down right away. Finally, the ratio should most likely be 4:1 or greater, meaning every 4dB over the threshold setting in results in 1dB out.

It's important that your DAW have delay compensation so that the compressed signal is in perfect sync with the source track. Most do, but if you don't have automatic delay compensation you'll have to bounce the tracks to disk and line them up manually...which is unfortunate, because you can't really hear the effect properly beforehand.

Taking the trick farther, you can set up multiple compression busses, each going to a separate track with an EQ in front of the compressor's sidechain input. Each track can then be tuned for a different frequency range and effect. The sidechain is an input that only goes to the compressor's detection "circuit"; the filtered signal is only being used to trigger the compression being applied to the regular drum signal. Because they're not all at the same level, different frequencies cause the compressor to react differently. It takes experimentation.

Just don't be shy—this is not intended to be a subtle trick.

