

SOUNDLAB

Alesis DM5 Pro Kit With Surge Cymbals

REAL
FEEL AT
A STEAL

By Norman Weinberg

So, you're in the market for an electronic kit. What exactly is it that draws you to one instrument over another? Could it be the sound—set included in the brain or the flexible programming options? Is the "feel" of the kit the most important factor? How about fast and accurate triggering? For some, a small footprint that will let the kit fit into a corner of a dorm room is a must. For others, the economy is forcing the price/performance ratio to the top of the list.

Since an electronic kit is a marriage of different systems, it's sometimes difficult to present a single overview or a single rating. Some aspects of a kit might be superior while others could fall short. It's likely that you won't find the kit that's a 100 percent perfect fit. That's why it's so important to get a grip on your individual priorities. The new Alesis DM5 Pro with Surge cymbals is one of those

kits that may be the perfect fit for a large portion of prospective buyers: Good, solid performance, low price, relatively small and quiet, and a much-improved feel on pads and cymbals.

HERITAGE

Alesis has been around for nearly 30 years. Since 1980, it has been creating products that have helped define the electronic-music and home-studio revolution. If you're old enough to remember the company's HR-16 drum machine (first produced in 1987), you know that Alesis has been consistently raising the bar of electronic percussion while keeping prices under control.

The DM5 brain has been around since 1995. That's an astonishing lifespan for a drum module. One can only assume that the reason for the DM5's longevity is that it's a good, solid machine. That's a fair assumption. Historically, the DM5 has been regarded for fast and accurate triggering, clean ergo-

nomie design, and sturdy construction. But don't let its age fool you. Today's version of the DM5 includes 18-bit sounds recorded at 48kHz. That's significantly better than CD-quality and a world apart from what was state of the art back in '95.

SOFTWARE

With more than 540 voices and 21 kits to choose from, you should be able to find and design sounds that will fit a variety of musical styles. It's thorny to classify sounds in a written review. I'd suggest you visit your local music store and give the sound-set a thorough perusal. According to Alesis, the voices include both classic proprietary sounds along with brand new ones. All of them are good, and some of them are very good.

In total, the DM5 Pro offers 94 different kicks, 116 snares, 70 toms, 33 hats, 35 other cymbals, 113 percussive voices, and 64 effects sounds. You'll have to decide for yourself if what's avail-

able will cover all your bases. If you're planning on using the DM5 Pro primarily for practice at home, you'll find scores of sounds that will serve you well.

The back of this one-space rack is full of ins and outs: twelve trigger inputs, footswitch input, left/right main outputs, and left/right aux outputs, along with MIDI in and MIDI out/thru. There's really not much more you could want—okay, maybe a USB port.

The front of the machine is simple and obvious. From left to right: headphone output, main volume, LCD display, large date wheel, and a series of dedicated editing buttons. From these buttons you store kits, activate the "note chase" feature, and edit voice, tuning, mix, output selection, external triggers, groups, and MIDI parameters.

The display is clean and very informative. The largest numbers indicate which of the 21 kits is currently being played. Other portions of the screen indicate the editing page you're on, the parameter name, the parameter value, which trigger is being recognized by the brain, and that trigger's gain level. If you have trouble programming this brain, chances are you're also staring at your VCR's perpetual 12:00 wink.

There are five different parameters that can be adjusted to fine-tune the pads and cymbals. Gain will adjust the signal strength

DETAILS

MODEL DM5 Pro Kit with Surge Cymbals

LIST PRICE \$999

FEATURES

PADS One snare pad (dual-trigger), three tom pads, one kick pad
CYMBALS One 16" ride (dual-trigger), one 13" crash, one 12" hi-hat
PEDALS Hi-hat controller

STANDS Rack-style stand
AUDIO OUTPUTS 4 (2 stereo pairs)

TRIGGER INPUT JACKS 12
TRIGGER ADJUSTMENTS Five parameters

DAC BIT RESOLUTION 18
SAMPLE RATE 48A/vk/Hz

SOUNDS 540-plus
POLYPHONY 16-voice
PANNING seven-position
KITS 21AS

MIDI JACKS In, Out/Thru
HEADPHONE JACK 1/4" TRS w/ variable gain
DATA INPUT Data knob, front-panel keypad

CONTACT

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of the triggers. If your softest strokes aren't triggering the sounds, increasing the gain should fix the problem. The DM5 comes with eight different velocity curves to better match the machine to your playing style. The Crosstalk adjustment is a suppression adjustment that is useful if playing one pad causes another to fire. Decay helps to prevent double triggering by adjusting which of the trigger spikes are actual strokes and which are secondary vibrations. The last adjustment, Noise, helps to control triggering that might be caused by external vibration — physical or sonic. With these controls, you should be able to get both the pads and the cymbals to feel good under

your hands. However, it's smart to remember that electronic drums are not acoustic drums and will not feel exactly the same. Expect to make some physical adjustments from your acoustic playing. Voice-editing parameters include selecting the voice from one of the eight families (kicks, snares, toms, hi-hats, cymbals, percussion, effects, and random). The pitch of each voice can be adjusted over a range of +3 semitones to -4 semitones. While that's not a huge range, it is adjustable in one-cent units. Each voice can have its own relative volume and be placed in any of seven stereo positions. You can also assign each voice to either the main or the aux outputs.

CYMBALS

If the DM5 is the brain of this kit, then the drum and cymbal pads are the body. The kit comes complete with five pads — snare, three toms, and kick. It also comes with a tubular rack system and a hi-hat-pedal controller. But the big news is the addition of the Surge cymbals: ride, crash, and hi-hat. If you're looking for a cymbal trigger that really feels like a cymbal, the Surge cymbals included with this kit may be the answer. Why? Because they are real cymbals. Alesis actually licensed its Surge cymbal technology from a company called Smartrigger. These instruments are genuine cymbals with a thin, clear acoustic dampening layer on their underside. When

you strike one of these cymbals, you feel the metal under your stick in a way that a rubber pad just can't match. The dampening material works very well to keep the acoustic sound to a minimum without adding a lot of weight that might affect movement.

In this kit, the cymbals include a 12" hi-hat, a 13" crash, and a 16" ride. These dimensions seem to be a compromise between a realistic cymbal size and a space-saving setup. I feel it's a good one, as the cymbals are large enough to give you the cymbal-playing experience without taking up a lot of space.

The trigger itself is a piezo-style device in a small, black plastic housing that is riveted to the underside of the cymbal near the bell. The 16" ride cymbal has two triggers. One is directly under the bell and the other is mounted under the bow in the same manner as the crash and hi-hat. The construction of these plates is of a very high quality, and they should last a good long time, even with constant playing. The hi-hat is a single plate that works in conjunction with the hi-hat pedal. While the trend on high-end kits has been moving toward using two cymbals when emulating a hi-hat, it's not really necessary on an electronic kit.

PADS AND RACK

The pads also seem to be well constructed. On this kit, only the snare drum is a stereo pad, capable of firing a different voice from the head or the rim. From the top down, you'll find a removable rubber ring sitting on a four-lug metal counterhoop. The ring helps to mute the acoustic sound from rimshots and, as a bonus, will also offer your sticks a little more of a life-like feel. Below the counterhoop is a back plastic head. Under the head is the body of the system that consists of a thin wooden shell with silver covering, foam padding, metal disk plates, and a piezo trigger. All of this sits inside a molded, hard plastic housing that holds the whole thing together. The pads are relatively light in weight and seem to be designed for medium-duty use. The kick drum pad is exactly

the same as a tom pad, except that it is mounted onto a freestanding floor stand. The stand is very solid and sturdy. I didn't have any problems with bass drum creepage.

The rack stand is made from aluminum tubing and heavy plastic clamps and fittings. For all but the most intense heavy metal bashing, the stand should keep everything in its place

without movement. One unique feature of this rack is that it's designed to mount the brain in front of the player, behind the mounted toms, rather than on the left side like many other kits. This mounting position insures that you can easily see the display while you're playing, but it requires a slightly longer reach for editing.

Generally, I'm not a fan of rack-mounting drums, as I sometimes find it difficult to get the instruments exactly where I want them at the exact angle I need. The drum-mounting arms are metal and shaped in a way that prevents the drum from rotating. It certainly makes the drum/rack relationship more stable, but inhibits some setup options. The cymbal arms

are not booms, but I had no trouble putting the cymbals where I wanted them. You'll have to sit down with the kit and see if it allows all the adjustments you need. It took me some time and experimentation to get happy with it.

WISHES

While 21 kits should be plenty for the casual user, I'd like to see a future version of the DM5 Pro that held more. Now that Alesis has made the jump to USB connectivity in its TriggerI/O and Control-Pad, it's time to add a USB jack to the DM5 Pro.

The DM5 Pro has 16-note polyphony, which may not be enough for those of you who enjoy playing lots of notes in a very short period of time. At a fast tempo, a one-measure fill of sixteenth-notes after a cymbal crash may very well force that cymbal crash to be cut off prematurely. It is possible to connect two DM5 brains together to achieve a 32-note polyphony, but that's sort of overkill. I'd really like to see an increase in the available polyphony in future versions. If you're using the DM5 Pro kit to fire sounds on your computer or for sequencing, this polyphony issue is not going to affect you.

The hi-hat system includes sounds for open, closed, and foot-closed sounds. But there's no way to get a foot-splash sound. For several styles of music, this isn't necessary, but for some others, it's essential. ■

VERDICT

In terms of price vs. performance, it's hard to imagine a better setup. All you need to get up and drumming is a drum throne and a bass drum pedal. The pads feel good, the cymbals feel great, the rack is stable yet lightweight — and the brain is a solid performer with a proven history.

I feel that that the DM5 Pro with Surge Cymbals will be a welcome addition to the electronic drumming community. In the world of full electronic percussion kits that have a street price under a grand, this might be the best deal going.

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