Crash Test #2

XYLOSYNTH MIDI CONTROLLER

by Norman Weinberg

Chances are, you've never heard of a company called Wernick Musical Instruments. Chances are, you'll hear more about them in the future. Last summer, I had the opportunity to attend the Rhythm Sticks Festival in London. At an evening concert, I saw this thing on stage and totally freaked. Being pretty familiar with most of the electronic percussion controllers, I was totally surprised to see a MIDI controller that looked like a xylophone but had the range of a vibraphone. What a find!

A Very Natural Progression

I've owned both the Simmons Silicon Mallet and Alternate Mode's MalletKat, and I firmly believe that keyboard percussion controllers are an important aspect of a 21st century percussionist. But since Simmons stopped production of their Silicon Mallet several years ago, the MalletKat has been the only game in town. Now, with the Xylosynth, percussionists have another choice in MIDI keyboard percussion controllers.

So what is the Xylosynth? The review instrument was three octaves from F1 to F4 — the range of a standard vibraphone. However, the Xylosynth is available in any size and keyboard layout between three and four octaves. A large central chrome bar supports bubinga wood keys mounted on a floating bracket system. Each key is cushioned in a mounting bracket, which is itself cushioned on a key mount. With this type of mounting system, the bars have a flexible "give" that is quite similar in feel to an acoustic bar's movement. Each bar has a cable running from its body to the central support bar. Below the central bar is a finely crafted wooden box that houses the electronics that control the machine.

Simplicity. One of the underlying philosophies of the Xylosynth is simplicity. The front panel consists of a 40-character LCD display and several programming buttons. Like most synths, there are dedicated buttons for increasing or decreasing parameter values. But unlike other synths, there are 19 logically organized buttons for accessing each programming command.

Changing patches in the Xylosynth is a snap. There are six buttons on the front panel that are dedicated to calling up one of the six patches. You can also use the dedicated "patch up" and "patch down" buttons. If there's no time to change patches while you're holding four mallets, you can increment and decrement by the optional dedicated foot pedals.

In the first patch, the LCD displays the patch number, the program number, the MIDI channel, and the instrument's octave range. In other patches, the display shows the split functions.

Programming. Altering a patch is nearly as easy as selecting one. While playing, the unit's octave can be adjusted. Even though the Xylosynth is three octaves in size, the instrument can control a MIDI sound generator over the entire MIDI range of ten octaves. Pushing the "octave up" button raises the pitch up to three octaves. Pressing the "octave down" button drops the pitch by up to four octaves. And hitting the "octave zero" key instantly brings the machine back to its central range of F1 to F4 (MIDI note numbers 41 to 77).

By hitting the Patch Edit button, you can tune the Xylosynth. Since the instrument is a MIDI controller, tuning is actually setting the MIDI note numbers for the keys. To transpose the instrument, you simply strike one of the keys, which tells the Xylosynth the pad you wish to set. By using the up or down edit buttons, you can then set the starting note for the instrument. From that point, the keys to the right will follow chromatically. For example, by setting the bottom

note of the Xylosynth to note number 43, you'll effectively transpose the entire keyboard up a step. An interesting note about this method of programming: As long as you program the pitches from the lowest keys to the highest, you can set a different note number for each key on the instrument. This is perfect for controlling drum machines or firing samples and sound effects. As you play on the instrument, the LCD displays the MIDI velocity of your strokes. By adjusting the sensitivity knob, you can see how your playing style will be translated into MIDI velocity values.

Saving edits is a no brainer. Pressing the Patch Edit button leaves the edit mode, saves your changes, and returns you to play mode. Isn't this nice? No special commands to remember, no repetitive pushing of some "enter" key. The unit just saves what you program and moves into play mode. Very simple!

Splits. It's possible to have the Xylosynth control up to four different sounds at once. As with most keyboard synthesizers, each individual area is called a "zone." Programming zones is a pretty simple affair. Since the machine contains dedicated program zones, you only need to press the "Split Edit 1" button, and strike the note on the keyboard that defines the highest note in the zone. Press the Split Edit 1 button a second time and you can select a program number for the zone that will call up a particular timbre on your sound module. Press the button one last time to set the MIDI channel for the zone. To program the second zone, press the Split Edit 2 button and repeat the same procedure. Pretty easy, right?

Modes. The Xylosynth comes with five different performance modes. These modes should not be confused with MIDI modes, but rather, they are different modes of playing. The first mode is the normal performance mode, where the instrument is capable of covering the entire MIDI velocity range from 0 to 127. Mode two is a "Mono Mode" that will control any sound module in a monophonic style. This means that the controller will only send one MIDI note at a time. Mode two is the one to use if you're playing woodwind, brass, and maybe some bass sounds. By holding down the sustain pedal, it's easy to achieve smooth, legato lines in mono mode. The third mode is called "50% Range." In this mode, the MIDI velocity has a range of 0-63.

SPECS

Model: Xylosynth
Suggested Retail Prices: 3-octave: $4,050; 4-octave: $4,995 (prices include shipping crate). Extra keys: $69 each. Sustain pedal: $139.99.
Range:: 37 keys, 3 octaves F1 - F4
Size: 4'1" long, 10 1/2" high, 12 1/2" depth, 43 lbs.
Features: Transposable up three and down four octaves, four separate zones, programmable MIDI channel and patch, six presets.

Mode four is "Damping Mode." In this mode, a light stroke (defined in the manual as less than a MIDI velocity value of 15) on a sustaining note will cause a note-off command to be sent. The idea here is to create an electronic version of the mallet dampening technique that vibe players use to play clear lines inside of harmonic structures. Mode five is the "Quiet Mallet Mode," where light playing will still control the full range of MIDI velocity. This mode provides an option for players who need to keep mallet contact noise to a minimum in small recital halls or studios with open microphones.

Real Analog Knobs! Having a dedicated analog knob that controls sensitivity is a real blessing. Want to adjust the touch and get just a little more contrast with your dynamics? Just reach down and increase the sensitivity. This adjustment affects the entire keyboard at once. There is another analog knob dedicated to length or gate time. The range of values is from 30 milliseconds to seven seconds — enough flexibility to cover just about any situation.

The Manual. Wernick's concept of "less is more" is obvious when you open the owner's manual. The entire thing is only 11 pages, and that includes the cover page and the table of contents! The short manual is well written and easy to understand. If you can't figure out how to program this instrument in an hour, I'd be surprised.

Cool Stuff. All cables lock! The power cable, the MIDI cable, the sustain cable and both foot switch cables lock into place at the front of the Xylosynth. If you've ever had a cable pulled out of one of your machines during a rehearsal or performance, you'll certainly appreciate this nifty little feature. I like the idea that each function has a dedicated button. This makes programming a piece of cake. And the dedicated analog knobs for length and sensitivity are outstanding. I can just reach down and adjust the length (gate time) of my sound in an instant. If a key should go south, it's pretty easy to replace it on the gig without major surgery. The key can then be sent back to the factory and repaired without having to ship the entire instrument.

Less Than Cool Stuff. There are two minor problems with the Xylosynth. Mode 2, the mono mode, can "glitch." If you strike two notes within 2.5ms, the higher of the two fails to send a note-off message. This is a problem that Wernick is aware of and is working to repair. According to the company, all current units will receive a free upgrade when this feature is fixed. Mode 4, the damping mode, is a little hard to control. it works fine, but you need to develop the proper touch so that your muffling stroke is effective. Last but not least is the price. Four grand is a lot of cash for a MIDI controller.

Playability. So how does it play? For a variety of reasons, I feel that the touch and level of control in terms of dynamic expressiveness is outstanding. It's not just the tactile feedback you get after hitting the bars, it's the way the instrument feels and plays. It's very natural.

The simplicity of the unit is another strong point. There isn't much programming to learn because the instrument is just not that deep. This may prove to be a negative point to those players looking for a great deal of control over a ton of MIDI aspects. But, it is a great plus for those vibe players who may want to jump into the 21st century without having to learn a bunch of programming. They may just want to set the Xylosynth up, plug it in and have it work. In these days of "more is better," the fact that the manual is 11 pages long is a statement that "less is often more."

In the final analysis, the Xylosynth is a valid choice for those keyboard percussion players who are ready to tap into the world of contemporary sounds and MIDI music without having to strike little rubber pads or learn a new programming language. The feel, response and simplicity of the Xylosynth makes it a contender. ■