



Crash Test #2

YAMAHA DTXPRESS ELECTRONIC DRUM KIT

by Tré Battute

We live in an amazing world! In addition to such forward-bounding leaps for humankind as gene splicing, wireless Internet, quiz shows and Pokemon cards, we have electronic drum kits that are becoming more powerful, easier to use and less expensive all the time. This

Big Bang for Your Buck

may seem a trivial matter to some, but now, for under a grand, you can get a fully functioning (and quite sophisticated) electronic drum set for practice *and* live performance. This really is quite an achievement. Consider that for around the price of a custom snare drum, you can own an instrument that is capable of playing thousands of different sounds.

Yamaha's DTX electronic drum system has been around for a few years. Originally introduced in 1996, the brain was upgraded to DTX version 2.0 several months later. Just last year, the company repackaged the brain with a number of pads and a stand-up rack as the DTK5L. This unit was outfitted with sounds, kits and sequences of a distinctive Latin flavor. The newest child to be welcomed into the DTX family is the DTXpress.

The new DTXpress brain is a different critter than its parents. The original DTX brain couldn't be mounted in a rack, as the controls — buttons, switches, knobs — were on the top. The DTXpress is a half-rack system with all the operational controls on

the front. In addition to a different look and feel (the Xpress is orange instead of black) the system has been totally revamped with changes in operating system and a more friendly user interface.

Overview. The back panel of the DTXpress brain is packed full of ins and outs. Ten trigger-input jacks along with a hi-hat controller input provide connections for all the pads you'll probably need. By the way, eight of these trigger inputs are stereo, so they can easily fire different sounds from a pad's main surface and from the rim — that is *if* you are playing stereo pads.

There are the required MIDI-In and MIDI-Out jacks, but no MIDI-Thru. A single pair of stereo audio outputs for feeding

Crash Test #2 CONT.

your sound system completes the most common features. The DTXpress has an additional connection. There is a "to host" jack that connects the unit directly to your computer. A "host select" switch allows you to choose between MIDI, PC1, PC2 or Macintosh systems. In terms of sounds and memory, the unit includes 910 drum and percussion sounds and a full set of 128 general MIDI sounds with 32-voice polyphony. There's room for 80 drum kits: 48 kits are preset from the factory and can't be altered, and 32 kits are fully programmable user kits.

One of the features that has always set the DTX drum systems apart from the competition is the interactive nature of the machine. The DTXpress retains these important features. There is a two-track sequencer with 95 preset songs as well as space for 32 original songs that can be programmed by the user. Yamaha also hung onto the "groove check" feature from the original DTX. The front panel includes a convenient headphone input and an auxiliary input for blending a CD, minidisk, or even a cassette with the DTXpress sounds. Four knobs control volume for the master outputs (as well as the headphone volume),

the aux in, the click and the accompaniment. On the right third of the front panel are six small buttons that control function and nine buttons for programming.

The kit portion of the DTXpress includes five TP60 pads that serve as snare, hi-hat and three toms, two PCY60 cymbal pads for ride and crash, the KP60 bass drum tower and the HH60 hi-hat control pedal. Everything is hung on Yamaha's RS60 rack frame. The only thing you need to add to get up and playing is your own bass drum pedal and drum throne.

Details 1.0: Pads. The DTXpress's five TP60 pads are monophonic. Even though the brain will read and respond to stereo pads, the TP60 will fire the same sound when playing on the pad's surface and when playing on the rim. The pad feels great! Its playing response is very close to a RealFeel pad. Right out of the box, without any tweaking, it's possible to play a smooth, clean, closed roll without having to work too hard. The dynamic contrast is wide, playability is high and response is controlled, even over the entire playing surface.

PCY60s are wedge-shaped, monophonic cymbal pads with the same rubber surface as the TP60. Being lighter and having a thinner body than the drum pad, the

PCY60 sends a little more vibration back into your hand through the stick. There is definitely a sweet in the center of the pad. Because of its shape, the vibration increases and response diminishes slightly as you play closer to the edges. The cymbal pads include an adjustment that allows you to increase or decrease the output level of the pad to better match your playing style.

The new KP60 bass drum tower is designed for a single pedal. Its trigger is a thick rubber surface with a pretty natural feel. Unlike an earlier version of Yamaha's bass drum pads, the KP60 can't be easily folded for portability. But by removing four Phillips screws, the two parts of the tower disconnect and take up very little space. The pad includes both an output level adjustment knob and a polarity switch for use with other drum brains. The HH60 is a smooth working, stable hi-hat controller pedal. I had no trouble getting it to recognize open and closed hi-hat strokes, foot splashes, and smooth transitions between fully open and fully closed positions.

Details 2.0: The Brain Sounds. The DTXpress is full of 'em: 53 kicks, 33 electric kicks, 122 acoustic snares, 120 electric snares, 90 toms, 59 electronic toms, 51 cymbals, 52 hi-hats, 100 percussion, 170

effects, 26 loops and 34 miscellaneous voices. There's a little bit of everything here: from the building blocks of the most straight-ahead acoustic kit, to fresh sounds with tons of attitude and in-your-face originality. Granted, you may not like or be able to use each and every sound in the machine, but if you're looking for a big selection that will enable you to play a variety of styles, the DTXpress delivers!

Editing a drum kit is pretty easy and quite flexible. Once you've selected the trigger you wish to program (simply by hitting the pad), you navigate and adjust various parameters with the Page, Select and Value buttons. Each pad can have two voices layered together (remember that Yamaha uses the term "voice" to describe a drum sound or a general MIDI sound), so you can get pretty creative while mixing and combining any of the sounds contained in the DTXpress. Each voice can have its own volume, pan position (with 128 positions between full left and full right), pitch (with a two-octave range and fine tuning), decay, filter setting, reverb and balance between the two voice layers.

After editing the pads to your liking, you can save the kit to one of the user locations and name it using a maximum of eight characters. For a scaled-down version of a drum brain, the DTXpress has a number of highly sophisticated features. For example, each voice assigned to an input can be programmed to fire a separate MIDI note number on a separate channel with a gate time ranging from 0.0 to 9.9 seconds. If you plan to use an electronic kit along with other sound modules, you'll be glad the DTXpress has this feature. When editing "input common parameters," the DTXpress can be programmed for nine different types of cross-fade between the two voice layers. You can assign an input to one of 15 different groups (so that two voices, like open and closed hi-hat, will sound at once), and select the key assignment mode.

Each of the inputs can be programmed to function in special ways. For example, a pad can be programmed to switch on and off the metronome, increment or decrement the drum kit, switch the trigger bypass on and off, start and stop the main song, or control the playback of a "pad song."

Pad songs are a totally cool idea. Think about this for a minute, and I'm sure that you'll envision some very hip ideas for live performance. When a pad is set to this

function, it can be programmed to play any song one time or to repeat the song continuously. In addition to the repeat function, there are three other ways to control the pad songs: when a pad is hit in Play mode, the pad song will alternately start or stop with each subsequent hit. Chase mode enables the user to play one measure at a time of the pad song. And when a pad is hit in Cutoff mode, the DTXpress will play the pad song until any other pad that is programmed as a pad song with cutoff is struck. Okay, have your creative juices started to flow yet? Here's a hint: one pad song could be a series of bass-line frag-

Model: Yamaha

DTXpress
electronic drum kit

Retail Price: \$1,295

Pads: five TP60 drum pads, two PCY 60 cymbal pads, one KP60 kick pad, one HH60 hi-hat controller.

Brain Features: ten trigger inputs (eight stereo), hi-hat controller input, auxiliary input, MIDI In, MIDI Out, stereo out, headphone out. 910 drum sounds, 128 general MIDI voices, 80 factory drumkits, 32 user drumkits, 95 factory songs, 32 user songs, 12 trigger setups.

SPECS

ments. Still not sure? Check out the factory-programmed kits that demonstrate how this feature can be put to good use.

Details 2.1: Songs. The 95 factory-preset songs on the DTXpress include a variety of styles. There are Latin tunes, rock tunes, ballads, jazz, fusion, funk, R&B, reggae, shuffles and much, much more. Do these songs cover all the styles you'd ever need to play? No. But they do cover enough popular styles and difficulty levels to keep most players happy for a long, long time.

Using the features of the DTXpress, it's a simple matter to call up a song, mute all of the drums entirely or just mute the snare, kick, cymbals, or the other percussion sounds. You can also easily control the relative balance of the various drum voices and the song's pitched instruments. This interactivity makes it possible to isolate a particular drum groove or drum kit voice and hear how it fits within the entire context of the song. By adjusting the song's tempo, you can work in slow motion until things start to feel good and sound good. This is a won-

derful teaching tool!

Along with the factory songs are locations for 32 user songs. Yes, you can create your own songs on a two-track sequencer. You can record directly into the DTXpress or create your sequence on a computer and play it into the DTX's sequencer. User songs (locations 97-128) are edited by entering the Song Job mode. Here you can set the song's tempo to any range from quarter-note = 30-300 beats per minute, and tell the DTXpress to play the song once or repeat it indefinitely. You can also edit the 16 MIDI channels to change the timbre, volume and stereo placement of a particular part of the song.

Need to adjust some the track's timing? Here's where you do it. Each of the two tracks can be quantized separately, using six different values from quarter-note to sixteenth-note triplets. You can also clear a track or the entire song, merge both tracks into track one and name a song using up to eight characters.

Details 2.2: Utility Mode. Inside the utility mode are five additional functions for system, MIDI, sequencer, tone generator and drum map. System functions are those that affect the entire DTXpress and include commands for trigger bypass, hi-hat offset, factory data recall and a few other commands. The MIDI function controls all of the necessary work for handling MIDI dumps, controlling the ability to receive program changes and system exclusive messages. Using the MIDI function commands, you can also turn the MIDI output to a MIDI merge that combines the messages received through the MIDI input with the MIDI messages generated from the DTXpress.

With the sequencer functions, you can control the click voice, tuning and MIDI note number. You can also activate a two-bar count-off that will begin before a song actually starts playback. Since the DTXpress's sequencer can be used along with a computer's software sequencer, the MIDI functions can determine which device will be in charge of synchronization commands. When "internal" is selected, the DTXpress is in charge. With "external" selected, the brain follows commands from another MIDI sequencer.

Another set of utility commands control the equalization, tuning, volume and reverb bypass of the group of sounds when the DTXpress is used as a general MIDI sound

Crash Test #2 CONT.

module. In the Drum Map function, each MIDI note number can be assigned a voice with programmable volume, pan, tuning, layer balance, decay, cutoff frequency, alternate group, key assignment (poly, semi, mono or high) and key-off enable. All in all, the controls inside the utilities menu offer a high degree of functionality for those using the DTXpress in more sophisticated and demanding musical environments.

Details 2.3: Triggering Controls. A drum brain is only as good as its controls for tweaking the triggers. Let's face it, if you can't get the instrument to react surely and swiftly to your playing style, you won't be happy with your kit. Here the DTXpress really shines. For most people, just putting the unit together with the supplied pads will offer a kit with a great feel. But if you have the desire to tweak — due to using different pads or playing with a special touch — you've got all the tools you need.

The DTXpress has no fewer than 20 different pad types defined in the "trigger type" menu. These cover all the bases from pads used as snares or toms (different playing sensitivities required) to triggers mounted on acoustic drums. After selecting the pad type, you can then fine-tune the pad's gain, adjust the minimum velocity, select one of five different velocity curves and adjust the self rejection amount, the general rejection value and specific rejection values. To make a long story short, if you can't get

this brain to respond well to your playing style, you haven't done your homework!

Thanks to Yamaha for including trigger setups in the DTXpress's memory. The brain comes with eight factory-designed setups with room for four user setups, which means you can define one playing/response style for your bedroom and define another one for live performance. A very handy feature indeed!

Details 3.0: Extras. There is an internal digital reverb that is the same as those found on the company's MU series of general MIDI sound modules. While the reverb parameters are pretty basic, they sound very good. Included are 11 different reverb types (hall, room, stage, plate, white, tunnel and basement). Once you select the reverb type, you can adjust the reverb time and the master return level. These settings affect the entire drum kit.

Details 3.1: Nice Things. The small LCD display is more informative than you might think. For example, when assigning voices to pads, the display indicates the pad, the layer, the bank (such as snares, kicks, effects, etc.), the voice number and the voice name. Programming the DTXpress is really very simple and darned intuitive. Sure, the programming buttons are physically small and close together, but that's what you get in a half-rack space. Learning to navigate the machine with all the most basic features should take a novice no longer than a couple of hours. The more esoteric functions can be grasped in a few additional

hours; that is, if you even need to use them.

Details 3.2: Less Than Nice Things. Okay, Yamaha, it's time to bite the bullet and hire a copyeditor and a proofreader to improve your manual. The DTXpress manual is helpful, complete and has a good index and table of contents that outlines each chapter. But the syntax is uncomfortable, at times confusing, and the number of typos (some of which are important) are depressing. Sure it's a minor point, in that you don't play the manual, but why not apply a little of the same care and quality that went into the hardware to the manual?

Details 3.3: Our Wish List. It would be great to have at least one dual-zone stereo pad to use as the snare drum, wouldn't it? Since the brain can handle up to eight of these babies, it seems a waste not to include at least one for rimshots. With a single pair of stereo outputs, this brain is less useful in the studio that it would be with at least one other pair of assignable auxiliary outs. Since the DTXpress has a direct computer port, it would be great to see Yamaha offer additional song packages for Macs and PCs. Just pop in a floppy and dump another load of songs into the brain.

Other than that, it's hard to think of anything else that should be included. If you're thinking of purchasing an electronic kit, you've got to play this machine. It fills a number of useful purposes: dorm or apartment practice, live performance, teaching tool and sequencer. For the price, I can't think of anything better on the market. ■