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Multipad Madness

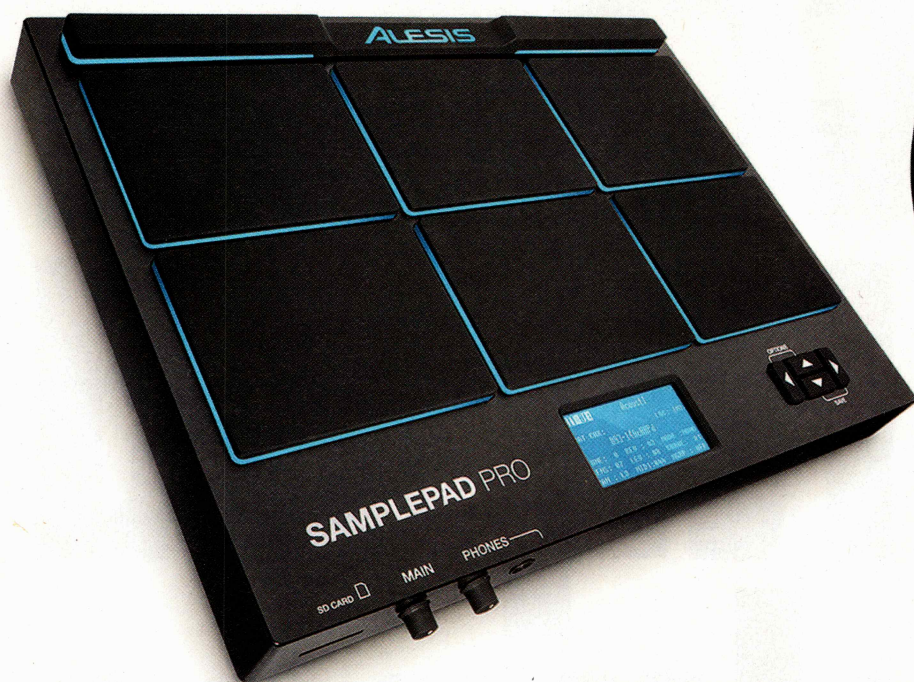


**THE LITTLE
GUIDE TO BIG
SOUNDS**

By Norman Weinberg

Multipads have been around since shortly after the birth of MIDI, and during the last few years have been gaining popularity. The blending of electronics with acoustics offers the best of both worlds, and multipads are perhaps the easiest way to bridge the banks of this musical river. You might want to add a multipad to your acoustic kit, or perhaps use a multipad to replace your acoustic or electronic kit. You may even be thinking about getting a multipad to explore live performance possibilities that simply aren't available with any other system.

In this article, we'll take a look at seven leading candidates in the current crop of multipads. We'll talk about their strengths, their weaknesses, and offer suggestions about which device might best suit a particular application and user.



ALESIS SAMPLEPAD PRO

The SamplePad Pro is Alesis' newest entry into the multipad market. The playing surface consists of eight pads arranged in two rows of three with two edge pads at the top. To make the machine more flexible, there are jacks for both a kick drum and a hi-hat controller in the back. And, the SamplePad Pro has two additional inputs that will support a dual-zone pad and a single-zone pad, respectively. Both the main outputs and the headphones output have individual volume controls that are accessible at the front of the unit (which is a nice convenience).

Programming the SamplePad Pro is very easy and pretty obvious. The LCD screen offers just about everything you might need in a single view. You can see the kit number and name, the location of the sample (internal memory or card), the name of the sample, the velocity layer to which the sample is assigned, and the trigger location. In addition, this one screen displays the tuning, panning, reverb, sensitivity level, MIDI note number, play mode, and mute group. To make an edit, simply move the cursor to the parameter you want to adjust and change its value.

The SamplePad Pro supports two layers of sounds under the same pad controlled by velocity. However, this is available only while accessing sounds on the memory card. If you choose to use internal sounds, you can fire only one sound per pad. Rather than using a USB stick, the SamplePad Pro relies on an SD or SDHC card of up to 32GB. You can connect the unit to your computer via USB to send/receive

MIDI data and for card management. Kits are limited to a maximum of 48MB of samples, and sounds must be in the WAV format.

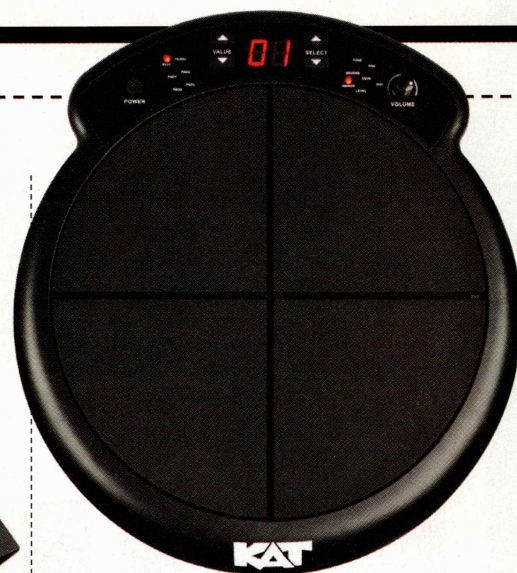
Using a USB cable, I was able to mount the memory card onto my computer while it was still inside the SamplePad Pro. Then I could change the names of samples, copy new samples to the card, change the names of kits, and even copy kits without any significant issues.

This machine has 200 internal sounds and ten internal kits. Any additional sounds or kits are saved and stored to the card. I felt that the internal sounds lacked variety. For example, nine of the sounds are very short (clipped) samples of the numbers 1-9 (so that the metronome can have a voice option), and 27 of the sounds are marimba samples at various pitches.

I was surprised to see that the editing and adjustment options were somewhat limited. For example, there are only nine possible pitch adjustments and ten reverb and volume levels. While the unit does offer eight sensitivity levels, there are no other internal controls for fine-tuning crosstalk or false triggering that may arise, and no adjustments for the trigger, kick, or hi-hat inputs.

I have to say the SamplePad Pro left me feeling that it was a bit too costly for the beginning user and too limited for a serious professional. Some features, like accessing WAV files on a card, are awesome. Other features, like a very limited tuning range, redundant sound set, and no trigger controls, are less than awesome.

MSRP: \$399



KAT KTMP1

The KAT KTMP1 is the smallest and least expensive multipad in this roundup. It has four surfaces that can be played with either sticks or hands, as well as inputs for both kick and hi-hat controllers.

Its 50 onboard sounds cover the most common drum and percussion sounds. If you want to venture outside the factory sounds, the KTMP1 has both MIDI output and a USB jack, so you can use it as a controller to fire sounds from your computer. A single volume knob controls both the pair of 1/4" master outputs and a mini-jack for headphones.

In terms of editing, the machine is very straightforward and somewhat limited. It has controls for selecting the sound you want each pad to fire, the level, tuning, pan, reverb, pad sensitivity, and MIDI note number. It should be noted here that along with the limited number of controls comes a limited set of values. For example, the tuning range and pan setting are restricted to only nine positions.

Another limitation is that the KTMP1 will send or receive only on MIDI channel ten. While some might see these constraints as a negative, newcomers to the electronic percussion scene might very well appreciate the level of simplicity that fewer features and options provide. However, the biggest drawback for me is the inability to save kits.

Sounds and edits you apply to the pads will return after you turn the power off and back on, but it isn't possible to call up a saved set of sounds and edits. For example, you'll have to reprogram the pads to switch from conga sounds to drum set sounds. And that's a huge pain.

That being said, I feel that the KTMP1 is a good choice for those who want to control a few extra sounds without spending a lot of money. After all, this device sells for just over a C-note. I don't know of a less expensive way to add electronic sounds to your kit, or fire sounds from your computer using sticks.

MSRP: \$199

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Recently, the company changed the style of pads to something it calls “nuBounce,” and added a protective covering for the pads manufactured by Aquarian Drumheads. The combination seems to work just fine and affords the player a really comfortable playing surface.

Direct Sales Only: \$1,799

ROLAND OCTAPAD SPD-30 VERSION 2

First introduced back in 1985, the Roland Octapad has been adopted by countless players, producers, engineers, and composers. In the past 30 years, the machine has undergone so many improvements and enhancements that the pads on its playing surface are about the only things that remains from its ancestor.

In addition to the eight main pads, the SPD-30 has jacks for four additional stereo inputs along with a dedicated hi-hat control input. Audio connections include headphone, master output, and a mix-in jack. You'll also find MIDI in and out, along with a stereo input to support up to two footswitches. Like most machines, there is support for MIDI over USB and a USB stick for loading and saving data (not samples).

Two sounds can be layered under a single pad, and the layered sound can be mixed, switched, faded, or crossfaded based on playing velocity. Layering isn't possible when programming the external pads, as the head and rim triggers on stereo pads will play only one sound each.

Programming the SPD-30 is really a pleasure. There's a large backlit LCD display that shows a ton of information about what's happening in the machine's brain, and dedicated buttons and knobs for selecting parameters and making adjustments.

Roland claims the new Octapad doesn't have any crosstalk between pads, and therefore won't false-trigger. In my exploration of

the machine, I have to agree. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't get any crosstalk. In fact, the available settings for the internal pads offer only a choice of five different velocity curves, a sensitivity setting, and a threshold setting. That's confidence! Of course, the controls for external triggers supply the full range of important parameters to make your pads or triggers respond in the most effective manner.

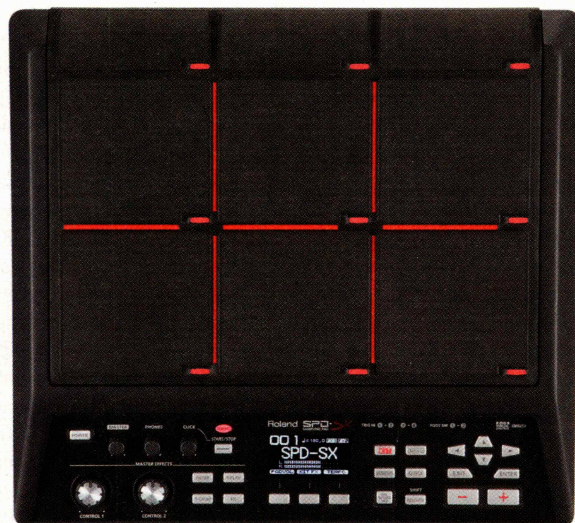
One of the unique features of the SPD-30 is the “phrase loop” that lets you record phrases on the fly and play them back. Each loop can comprise three different parts, and each part can have different tracks as long as they're all assigned to the same kit. Controls let you determine the meter, the length of the loop, and even a quantization level. Roland states that this is a real-time performance tool, but I have to disagree. Changing tracks and recording on the fly requires pushing buttons that would force you to stop playing.

The SPD-30's pads feel really nice. In fact, the playability comes in a close second to the other Roland's SX version of the multipad, which was my favorite. The internal sounds cover both the traditional instruments you might expect as well as a great selection of sounds that would be right at home in the most current popular music.

MSRP: \$799

ROLAND SPD-SX

Every machine in this roundup has a particular focus. Each seems to be aimed at a certain segment of the drumming population based on price point, features, ease of use, novice or expert, and so on. The SPD-SX felt like it was

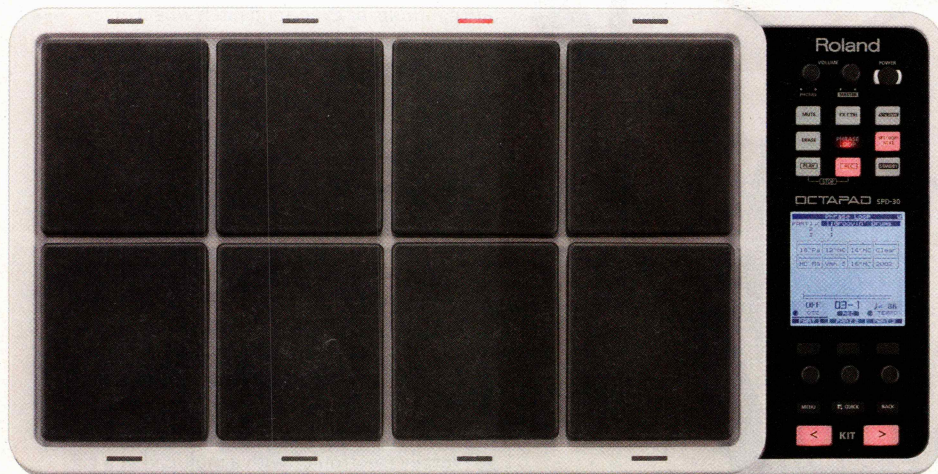


aimed directly at me. Specifically, I absolutely loved the fact that this unit sports 180 minutes of available sampling memory. Yes, that's correct: three full hours of stereo sampling memory. To be fair, the internal factory sounds take up a certain amount of this available sample time, so your actual mileage will vary.

While many multipads have outstanding internal sounds, at some point, I often wish I could access more than just what's onboard. With MIDI and/or USB included on every unit, it's not all that difficult to access any sound on your computer. But that requires taking a computer with you to the gig. In some instances, it would also require MIDI and perhaps an audio interface. With its three hours of sampling time, it's easy to design and edit any sound you wish, dump it off your computer to a USB thumb drive, and load it into the SPD-SX.

This multipad has the ability to access up to 100 different kits that can be organized into 8 different chains with 20 steps each. If necessary, you can also use the USB drive to download and upload kits and other settings, so you'll likely never bump your head on memory limitations. Each pad can have two different sounds layered together. If you need a larger composite sound, just resample the output of both pads and create a new sample.

Since the SPD-SX is designed and advertised as a sampling pad system, you would expect a clear and simple sampling methodology — and that's what you get. In addition to combining samples, you can sample to a single pad, slice a sample onto multiple pads on the fly, resample a sound with an added effect (and the unit has a lot of really good effects), chop a sample, and even create a sample from your own performance on the SPD-SX in real time. The unit also has a pretty sophisticated set of tools for editing your sample once it's in the machine. One cool feature is the ability to assign a tempo to a sample, so that loops can be



ALTERNATE MODE DRUMKAT

The drumKAT is, without question, the most sophisticated electronic percussion controller on the market. On the unit's face is a pattern of ten playing surfaces that use FSR (force-sensing resistors) rather than piezo triggers. These FSR pads read pressure rather than vibration, and as a result are absolutely free of crosstalk, false triggering, and other maladies that often afflict electronic percussion instruments. Since the pads read pressure, a pad can be programmed by pressing on it to affect a sound's duration or even send continuous controller information. In addition to the ten surface pads, the drumKAT supports up to nine additional triggers via jacks in the back of the machine. Each of the trigger inputs can be programmed to take advantage of all drumKAT features.

And what can these pads and triggers do? Just about anything you can imagine. From firing a single note over a single MIDI channel, to a 128-note alternate, to playing chords, delaying notes, linking pads together, sending continuous controller data, and the list goes on.

For some readers, a downside might be that the drumKAT contains no onboard sounds. You have to use the provided MIDI jacks (two MIDI-inputs and four MIDI-outputs) to control either your computer or other sound producing outboard gear. For other readers, the lack of an internal sound library is much less important than total performance control. In a recording studio environment, for example, playing internal factory sounds is often not all that important.

Editing information on a drumKAT can be confusing at first. You won't find any knobs, sliders, or buttons. In fact, even the programming screen is pretty small by today's

standards and some of the abbreviations can be somewhat cryptic. There's simply no way for you to learn this machine without going through the manual very carefully. But as Spiderman said: "With great power comes great responsibility."

All drumKAT programming is accomplished by striking pads. For example, to program a pad to play a four-note chord, you would first press the kit edit pedal while striking the pad you want to program. From this point different pads have different functions. Pad one moves through the various functions of programming, and pad two moves the cursor on the display. Pad six is used to change values, with pad three serving as a toggle between values moving up or down. Pad four is used to change the sound when multinode functions are programmed, and pad five will let you hear the sound you're programming. And, when programming a four-note chord, each note can have its own specific MIDI channel, velocity setting, velocity curve, delay time, and duration.

Even though this learning curve is steep, it's fairly short. Once you get the hang of it, the system is pretty logical and can actually be just as fast or faster than programming with dedicated buttons and knobs.

Sitting in front of a drumKAT is a pretty amazing experience. Since each pad has so much flexibility, it's easy to lose yourself in the sound as you control alternating drum patterns along with keyboard pads, loops, filter sweeps, and more. If you're looking for an instrument that will simply fire drum samples, you don't need the drumKAT. If you'd like a MIDI percussion controller that has very few limits, this is the one.

MSRP (drumKAT Turbo, Direct Sales) \$1,189



ALTERNATE MODE TRAPKAT XL

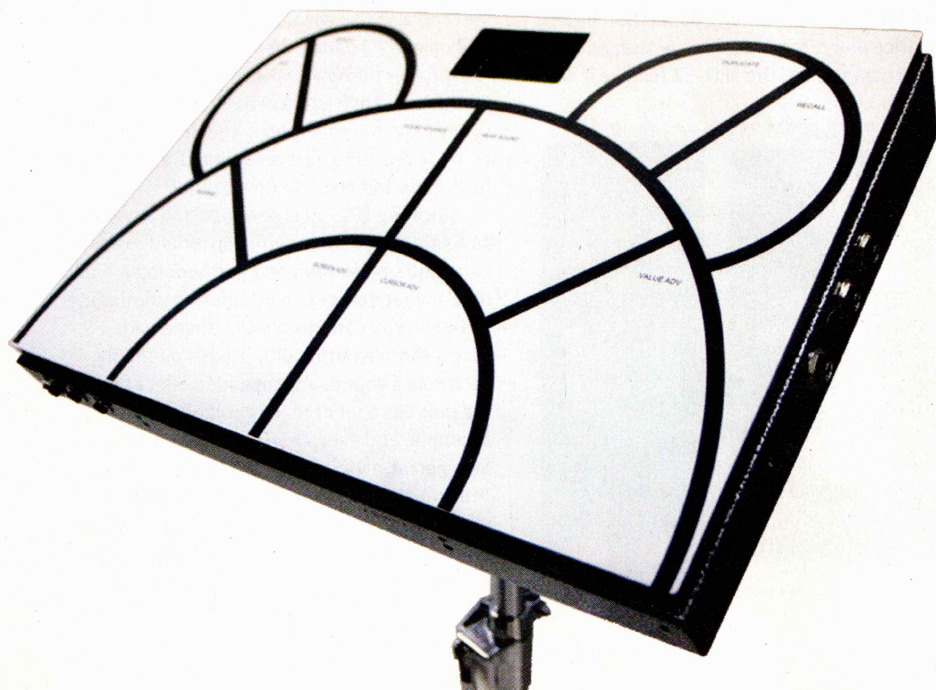
The trapKAT first came on the market back in 1995. While the drumKAT has ten programmable surfaces, the trapKAT more than doubles that with 24, with 10 large pads and 14 "rim-style" pads. Kick and hi-hat inputs round out the available possibilities. Like the drumKAT, the basic trapKAT has no internal sounds, however, there is a version called the SKS that features an internal sound module made by Kurzweil and sells for about \$450 more than the XL.

Of all the multipads in this roundup, the trapKAT is the only one that's too large to complement an acoustic kit. Instead, it's designed to completely replace an acoustic kit. In fact, as a single unit mounted on a single stand, it's also the perfect replacement for an electronic kit! A full trapKAT rig takes no more than five minutes to set up, from in the case to ready to play.

This machine uses the same FSR technology as the drumKAT, but doesn't have quite the same MIDI sophistication and feature set. Even so, the options are pretty impressive. You can program the brain to link pads together (only one link per pad in contrast to the drumKAT's cascading links); play up to 16-note alternates; send sequencer commands such as start, stop, and continue; or even send pitch wheel or continuous controller data based on pressure.

The trapKAT has a unique set of available kits. There are 24 factory kits, 24 user kits, and 6 other kits that are preprogrammed to interface with Toontracks Superior 2, Addictive Drums, Ocean Way Drums, or the Yamaha DTX III. Alternate Mode's website contains SYSEX data for other hardware and software packages.

With 24 pads, you can program a complete set of drums, cymbals, and percussion that can fire or blend different sounds via dynamic control. Using some judicious programming, the trapKAT responds naturally, feels great, and offers the sort of confidence one needs to go "totally electronic" with a multipad at a gig.



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synchronized to your performance tempo. But wait, there's more!

Roland supplies a CD-ROM with a software program called SPD-SX Wave Manager. Connect the SPD-SX to your computer via the USB jack, open the software, and you're in. From the software, you can drag and drop samples off your computer onto the internal sound library or directly to a pad and layer on the machine. You can build kits using drag and drop, rename samples, rename kits, and more. Sample management and instrument/pad assignments really don't get any easier than this.

Of all the multipads in this roundup, the SPD-SX has the most complete set of features for working and tweaking internal sounds. And only the Alternate Mode machines offer more control in the way pads and external triggers respond to your playing style and touch. With so much power and flexibility comes complexity. But the manual included with the machine is well written and clear. In fact, it could be the best manual I've read in a long time.

The SPD-SX is a very respectable machine. The build quality seems excellent and the feel is outstanding. These pads were the most responsive for my personal playing style. They closely matched what I might expect from an acoustic drum. I had no problem playing quick double strokes, and was impressed by the way the SPD-SX tracked a closed roll.

MSRP: \$999

YAMAHA DTX-MULTI 12

As you might guess from the name, the DTX-MULTI 12 has 12 separate pads on its surface. In a similar setup to the Roland SPD-SX, there are six larger square pads in a three-by-three grid with three additional smaller pads above and below. Unlike the Roland, the six pads closest to the player are flat while the six upper surfaces are slightly angled. This step-like effect seems to make the different pads visually unique. Also like the Roland, all controls are available on the front panel with the inputs and outputs on the back panel (except for the USB jacks on the left side of the unit).

While there are only 12 on the top face of the DTX-MULTI 12, the unit offers options for up to five additional pads or triggers. Three trigger inputs on the back offer the ability to

read one three-zone pad and two dual-zone pads along with inputs for hi-hat control and foot switch control.

In my opinion, the pads on the MULTI 12 are a little too soft for sticks, as the amount of "bounce back" was somewhat sluggish, making it difficult to perform fast open rolls and closed rolls. That being said, I thought they felt great when I played with my hands. It's easy to adjust the sensitivity so the pads can be played comfortably without sticks. Perhaps this is one reason the sound set includes so many hand percussion and world music sounds.

Yamaha is known for outstanding internal sounds, and the MULTI 12 is no exception. The samples are awesome. In addition to the sounds you might expect from a drum unit like this, it also includes plenty of sounds grouped as Cuban, Brazilian, Indian, Japanese, African, and Orchestral Percussion. The inclusion of so many percussion sounds really delivers on any expectations the target audience for the MULTI 12 could have.

The MULTI 12 has a total of 64MB of internal memory for importing user samples. Using the rule-of-thumb of 10MB per minute of stereo audio, this translates into about 6.5 minutes of total available sample storage. Each individual sample (44.1kHz/16-bit WAV or AIFF) has a maximum available time of about 23 seconds. With up to 500 available assignments for samples, a large number of very short samples won't clog the system. Even though it has an aux-in jack, there's no way to sample directly from the aux-in to the machine. You have to sample on a different machine or computer (a version of Cubase is included) and then import WAV or AIFF data via the USB stick.

The DTX-MULTI 12 offers up to four-voice layering on a single pad. Each pad can be programmed to play all the notes at once, alternate with each successive stroke, or be sustained and turned off by each successive stroke. One of the unique features of the MULTI 12 is the implementation of the mute function. For example, you can mute the pad and stop the sounds, like muffling timpani. Or you can assign a pad to fire a different sound when muted, or even cause other pads to fire different sounds — muting pad seven caused pad eight to fire a slap.

MSRP: \$900