

# DIALED IN

# GETTING BETTER ALL THE TIME

# Roland TD-17K VX

BY NORMAN WEINBERG

**M**y first electronic drum set back in 1985 was a Roland DDR-30, and it changed my life. Now, just 33 short years later, it's really amazing to see how much these instruments have developed since then. Roland's newest addition to the family is the TD-17 series. This mid-level kit includes a newly designed brain and pads that showcase some of the recent advances in electronic drum technology, with a focus on education.

We received the line's flagship, the TD-17K VX, which came with snare, three toms, a ride cymbal, two crashes, hi-hats, the module, required cables, and hardware rack — everything you need to get playing except a bass drum pedal, hi-hat stand, throne, and sticks. Let's talk about the hardware first.

## THE BODY

The PDX-12 snare pad comes with an eight-lug, tunable mesh head. The body of the pad seems to be made of a fairly dense material that gives it the look and feel of a solid performer. The mounting bracket is made of metal, offering another level of stability. The pad's sensor is located opposite the mounting bracket, near the edge of the mesh head. Roland states that the new rim structure "provides a rim height that's the same as on an acoustic drum," which allows for "natural-feeling rimshots." I found this to be true; the relationship between head and rim is quite comfortable. While the size of the head is only 12" in diameter, the instrument itself feels exactly like a 14" drum due to the way the drum's supporting shell extends past the area of the head.

The PDX-8 tom pads have 8" mesh heads with six tunable lugs and the KD-10 kick pad has a 10" mesh surface that's

easily large enough to support a double pedal.

The three-zone, 13" CY-13R ride cymbal responds to the bow and the bell of the cymbal along with the edge for a more crash-like tone. In addition, the cymbal has an edge sensor that allows you to mute a sound or play a shorter sound if holding onto the mute area while playing one of the other areas.

The other two cymbals provided with the kit were CY-12C crash units. These 12" pads respond only to bow and edge strokes, but they do have mute capability. Playing the cymbals felt natural both in their stick rebound and movement on the stand. All of the pads, minus one of the crash cymbals, connect to the brain with a single snake, making setup a breeze and reducing cable clutter. The extra crash has a separate 1/4" connection.

The newly designed VH-10 hi-hat is very nice. The upper plate is lighter in weight than Roland's previous versions, and has a better foot response and stick feel. It felt like a good set of acoustic hats, and one serious advantage is the ability to use your own hi-hat pedal so the foot-feel is the same as acoustic plates. The improved pair of pads tracks the pedal movement and pressure in a highly accurate manner. Once the proper adjustments were made (as suggested in the manual), it was a pleasure to play.

The included four-post stand was easy to set up and did a good job of keeping the kit on solid ground. Kudos to Roland for including an improved snare pad mount — I really do wish that all the mounts were like this one. While not too heavy, the rack was stable and once the instrument mounts were tightened down, everything stayed in

place. [Editor's Note: We received the MDS-4K VX for this review. Roland has since changed the included rack to the MDS-COM model, which includes ball joints instead of static boom arms for the cymbal stands.]

## THE BRAIN

There are plenty of adjustments in the TD-17 module you can make to ensure that the pads respond to your particular playing style. You can tweak the touch for each pad's sensitivity, threshold, velocity curve (eight types), scan time, retrigger, mask time, and crosstalk. There are even parameters for how the rim will respond in relationship to the head, including rim gain, head/rim adjustment, cross-stick adjustment, and external noise cancellation.

On the TD-17, changing the sound of the head more often than not also changes the sound assigned to the rim of that pad to its complementary rim sample, and vice versa. The same holds true for cymbals; calling up a new sound for the ride cymbal's bell will also call up new sounds for the bow and edge. For those looking to emulate an acoustic kit, this is no big deal. But it is a limitation for players trying to stretch their creativity by having more sounds at their disposal.

Right out of the box, there was no crosstalk between playing on the head and playing on the rim of any of the pads. Even with my heaviest strokes, the isolation was perfect — too perfect, in fact. Try as I may, I just wasn't able to get both the head and the rim sound to fire at the same time. If I played what Roland describes as an "open rimshot" — hitting both the head and the rim at the same time — only one of those sounds would



fire. You also have to choose between the rimshot or cross stick sample on the rim with the accompanying head sample; there's no option to have both.

The face of the TD-17 module is pretty ergonomic. Features are easily accessible, and getting around the operating system is quite intuitive. The most commonly used aspects have their own dedicated buttons, while other more esoteric features are only a few clicks away.

In addition to the trigger input connector that consolidates the pad cables into a single snake, the module includes an SD card slot and a USB port. An SD card can be used to store songs or kit data, as well as load user samples into the module. The USB connection makes it easy to record audio or MIDI data directly into your DAW. Other connections include MIDI output, one 1/8" headphone and two

1/4" audio outputs, two additional 1/4" trigger inputs, and one 1/8" audio input.

The TD-17 also incorporates Bluetooth 4.2 audio streaming. After pairing your device, you can play music on your phone or tablet through the audio outputs of the TD-17. Perhaps more fun is using the TD-17 as a master controller on your device running software that receives MIDI through Bluetooth. If you've got that capability, you're really going to enjoy this feature.

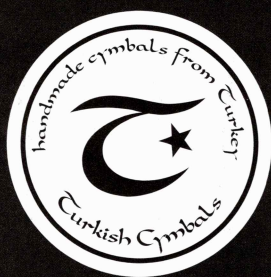
Being an intermediate-level kit, it's a smart move on Roland's part to include several educational features. Primarily, these features involve using a metronome in one way or another. "Time check" grades your timing accuracy, and "quiet count" causes the metronome to drop in and out at various intervals to check your groove. The TD-17 also includes seven

internal "songs," which are actually just short loops that last only a couple of seconds. If you want to do any serious play-along stuff, better to use the tunes on your phone.

## THE SOUNDS

The TD-17 comes with a large selection of pre-loaded kits and sounds. There are 50 factory kits and internal storage for 50 more user kits. All of the kits sounded good, and for the more "traditional" kits the sounds were musically appropriate in tone and tuning right out of the box. In the acoustic-style kits, I really liked the bass drum and cymbal sounds. The snares are all set up to take advantage of the pad's sensitivity so the ghost notes and accents of various dynamics speak well. The toms are rich and full, with plenty of meat on their bones.





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## DIALED IN

Bluetooth 4.2  
connectivity  
for audio and  
MIDI data

310 different  
sounds pre-  
loaded



Educational  
exercises  
included

50 factory  
kits pre-  
loaded  
with space  
for 50  
additional  
user kits

The unit comes with 310 different sounds divided into acoustic and electronic bass drums, snares, toms, percussion, and hi-hats, as well as acoustic rides, crashes, splashes, Chinas, other cymbals, and sound effects. I really liked the selection of sounds, and was glad to see some of the less-useful samples often included in electronic drum brains had purposefully been left out.

Sounds can be edited in a number of ways, but not all sounds have the full complement of adjustable parameters. The format is that the "acoustic-based" sounds generally have one set of parameters while the "electronic-based" instruments have a different set. For example, you can adjust an acoustic tom's tuning and muffling, while electronic toms have adjustments for pitch and decay. There are also a ton of adjustable parameters within the audio effects.

I did find that a few of the sounds had an audible transition when changing from one sample to the next. Rather than blend the sounds over a dynamic range, the samples in the TD-17 seem to switch from one into the other abruptly. Sometimes it was a very slight mismatch in the timbre, amount of ring, or character of

the instrument. While these anomalies weren't all that serious, I would expect that the sonic blend from one dynamic level to the next would be imperceptible over the entire dynamic range of an instrument.

Transferring WAV files from your computer to the TD-17 is fairly simple, and each sample can be a maximum of 295 seconds (almost five minutes) for mono or 148 seconds for stereo. This is plenty of time for even the longest loops.

### BOTTOM LINE

I like this kit. It only took a few minutes of playing to get comfortable behind the instrument. Playing for extended periods felt good too, and with eyes closed I could easily picture myself playing behind an acoustic kit. While the sounds aren't as good as using plugins on your computer, that's to be expected. And if you really need that high-end audio quality, you can use a MIDI connection. Overall I thought Roland's on-board sound selection was very sensible, and the inclusion of Bluetooth is a nice touch. The TD-17KVX has a lot going for it: an outstanding feel, strong sounds, good educational features, and a reasonable price. **D**