

SoundLab No. 4

Roland PD-20S-BK Electronic Drum Set *by Norman Weinberg*

Details, Details

Model: Roland PD-20S-BK

Price: \$6,495

Brain: TD-20

Drums: (3) PD-125 (Snare, Toms), (2) PD-105 (Toms), KD-120 (Kick)

Cymbals: (2) CY-14C (Crash), CY-15R (Ride), VH-12 (Hi-Hat)

Stand: MDS-20 Rack-Style

Maximum Polyphony: 64 Voices

Drum Kits: 50

Drum/Percussion Sounds: 560

Backing Instruments: 262

Chains: 16 (32 steps per chain)

Effects: Pad EQ, Pad Compression; 14 Multi-Effects; Master: EQ, Compression; Backing Parts: Reverb, Chorus

Display: 64x240 dots backlit graphic LCD

Faders: 8

Sequencer: 100 Preset, 100 User Patterns;

Parts: 6; Resolution: 192 ppq

Recording Method: Real time

Expansion: CompactFlash Memory Card, Expansion Board

Additional Features: A normal power cable, the ability to accept an expansion board, backlit LCD, stereo footswitch jack, the words "Assembled in the United States" on every pad, and the coolest graphic display this side of a Playstation II.

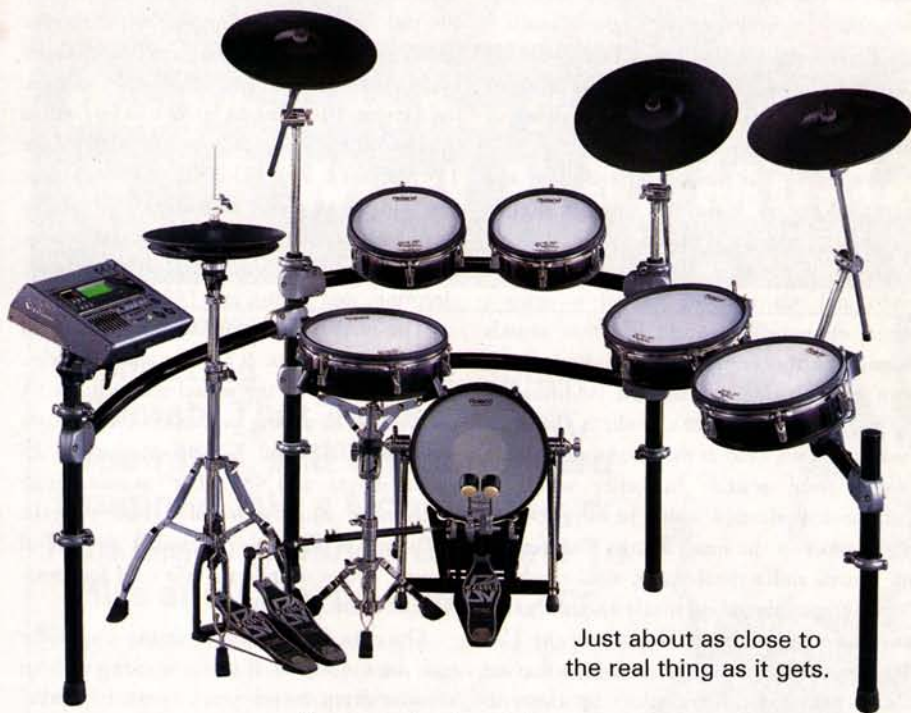
Raising The Bar

Okay, here's the skinny, short and sweet: this is simply the best electronic kit ever available. If you're in the market for the crème-de-la-crème, state-of-the-art, full-tilt boogie, no-holds-barred electronic kit, this baby's the one. That said, this review is over – but maybe not. Maybe you're still interested in what this kit does, how it sounds, how it feels, what it costs, and what (if anything) might be its limitations.

The Brain. The brains of the outfit is the new TD-20 Percussion Sound Module. If you're familiar with Roland's TD-8 or TD-10 modules, you'll see some obvious improvements. Most striking is the larger LCD display and additional buttons dedicated to specific programming tasks.

The logically organized back panel has everything you need for live or studio applications. The TD-20 has trigger inputs for kick, snare, four toms, ride (with edge input), hi-hat (with control input), and two crashes, as well as four auxiliary inputs. It offers MIDI-In and a single MIDI-Out/Thru connection, along with a footswitch input and a "Mix-In" for connecting any external audio source such as a CD or iPod. Audio outputs include master outs, eight individual outs, and a digital S/PDIF connection.

The TD-20's face sports eight group faders as well as master, headphone, and mix input volume controls. Sequencer functions are controlled by an arrangement of transport buttons that include pattern select, stop, play, record, and tempo (click). Along with the obligatory cursor buttons, oversize up and down value buttons, and data value wheel, you'll find a number of buttons dedicated to commonly used features such as chain, copy, effect styles, and trigger controls.



Just about as close to the real thing as it gets.

The currently selected drum kit is displayed on a large three-character LED. Additional kit information, as well as editing parameters, are clearly shown on the backlit graphic display. During normal playing, this display shows the kit's name and additional information about its functions. When editing, the display shows both parameter and graphic information, depending on the type of editing being done. Like most new synths, value editing is easily accomplished by adjusting the five function knobs below the display. This interface makes editing easy and intuitive.

The Pads. For years, Roland has featured their patented mesh-head pads on their high-end kits. Some electronic drummers believe that the mesh heads are "soggy" and prefer playing rubber pads. Other players feel that the mesh heads offer a more natural stick response than rubber. If you're not familiar with the feel, response, and sensitivity that mesh heads offer, you need to give the pads a test drive at your local dealer. Logically, adjusting the tension

of the mesh heads will not affect the pitch or tonal qualities of the sound coming out of the PD-20's audio outputs. It will, however, drastically affect the way the drums feel under your sticks. For accurate triggering, it's still important that all of the tension rods are adjusted evenly to get the best response from the trigger mechanism.

This six-piece kit includes three PD-125 12" pads for the snare and floor toms, two PD-105 10" pads for higher toms, and the KD-120 kick pad. All of the pads have been reworked. Roland's older PD-120 pads had a trigger bridge suspended from the drum's shell. The new pads have a trigger basket that sits inside the shell. The company believes this offers better dynamics and sensitivity, as well as more accurate and even rim triggering. Based on my experience, these are some of the best tracking pads I've ever played. Not only do they feel great, they responded to my slightest touch – and I mean my *slightest touch*. Even with my strongest playing, the head and rim triggers were well isolated. There was no evidence of crosstalk between surfaces.

The mono kick drum pad feels fine and there's plenty of room to support double beaters. The pad/stand unit is solid and didn't creep out of position. All the other pads are stereo and can be programmed to offer a variety of sounds. It works like this: sounds assigned to the head can fire independently from sounds assigned to the rim. Additionally, the pads can detect when a stroke is played on the rim and the head at the same time to fire a unique third sound. In other words, a traditional application would be to program a snare sound on the head, a cross stick for the rim sound, and a rimshot for, well, rimshots. Depending on the sound that is assigned to the rim/head stroke, it's possible to have the TD-20 change timbre as you play rimshots that are more "shallow" (with the stick's tip closer to the counterhoop).

The kit's cymbal arsenal includes two CY-14 crashes. These stereo instruments can have unique sounds assigned to both the bow and edge of the cymbal. Chokes are accomplished by grabbing the cymbal at its edge sensor. The CY-15R ride cymbal senses strokes on the bell in addition to those on the bow and edge. With compatible ride cymbal sounds assigned to the CY-15R, changing the playing position on the cymbal's bow affects the nuance and tonal character of the sound.

Roland's new VH-12 hi-hat is a set of two pads that can be mounted on most normal hi-hat stands (1/4-5/16" rod, 1/2" max seat, 3/4-1" riser tube). It's an amazing instrument,

capable of offering a smooth and continuous change from open to closed, depending on the position of the pedal. The top cymbal will read a stroke on the bow or the edge so that its colors change depending on where you strike the pad. The VH-12 can also read pressure. When the cymbal pads are closed, pressing down on the pedal will alter the closed hi-hat sound. Foot splash? No problem.

While some of these features may seem like bells and whistles, they're not. When taken together, the result is a set of pads that feels and responds in a highly natural and organic manner. This is no small accomplishment for an electronic kit.

Instruments. The TD-20 ships from the factory with 50 presets. While the factory kits can be edited, they're part of the TD-20's permanent memory, and can be recalled at any time. Getting the sound you want under the pad is really quite simple. You strike the pad or rim that you want to program, select the instrument group, and then the specific instrument. For example: strike tom one, select the instrument group of "tom," and call up the 12" Maple T1. The TD-20 has a slew of great sounding samples, including 70 kicks (including normal, processed, and electronic), 80 snares (including normal, processed, electronic, and brush), and 142 toms.

The cymbal locker contains 18 hi-hats, 20 crashes, 10 splashes, 9 Chinas, and 33 rides. The remainder of the sound set includes 94 percussion, 11 analog percussion (taken from Roland's CR78 and TR808 machines), 23 special effects, and 48 "other" sounds. Some instrument sounds are designed to take advantage of the pads' positional or interval sensing. Other sounds are best used for cross-stick or brush purposes.

Once an instrument is sitting under the pad, the fun begins. If you're working with an acoustic drum sound, you can enter "V-edit" mode to essentially create your own virtual instrument. Drum parameters include shell depth, head type, head tuning, muffling, and a five-position microphone placement. While the head choices are common to all of the drums (clear, coated, dual-ply, or Pinstripe-type), other elements are specific to the particular drums you're designing. For example, the bass drum elements include beater type (felt, wood, plastic), while the snare's elements include shell material (wood, steel, brass) and strainer tension adjustment (off, loose, medium, tight). When V-editing cymbals, you can select the cymbal size, sizzle type (rivet or chain), or even add a tambourine to the hi-hat!

In addition to all of the drum and percussion sounds, the TD-20 contains 100 preset patterns. Eighty of them are loops, 18 are taps (with the ability to step through a melodic pattern one note at a time, each time a pad is struck), and two are V-link patterns.

Effects. The TD-20 has plenty of audio effects. Each input has its own individual EQ and compressor. The three-band equalizer has controls for Q (width of frequency range), center frequency, and gain (boost/cut by 15 dB). Other kit effects are ambience, multi-effects, and master effects. All effects have a number of parameters to fine-tune your sound.

The ambience effect is somewhat different than a typical reverb; it's more like designing the drum kit's playing environment. Here you can select the room type (studio, garage, theater, etc.), room size, wall type (wood, plaster, or glass), microphone position, and room shape. Multi-effects include the typical reverb, gated reverb, delay, chorus, and flanger. Less common are the lo-fi, enhancer, distortion, overdrive, and beat delay (synchronized with the tempo of the sequencer) effects. Master effects include both compression and EQ, and can be applied on a kit-by-kit basis or assigned to all kits in the TD-20.

The PD-20's sounds are wonderful. Kicks have power, punch, and depth. Snares are rich and colorful. Toms have plenty of tone and ring, and the cymbals sound like cymbals. Combine the sounds with the effects, and playing this kit makes you believe that you're playing a high-end kit in a high-end studio.

The Rack. It's a beautiful thing! The new 40-pound MDS-20 rack has several features. First and most obvious is that all the cables are run directly through the piping of the stand. Not only does this provide a much cleaner look, the kit is faster to set up when the cables are clearly labeled and always ready to go. Four large quick-release cam levers control the cymbal booms and height of the vertical tubes, making any type of adjustment a breeze. The drum clamps are elegant, simple to operate, and absolutely rock solid.

There are, however, a few concerns. Running cables through the inside of the rack is a great idea, but what happens when one of the cables goes south? Replacing cables doesn't look like an easy fix. The curved horizontal tubing of the stand made it difficult for me to place my floor toms where I wanted them. When tom 4 was in position, tom 3 was too far away from my snare drum. When I put tom 3 in just the right place, tom 4 was too close to my body. I eventually found something that

worked, but it was a compromise. All the cymbal mounts have built-in boom arms. However, only one of the cymbal arms (the right-side crash) is designed so that it can be moved along the horizontal pipe. The other two cymbals must be attached to the frame in line with the vertical tubing. This may or may not be an issue for you.

Identity. When Roland went to the drawing board, they must have decided to create an identity for this kit without trying to be all things to all players. It's not designed to be a fancy MIDI controller; there's no stacked notes, alternate notes, or velocity crossfades (although it incorporates a pretty deep set of MIDI commands). It's not designed to fire thousands of different sounds (although its drum and percussion sounds are first quality). The six-part sequencer has only the most basic editing capabilities, and with a list price of \$6,500, it's certainly not a beginner's kit. In fact, that price tag will likely put this kit out of reach for most individual players. Sure, professional players, churches, recording studios, and Vegas-style venues will have to own this kit, but for the "drummer in the trenches," the price is too steep.

There are plenty of trigger settings – pad type, sensitivity, threshold, velocity curve, crosstalk, scan time, re-trigger cancel, mask time, and special controls for the hi-hat, ride, and the cross stick – to ensure that the pads respond in the most natural manner possible. The bass drum and toms can be programmed to include nine different values of sympathetic snare buzz from very subtle to terribly distracting. And the TD-20 is smart enough to turn off the toms' sympathetic buzz if you program the snare's tension to "off."

Many of the snare and cymbal sounds are capable of "interval" intelligence. With this feature, the brain tracks the speed of attacks and interprets quick strokes as a roll – changing the attack portion of the sample on the fly. The end result is that rolls sound like rolls, not simply re-triggers of the same sound. This is a first for electronic drums and makes a huge difference in the quality of rolled sounds.

While the TD-20 will accept a single expansion board, none are available at the moment. Roland says that the card will incorporate new functions, sounds, and features that will greatly extend the life of the module. Taken as a whole, the PD-20S-BK is absolutely the very best electronic emulation of an acoustic drum kit yet. 🥁

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