

Gear 4 Music DD502-J

Electronic drum kit

The DD502-J electronic kit is one of Gear 4 Music's most recent additions to their ever-expanding range of own-branded products — but what sounds and features can we possibly hope for at a smidgeon under £300?

Dave Holmes

In the early days of a once seemingly bizarre fusion of electronics and drums, the choice of available equipment was, at best, limited. There was a great deal of experimentation going on behind the scenes, but as far as commercially available electronic kits were concerned, the choice was pretty much narrowed down to either Simmons or Simmons. Though Simmons enjoyed a great deal of success and their kits were adopted by many bands of the day, the sounds and, more especially, the rock-hard playing surfaces, were far removed from anything resembling a conventional acoustic kit. As the memories of those badly sprained wrists and fairly basic electronic drum sounds began to fade, the acoustic kit once again reigned supreme. Nowadays, however, we are privy to some amazingly realistic sounds and 'real-feel' kits — many at a fraction of the cost of those

iconic hexagonal pads.

Up for review in this issue are the spoils of Gear 4 Music's foray into the world of electronic drums — the wallet-friendly DD502-J. With the exception of a drum stool, everything is included within the 'standard' package for the budding e-drummer. The five-drum set comprises a sturdy aluminium drum rack (complete with all the necessary clamps, stands and fittings), pedals for hi-hat and kick, cymbal pads (for hi-hat and two cymbals), and four individual drum pads for the snare and the three toms. There is also an Allen key included for rack assembly, a drum key, a pair of 5B weighted sticks and nine quarter-inch jack-to-jack leads formed into a 2.5M snake — all clearly labelled and colour coded for their designated inputs.

Under Instruction

The supplied instruction manual features a selection of comprehensible diagrams and concise text — supplying just enough information to allow a rapid setup and avoid the possibility of narcolepsy. There is, however, one error in the section that mentions the function of the hi-hat pedal. This basically says that pressing down or "stepping on" the hi-hat pedal "opens the hi-hat" and conversely releasing the pedal "closes the hi-hat" — this should, of course, be the opposite way around! Alongside the manual, G4M have also included an additional instruction leaflet, which lists the hardware, details of rack assembly and position and placement for each of the various components.



Brains of the operation

Located at the rear of a lightweight black plastic case is the on switch and a socket for the supplied 9V mains adaptor. The adaptor features an LED that illuminates when the mains power is on — I thought this was a very useful aspect that other manufacturers could adopt. Alongside the aforementioned power

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Gear 4 Music DD502-J
£299

With a combination of a great little module, very responsive pads and a sturdy rack to place it all on, Gear 4 Music could be on to a real winner.

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the whole kit operation. These include: Start/Stop, Kit, Volume, Voice Volume, Song Volume, Click, Tempo/Tap, and increment/decrement buttons. There are a further nine push buttons that may also be used to trigger the voices of a selected kit, without having to strike any of the pads. Each one of the buttons illuminates to show which of the pads is being triggered or sounded, and as the manual suggests, this could potentially be a useful training aid. The module comes complete with a selection of over 200 drum and percussion sounds, 20 preset kits and 10 user-definable kits too.

There are 50 preset songs, which offer a wide range of varying genres and styles to jam along with. Each song may be played at any selected tempo (displayed on the screen in BPM), and this may be adjusted by either tapping on the Tempo/Tap button

or making a selection via the incremental buttons. While the system mutes the actual song data from going out via the MIDI port, each one may be accompanied by any of the preset or user-definable kits, enabling the player to hear each one with a variety of kit setups. At anytime during song performance it is possible to mute the pre-sequenced drum tracks to allow the player to play his or her own drumming efforts with any chosen kit. The levels of the backing track or drum voices may be independently adjusted from the top panel, however the level from an external audio supply (CD, MP3 player etc) has to be adjusted at the source.

switch is a succession of quarter-inch jack sockets, spaced approximately 15mm apart. These are the inputs for each of the eight pads, hi-hat foot pedal and an external audio source for devices such as an MP3 or CD player.

Catering for the audio outputs are two more quarter-inch jack sockets, designated as Mono/Left and Right, together with a single five-pin DIN socket for MIDI out. On the left of the module is sited a single quarter-inch stereo headphone output.

Atop the module is a three-character, green-coloured alphanumeric LED display together with all the various control buttons for

Drum and cymbal pads

Each of the eight-inch drum pads is constructed from a robust, injection-moulded ABS plastic with a thin rubber membrane stretched over a padded base and a single sensor sited just below the padding in the centre of each drum pad. The combination of 'drum head', padding and the adjustable tension of the 'heads' has all in the ingredients to provide a good playing surface. The trapezoidal shape of the three cymbal pads will be instantly recognisable to anyone familiar with electronic kits — these, like the drum pads, are single zone, so the usual acoustic cymbal features such as chokes, for example, are not possible.

Hi-hat pedal

This little unit is finished in a black powder coating and has silver decaling matching the kick drum pedal. To stop the fairly lightweight pedal from going walkabout there are strips of Velcro-type pads thoughtfully placed to the underside of the pedal base — though for this to be effective the pedal does need to be placed on a carpeted surface. Just below the cast-aluminium pedal footplate is a large steel spring that provides the pedal return and ensures a reasonable feel under foot. A mono jack sends signals back to the module, and has the effect of either opening or closing the hi-hat — which should, when used in conjunction with the hi-hat cymbal pad, sound very similar to an acoustic hi-hat — as well as making the 'chk' noise of a hi-hat being depressed.

Bass drum pedal set

This two-part kick combo consists of a foot pedal accompanied by the vertical kick pad assembly, and is designed to operate very much in the same way as a conventional kick. The bracket and pad assembly features a robust 1.5mm-thick steel mounting plate, which should prove resistant to any potential pedal pounding. The tough overall appearance is echoed by the finish of the black powder coating on most of the metal work and it is »

Tech Spec

DD502-J

- Five drum pads: floor tom, two suspended toms, snare and kick.
- Three cymbal pads: hi-hat, crash and ride.
- Kick drum pedal.
- Hi-hat pedal.
- Aluminium tube rack.
- DD502-J sound module and trigger to MIDI converter.
- Left/mono and right outputs.
- Headphone output.
- MIDI output.
- Auxiliary input.
- 215 drum voices.
- 20 preset kits, 10 user kits.
- 50 songs.

Optional extras

Gear 4 Music offer two additional kit packages. The Kit Package Deal adds a further £25 onto the price but includes a set of headphones, a drum stool and an extra pair of sticks — which represents really good value for anyone's pocket. The Kit & Amp Pack, meanwhile, also includes the stool and a set of headphones but, as you may have guessed, it also comes with an amplifier. This pushes the purchase price up another £100 over the basic package.

» the angled edging of the pressed steel that gives the whole unit its rigidity. Sited to the lower-rear portion are two chromed-steel spikes to help avoid any potential forward kit motion, and a raised area is pressed into the bracket to ensure a good purchase for the kick pedal clamp.

Visually, the kick pad itself shares many features of the other drum pads in the kit, including the plastic injection-moulded casing and the rubberised pad, though this is, of course, mounted vertically. While this pad may look very similar to the others, the padding beneath the rubberised striking area appears to be slightly softer and almost sponge-like.

Although the kick pedal is fairly basic, it has all the usual functions of a standard bass drum pedal, and would be quite happy clamped onto a standard acoustic kick. There are twin posts for the pedal shaft and bearings for a smooth pedal action, which is fully adjustable via the single return spring. The pedal comes with a reversible beater, with a hard plastic on one side and a soft felt-like material on the other.

Performance

Thanks to those excellent instructions and the fact that I seemed to have more than just a vague familiarity with the rack (which looks remarkably like models I have seen from a few resellers), the whole set was hooked up and ready to play in less than an hour. Other than the default '001' kit appearing on the basic LED display, there is little activity as the system is powered on. Listening to the default song provided me with the first of many surprises of



▲ The DD502-J 'brain' holds 20 preset kits and 10 user kits, comprising 215 individual sounds.

this review — the snare was crisp and ballsy, and the kick really punched out. The first ride cymbal I listened to was perhaps the weakest link in the kit, as it sounded a bit too much like a crash and lacked any sort of stick definition.

Each song relies on a count or click of three or four beats at the beginning, which I found particularly frustrating. This means that you can't change quickly from one song to another, as there is a delay while the drum track counts itself in.

All of the rubber drum pads give a really good stick response and are a definite improvement on any of those rock-hard rubberised models available on some other electronic kits — especially around the lower end of the market. The sticks were not overly bouncy and I could feel each pad absorb a fair proportion of the shock caused by the striking of the head. As a bonus, each stick strike is very quiet, and apart from the pounding of the bass drum pedal, the whole kit remains quiet, so it could be good for practice. The kick itself is very impressive, with a solid mounting structure and a realistic rebound. The cymbal pads are fussy about exactly where they are struck, however — as near as possible to the sensor is the most practical way of accurately triggering the sound.

Conclusion

The heart of any electronic kit is the sound module, or 'brain' as it is colloquially known

(though it's possible to add some form of external MIDI sound source). It is essentially the hub of any electronic kit. Fundamentally, it is the most important component in providing all the sounds, samples and features to get the most out of those passive drum pads. The level of sound quality and the features available, of course, often determines the retail price, and for any high-end system, this can run into several thousands of pounds. With the exception of a few noisy samples (especially on a Fender Rhodes type sound), I must admit to being quite taken aback by the overall sound capabilities of the DD502-J.

A few of the pre-programmed songs could be described as 'cheesy', a couple just plain awful, and one or two tunes have a plodding mechanical feel, but there is a whole variety of musical genres, which overall represents a good cross-section of rhythms and song types. There are certain sounds that suffer from the familiar dodgy MIDI pitch bend, but the song programming seems to squeeze every bit out of the available polyphony from the GM-type voices.

There are a few electronic kits available at a similar price to the DD502-J, and one or two of these setups rely heavily on outdated technology. While the Gear 4 Music system doesn't have much in the way of the bells and whistles, and it doesn't have loads of

gimmicky sound effects, it does feature plenty of very useful drum sounds. The DD502-J is a great starter kit and a very worthy setup for any person wishing to 'go electric', but who might be afraid to spend mounds of dosh to get there. ■ **PM**

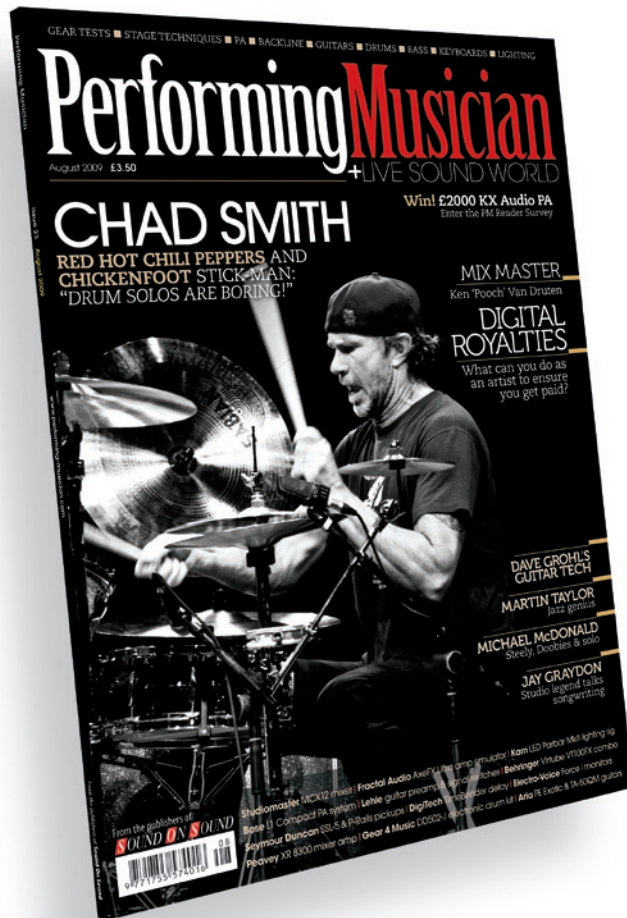
◀ As well as housing the stereo outputs and all of the trigger input jacks, the module's rear panel also features a MIDI output and an auxiliary audio input.



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