

cm mini reviews

A rapid-fire round-up of sample libraries, ROMplers and music gear

ROLI Blocks £170/£70/£70

Web www.roli.com
Format iOS

Blocks is a "modular music studio" of three Bluetooth MIDI controllers built specifically for use with the free Noise iOS app. For the full, intended experience, you need to buy all three - and one of them twice, for a possible total outlay of £480.

The £170 Lightpad Block is the heart of the system: a grid-based, LED-backlit surface for triggering loops, and playing drums and melodic instruments (which is why you'll want two). ROLI's MPE (Multidimensional Polyphonic Expression) technology is built in, enabling parameter modulation via left/right and up/down finger movement, as well as pressure.

The Loop and Live Blocks (£70 each) are button controllers, the first handling transport functions, the second activating scale locking, the arpeggiator, chord mode, etc.

The three Blocks stick together in any configuration via power-transferring magnetic connectors, and charge via the USB-C port in the

Lightpad. They're also very well made, although the Lightpad's surprisingly high-friction surface isn't at all fun to play.

A bigger issue than that, however, is the Noise software, which falls short in just about every area. It features over 100 drum and synth sounds and loops, with more available via IAP, but there's no editing of any aspect of them beyond the prescribed MPE assignments - not even volume and pan! Also, *nothing* is labelled - modulated parameters, kit elements, note names in Scale and Chord modes... - and there's no overdubbing or means by which to extract your 'finished' loops apart from export to the world at large via Noise.FM. On the plus side, there's scale snapping, auto chord generating and arpeggiation, MPE works well enough, and the sounds themselves (generated by Roli's impressive Equator synth engine) are great.

The Dashboard assignment/editing software



for Mac and PC opens Blocks up for use as MIDI controllers with any DAW or MIDI-compatible software, but being currently in beta, we can't factor that into our appraisal. And anyway, no matter how good it ends up being, the price of the hardware will still be way too high.

Ultimately, casual users with money to burn will have fun with Blocks until they tire of Noise's sounds and limitations, and there's clearly plenty of potential for wireless MIDI control thanks to Dashboard. Right now, though, it's an expensive, underdeveloped curio.

6/10

HoRNet Plugins Magnus Mk2 €22

Web www.hornetplugins.com
Format PC/Mac

Adding a number of new features and a fresh GUI to HoRNet's 2014 mastering plugin, Magnus Mk2 (VST/AU/AAX) is a cleverly designed two-stage clipper/brickwall limiter. The signal hits the Clipper first, where those inaudible peaks that just eat up headroom are rounded off or severely shaved, either in analogue-style Soft mode or more 'digital' Hard mode. After that, it's onto the Limiter, which incorporates three release stages: the main one, set by the Release knob, a second set to half the Release time and a third set to a quarter. In Auto mode, the main Release time is set to one bar, while the other two lock to one and two beats, which works very well indeed with dance music.

Each stage can be independently set to up to 4x oversampling, and the Auto Output option keeps the peak output level at a value of your choosing. Metering includes Integrated LUFS, dynamic Range (LU) and RMS readouts, as well as graphical peak and RMS meters.

A very versatile, transparent dynamics-shaping combo, Magnus Mk2 is an obvious bargain.

9/10



ProjectSAM Swing More! £369

Web www.timespace.com
Format PC/Mac, Kontakt Player

At its premium price point, the follow-up/accompaniment to Swing! needs to impress. Fortunately, with its 120,000 samples (80GB, compressed down to 40GB) spanning a wide range of big band ensemble and solo instrumentation, played by a crack team of jazz veterans, this immense Kontakt Player library certainly does that.

From brass of all kinds, drums, percussion, bass and guitars through to vocals, strings and more, you get plenty of articulations, phrases, strums, grooves, runs, etc. The Big Band Chords patches are particularly noteworthy, presenting 12 ensemble chords for each of the 12 root notes - instant jazz!

Three mic positions and a handful of other controls offer a degree of sound shaping, but this is clearly a package in which the recorded sounds are the focus, rather than a profusion of processing options.

Of course, it's simply not possible to 100% faithfully 'virtualise' the attitude and dynamism of a real big band (the 'everyone in the room together' factor), but this is as close as it's currently possible to get. Immense.

9/10



Soundware round-up



Mainroom Warehouse Underground Techno DNA \$25

1.3GB of on-point loops and shots for techno productions of all kinds. 100 tuned kick drums are intended to be laid out under any of 100 kick-free drum loops, which are supplied full and as multitracks for mixing and matching. The 50 Melody loops cover everything from basslines and leads to riffs and arps, all exploding with dancefloor energy. A wealth of one-shot drums, synths and vocals puts a ribbon on it, and overall, Underground Techno DNA is a joyously priced triumph.

www.reveal-sound.com

9/10

Touch Loops

LA Beat Scene £25

Vibey acoustic drums, funky basses, haunting pianos, quirky percussion, dusty synths, old-skool beatboxes and more unite in this library of 302 loops, 154 one-shot drums and FX, and 135 MIDI files for your chilled electronic productions. The bass guitars and keyboards are irresistible, and the live drums strike just the right balance between tight and loose. The ten melodic song starter construction kits are fun, too, and overall we really like Touch Loops' attitude - they seem to have a rare talent for bringing musicality and grit together in their samples.

www.touchloops.com

8/10



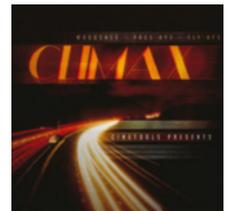
Cinetools

Climax £60

2GB of cinematic whooshes, fly-bys and suchlike, divided into 313 processed shots and the 600 raw source and field recordings on which they're based. A huge variety of 'stuff' was used to produce them, including water, aeroplanes, bikes, household implements and even a homemade fireball. The only things we're not keen on are the sense of repetition that crops up occasionally, and the amount of reverb used on most of the processed sounds. As fuel for your own effects, though, the raw samples are worth the price of admission alone.

www.loopmasters.com

8/10



Sample Magic

Lo-Fi Pop £35

Tape processing, distortion and other degrading techniques have been used to imbue everything in Sample Magic's wistful library with the titular roughed-up sound. The beats are represented by 38 stemmed drum loops and 40 mostly shaker-based percussion loops, plus a ton of one-shots, while the melodic side of things is the headline, featuring 20 beautiful guitar loops, 20 fully worked-up Inspiration Kits, and a solid array of synths, pads and atmospheres. A handy Chord Instrument Rack for Ableton Live tops off this fine genre pack.

www.samplemagic.com

8/10



Organic Loops

Jazz & Lounge Horns £20

Starring trumpeter Ben Cummings and saxophonist Billy Chapman, this collection of 600+ sax and trumpet loops and three trumpet multis (107 samples) really hits the jazz spot. The loops are categorised by tempo and instrument type (alto and tenor sax, trumpet, muted trumpet) and essentially comprise a grab-bag of lines, licks and improvisations for use as is or editing into your own shapes. Recorded through a Neumann 87 into an SSL G Series desk, the instruments sound fabulous, and both players work them brilliantly. And look at that price!

www.loopmasters.com

10/10



Puremagnetik

K-Station Atmospheres \$20

We were expecting a rendition of Novation's gnarly early-noughties K-Station synth, but this is in fact a pack of sampled textures and pads from the Kawai K5000S in Live Rack, Kontakt and Logic Track Stack formats. Up to four samples are layered at a time, then processed and blended into a single 'atmosphere' using each platform's controls. The Kontakt version offers the easiest sample mixing, but the more detailed effects of the Live and Logic versions are compelling. Whichever you go for, though, the source sounds are magnificent.

www.puremagnetik.com**8/10**

Ilio

Robotica £30

107 presets for Omnisphere 2, based on 400MB of source samples, Robotica takes the sounds of sci-fi as its inspiration. However, while mechanoid animations, alien imaginings and pan-celestial ambiances all feature heavily, what really shines through is the musicality of it all, from the rhythmic sequences and "Hits" to the mono synths and plucks. Consequently, while sound designers will find lots to get excited about, we reckon the main audience is the electronic music producer looking to add a touch of cinematic drama to their tracks.

www.timespace.com**8/10**

Loopmasters

Club Funk and Nu Disco £30

For us, the highlight of Loopmasters' big, bright dance music sample library is the Bass Loops folder, containing 56 infectious electric and synth b-lines – almost every one a winner. In the tubs department, the "56 Full Drum Loops" and "56 Top Loops" description is a little iffy, with 50 of the Fulls being matched pairs, presented with and without ancillary percussion, and the Top loops comprising said percussion and the tops from the Full loops. However, the beats themselves are all great, as are the sparkling guitars, synths and keyboards.

www.loopmasters.com**8/10**

Mode Audio

Outlook £18

The theme of Mode's latest construction kit library seems to be a slightly vague combination of acoustic/electric instrumentation and analogue synths, with the emphasis placed on the former. What we have here are ten very well produced loop-based 'songs' that media producers will find incredibly useful but musicians won't get as much of mileage out of, as all the parts (MIDI and audio) are specifically designed to work together. That's not to say that there aren't ad hoc treasures to be plundered, though, particularly among the percussion loops and hits.

www.modeaudio.com**7/10**

F9 Audio

21st Century Soul £30/£37

Available in Standard (4GB) and Deluxe (5GB) editions, this vast 'contemporary soul' pack contains more loops, one-shots and sampler patches than we can even begin to describe here, much of it loosely adhering to a set of 17 named construction kits. The drums are approached from every conceivable angle – loops, stems, layers, hits – and the instrumental performances (bass, keys, guitars, etc) are superb. It's not totally clear how the whole thing is meant to be navigated (the documentation is enthusiastic but non-specific), so just dive in and explore!

www.f9-audio.com**9/10**

Loopmasters

Tropics Presents – Retro Electronic £25

A no-frills library focusing primarily on synths, as you'd expect, but getting pleasantly organic in its drums and percussion – from strange pseudo-acoustic interpretations of house rhythms to understated brushed grooves and hyperkinetic tops, there's real imagination on display. In the low-end and melodic camps, the mood is laid-back, with sub-heavy basslines, pretty keys, evocative chords and cloudy atmospherics fuelling the compositional fire at tempos from 90-140bpm. Tasteful and distinctive.

www.loopmasters.com**8/10**

Native Instruments

Elastic Thump £44

Produced in collaboration with MSXII, this 300MB Maschine 2 Expansion fuses the uplifting vibes and rhythms of house with the soulful stylistic vernacular of R&B to great creative effect. Tight, upfront drums and percussion, funky basses, warm analogue synths, talkbox vocals and more come together beautifully across 48 Kits and 17 Instruments, incorporating 40 Massive and Monark presets, and 120 Drum Synths. An intriguing, rewarding, genuinely innovative sonic resource for Maschine users, with broad cross-genre appeal.

www.native-instruments.com**9/10**

Big Fish Audio

Kandiland £110

20 EDM construction kits (3.4GB), each one pulling together a truckload of parts to emulate the sounds of mainroom luminaries such as Diplo, Chainsmokers, Zedd et al. Everything is produced and engineered to BFA's usual high standard, and the requisite subgenres and stylistic elements are all checked off, but the whole thing lacks in authenticity and dirt, and strays dangerously close to pastiche at times. Thoroughly proficient, then, but by the numbers, making Kandiland one for media producers more than musicians. **cm**

www.timespace.com**7/10**