

DRUMAGOG 5

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(\$149.00 MSRP; <http://drumagog.com>)

WaveMachine Labs

Drum replacement software can seem like so much digital voodoo, adding to the “Photoshopification” of music production, but really it’s just an extension of drum enhancement techniques that stretch back to the introduction of multitrack. Drum re-amping and overdubbing have been around forever. We are forever slaves to “if it isn’t right, fix it, and make it better.”

Allowing you to trigger samples off of audio tracks, and one of the earlier fully-featured drum-replacement software solutions, Drumagog is a VST/AU/RTAS plug-in that focuses exclusively on drum replacement and enhancement/manipulation. Its clear display of the detection input and multisample triggering made it an easy go-to from day one. An incredibly effective tool to solidify and beef up kick drums of any kind or adding depth to snares and cymbals, I’ve been using it since the first version. It winds up somewhere on almost every record I work on.

Before Drumagog, I had been doing sample replacement by hand for a long time — really arduous and a complete pain, even with keyboard shortcuts. A friend of mine called it “CNN work” because he would just turn on the cable TV in his control room and do it all by eye!

The original Drumagog with its easy to visualize detectors was a real help speeding up workflow, and now Drumagog 5, with its rewritten detection algorithms and additional features, like Room Samples and Plug-In Hosting, has made the process much, much easier than before. I’m still going over everything beat-by-beat, but the process is now much less RSI inducing.

This is a major redesign with a full streamlining of the UI and major changes under the hood, including improved detection and phase correlation, bleed control, effects, and plug-in hosting. It’s much better than it used to be — both easier to use and much more powerful. The primary window of Drumagog 5 now gathers up the most useful displays all in one spot. It’s dead easy to set because you can see every incoming transient and configure the threshold and trigger resolution visually. With the sample set now in the same window and each sample lighting up when triggered, you can be confident that your settings are correct and follow the performance. The left side of the window now features a file browser so library navigation is now much, much simpler, and you can access your favorite samples easily.

Drumagog’s proprietary sample format, apocalyptically named Gog, now allows for parallel triggered multisamples so you can create or utilize multiple microphones on your one-shots. This isn’t anything new, but it’s new for Drumagog users — and it’s long needed. Now in the primary window in the bottom right under the Main tab are sliders that will allow you to blend in three extra samples along with whatever is being triggered (usually room samples, but you can create whatever you want). They work just like you think they will, and my only caveat is that I wish the standard Gog library that comes with the plug-in utilized more of this great new feature.

Rim Buntinas, Drumagog’s main guy, told me that it’s easy to create these layered multisamples right from Drumagog’s primary window. After importing all your samples, just drag-and-drop your room samples in the order that you wish them to appear as faders onto the main sample, and the assignment happens automatically. It’s killer — and easy to do. I just

wish that the library would be redesigned to use this new room feature everywhere. My inner synth person wants to be able to assign an LFO to these faders, but automation will do for now.

The factory Gogs have a wide variety of sounds for such a smallish sample set (now up to 7 GB with a new update) and usually have the right components to slot alongside existing drum tracks. I'm particularly fond of their Roland CR-78 and TR-606 samples, which seem to marry to acoustic kicks and snares without making them seem electronic in the least.

Probably the most major change with Drumagog 5 and the biggest incentive to purchasing the Platinum version is the integrated plug-in hosting. You can now load in any VSTi, and this has really changed how I use Drumagog in a big way. With Pro Tools, I used to employ a workaround to get MIDI out of PT from previous versions of Drumagog in order to feed it other plug-ins and external MIDI devices. I used a small piece of Mac OS X freeware called MidiPipe that is great at routing MIDI around the Mac (as well as a bunch of other awesome tricks). It definitely has its own lovely weirdness. Assigning Drumagog's MIDI output to a MidiPipe input, I could then bring MidiPipe's output back into Pro Tools and then assign that to a track or an instance of Native Instruments Battery. It worked like a charm. Now there's no need for it; I just fire up Drumagog 5 and load Battery — and that's it. It's stable and adds a new way to use any VSTi you have. (Soft synths make killer drum modules!)

One of the features exclusive to the Platinum version, the new Morph Engine claims to “dynamically shape” Drumagog's output to create “growling, liquid” sounds. In use, it's very synthetic sounding with a digital top end that may be a touch too idiosyncratic, which I think really limits its appeal. Rather than so many presets based on modulating resonances, maybe tape emulation, distortions, or compression could be interesting. It's a great idea that with a few tweaks could be a more useful feature.

Another new feature is a convolution reverb that's utilitarian and functional — great if you need it. It will accept 16 or 24-bit impulse-response files so you can access other libraries you might have. Loading other kinds of audio files, like a floor tom or short melodic parts, makes for more sound design options. Soft white noise bursts do wonders too.

In day-to-day use, I find that Drumagog works best when it's used in an additive fashion, to enhance rather than replace what's already there, but you could very easily go through all of your drums and transform the tracks entirely if you needed to. Drumagog has proved useful in a few situations past other than just replacing drums directly within the track. When I'm re-amping snares, I'd had much more success using Drumagog to output an electronic kick drum to the amplifier that is triggering a real snare. A well-chosen, tuned kick sample can really dramatically change the response of the re-amp snare and help it seamlessly fit into the track. And best of all, this technique eliminates phase problems produced by sending the initially recorded snare though. Obviously, Drumagog is also a great audio-to-MIDI generator for driving drum machines or hardware samplers, and the new detectors make that even more powerful.

Like a lot of other users, I seemed to be waiting ages for Drumagog 5, and when it arrived, I had high expectations. I think the new version is fantastic, and if you're already using Drumagog and haven't upgraded, I wholeheartedly suggest that you do. If you're interested in drum replacement software, I think it's a fantastic tool that's well worth the cost. It's easier than ever to achieve seamless results, and the best drum replacement is when no one knows you've done anything at all.

(Basic \$149 MSRP, Pro \$289, Platinum \$379; www.drumagog.com)