

INTERVIEW WITH SINGER/SONGWRITER STEVEN WILSON ON THE FUTURE BITES

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PreSonus: ATOM SQ

Hybrid MIDI Keyboard Pad Performance and Production Controller

Tap beats, play tunes, sequence and take control with this handy new controller

REVIEW BY DAVID BLASCOE

PreSonus has expanded its controller paradigm. Now joining the popular beat-focused 16-pad ATOM: Production and Performance Pad Controller is a new portable hybrid production controller / MIDI keyboard. I present to you, the ATOM SQ!

Fit and finish

The ATOM SQ is made entirely out of plastic, but it's surprisingly heavy for its size and it feels rigid and durable. The faceplate is all black; the bottom half of the enclosure features an attractive white finish. There are four large nonslip rubber feet on the bottom to ensure it stays put—I experienced no unwanted rocking or movement at all. There's a single USB C connector on the back, and that's it. There are no further MIDI I/O or control jacks of any kind; I found myself wanting a sustain pedal in.

On the surface

The eight endless rotary encoder knobs on the top are sturdy with no wiggle, and turn with an excellent light resistance. The soft rubberized buttons have a nice amount of travel to them, so there's no wondering if you pressed them all the way in or not. The pressure-sensitive, aftertouch-enabled performance pads don't depress, but they hold their ground if you will, allowing you

to finger-drum 'MPC-style' to your heart's content. The feel and layout took a bit of getting used to, but I quickly found them satisfying to play and drum on.

Goodies galore

True to form, PreSonus includes an impressive collection of software with the ATOM SQ that will get any aspiring producer up and running straight away. PreSonus Studio One Artist is included, as well as Ableton Live Lite; both offer extensive and airtight integration with the ATOM SQ. Also included are two bonus loop packs with custom kits for use with Studio One Impact XT.

In use

The ATOM SQ for me wasn't the most intuitive MIDI controller to use at first, but spending time with it in real-world music production tasks gradually unveiled its potential and power. I'm primarily an Ableton user, so I was looking forward to

using it with Live. My introduction to Studio One ran concurrently with my ATOM SQ reviewing time, so this report leans more toward Ableton Live integration, which I'm happy to report is seamless and powerful.

The essential functions and transport controls are all here and work flawlessly. Stop, play, record, and metronome controls are available on the left side of the controller along with secondary functions including undo, loop, save, and click functions via the shift button. I loved the session saving shortcut and used it often. Volume, panning, send levels, and solo / mute / arm controls worked as expected.

I found the travel on the rotary knobs to be slightly short/slow, which required a bit more throw than usual. It would be a nice firmware update to be able to adjust and customize the travel and speed of the rotary knobs; this is just a personal preference and by no means a design flaw.

Live tricks

Useful shortcuts become available in song mode on the eight buttons (labeled A through H). 'A' toggles between Arrangement and Session View. 'B' opens and closes the Live browser for selecting audio effects, plugins and sounds. 'D' opens and closes the clip or device view bar on the bottom of the screen, and 'H' toggles between clip and device view. Once these shortcuts became second nature, they offered intuitive speed, ease and control at the touch of a button or two.

I worked on a song for my side project Black Fuse, called 'Playing With Fire'. The song's primary instrument is a warm-sounding upright piano playing a repeated arpeggio. I decided to give it a go on the ATOM SQ pads. I'm really used to

keyboard-based controllers so this felt a little strange at first, but after a while I didn't mind playing the piano part on the performance pads. Setting the pads to key mode selected and illuminated the appropriate pads needed to approximate a traditional piano keyboard layout. Here's where I missed having a sustain pedal input, but thankfully, PreSonus did build in sustain capability by pressing and holding the 'A' button. Not ideal, but given the portable nature of the ATOM SQ, carrying around a sustain pedal might not always be feasible anyway, so at the end of the day, problem solved. The final piano part on the official release was the one of me playing it on the ATOM SQ. As you can guess, the performance pads also proved useful and very intuitive for launching loops and clips in session view, as well as for finger drumming, even despite the staggered, non-traditional drum controller layout.

Home court advantage

As mentioned, the ATOM SQ is deeply integrated with PreSonus Studio One. Even with my admittedly limited knowledge and experience with Studio One, everything I tried with the ATOM SQ was

simply a breeze. The additional visual feedback on the LCD screen for instruments and plugins was a welcome addition. The encoder knobs being automatically mapped to the parameters of each instrument or plugin I called up was also very handy. There is automatic mapping of the encoders in Ableton Live, but it's not as intuitive as the Studio One implementation. In Live, I had to turn each knob and closely check the parameter it affected, and then try to remember the configuration. Of course, you can customize the MIDI mapping to control the parameters you like. The center touch strip comes to life as well in Studio One, as a mod wheel or mapped to any parameter, whereas in Ableton Live it's primarily used to shift the octave range up and down for the performance pads in instrument mode.

In sequence

I particularly liked the step sequencer mode, which offers classic step sequencing from 2 to 64 steps. The RGB LED lights' visual feedback on the performance pads makes it very easy and satisfying to program beats or melodies in a step sequence style. The ATOM SQ/

Studio One combo can become your one-stop shop for controlling, playing, and performing, allowing you to take your hands off your mouse and keyboard and stay in the creative zone.

In addition to Studio One or Ableton Live, there's also the option of MCU or HUI mode for use with almost every other DAW.

Conclusion

The ATOM SQ is an excellent choice for anybody looking for a portable yet powerful MIDI controller. Throw it in your backpack or set it up on your desk. If you find yourself needing more control or new inspiration, check out the PreSonus ATOM SQ. ➡

David Blascoe is a Nashville-based session drummer and engineer. He was a co-founding member of the chart-topping CCM band Citizen Way, and he records and tours with a roster of artists including his personal project, Black Fuse.

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