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PreSonus ATOM

This pad controller takes you from expressive playability to quick control of Studio One

REVIEW BY MIKE METLAY

PreSonus offers a great lineup of affordable and well-built control surfaces for its Studio One DAW and other software platforms. In recent years, we've been happy to reintroduce our readers to the trend-setting FaderPort (now in a comprehensively updated form) as well as its new 8-fader and 16-fader descendants. The ATOM, though, caught us by surprise, and is indicative of PreSonus' commitment to keep its products relevant and useful for the widest possible audience.

Studio One has offered a lot of tools for beatmaking and dance music production since its very first version, but as of Version 4, it contains grid-based rhythm production tools to rival those in many other DAWs. However, getting to those tools and using them effectively has required a bit of MIDI controller mapping with third-party drum controllers. This is not hugely difficult, thanks to Studio One's exceptional MIDI controller support, but it's still not as intuitive as Studio One users have come to expect from devices like the FaderPort family.

With the ATOM, PreSonus offers a light, well-made, compact drum pad controller that would work well with nearly any DAW... but whose Studio One integration opens up a new and very intuitive workflow for rhythm creation.



The hardware: solid all around

The ATOM is lightweight yet reassuringly solid, with enough heft to be played hard without fear. Its form factor is very backpack-friendly: a thin 7.68 x 7.95 inch body (bus-powered, with a standard USB-B port) with four assignable encoders as the only protrusions. Longtime readers know that I often downgrade a product of this type if the knobs are too tall or too flimsy to withstand being stored and yanked out of a bag in a hurry. Users will have no such worries with the ATOM's knobs, which are comfortably tapered (no cable snags) and very rigidly seated.

The rest of the ATOM is devoted to brightly backlit buttons (10 each on the left and right) and a familiar grid of 16 dynamically-sensitive drum pads. The pads are comfortably soft to play, with very little 'give' but an adjustable sensitivity that allows them to be played with a very light touch. They transmit velocity and pressure data, the latter being sent as the user's choice of channel pressure (monophonic aftertouch), key pressure (polyphonic aftertouch), or MIDI CC 22 messages.

There's one more button, unlit and flush with the top panel so it won't be pressed by accident; this accesses a set of quick

setup functions that are laid out on the grid as a map of color-coded switches. This is where you can set velocity sensitivity, pressure sensitivity and data type, pad mode (a drum grid or an octave of keyboard pitches plus octave up/down), tap tempo, and an All Notes Off MIDI Panic button. A more advanced Setup mode is available for setting MIDI channels and other less-needed functions.

The grid: useful on any DAW

The grid is set up so that there are eight banks of 16 notes each; these can be used to trigger drums or keyboard notes as mentioned above. The Bank button, when pressed, lights up eight of the pads for a fast Bank selection, with no need to page up and down.

Since every DAW has a MIDI Learn function, there's no need for the ATOM to offer more than Channel selection; you can assign everything else in your software. That makes setup quick and easy, as each control has a fixed MIDI CC number that's laid out in the manual. The four encoders can be used on their own or while holding the Shift key for a total of eight adjustable CCs (14–21); the various buttons, some usable with the Shift key as

well, add another 22 on/off CC messages. That's a lot of possibilities!

Playing the grid as a keyboard takes some getting used to, as the note layout doesn't correspond to that of any other grid out there, but the notes are color-coded for "black" and "white" keys, and you can pick up basic intervals and scales with a bit of practice. The primary difference between the drum grid and the keyboard grid is that on the former, you can select certain pads on Bank 1 to not send CC 22, which allows for some fancy programming tricks like isolating certain sounds (e.g. the kick) from realtime timbre control.

Oh yes, note repeat! Two of the most common drum-grid features on other controllers of this type are offered on the ATOM as well. You can set the grid so every press sends a full-on velocity message no matter how hard you hit (suitable for 808-style programming), or to repeat notes while held down. The repeat interval ranges from 1/4 to 1/32 in full or triplet note lengths, for everything from simple metronomic functions to crush rolls. Naturally this interval can be set differently for each pad, or turned off entirely.

The Studio One integration: easy access

The above features alone make the ATOM a competitive drum-pad controller on the current market. However, when you hook it up to Studio One (a copy of Studio One Artist is included with the ATOM), a bunch of extra DAW-control features are automatically activated. While you can't control everything in S1 with the ATOM, the most-used features are covered very well.

The buttons on the left select various modes of operation, while the buttons on the right are used for navigation and basic transport control. Some of the pads are labeled with functions that are accessible in certain modes (like Setup), giving you added control over things that would normally require a mouse and menu-diving.

Without ever touching your mouse, in Studio One the ATOM will let you: navigate through tracks in any view, browse for and select Instruments and launch them (creating appropriate tracks in the process), control vertical and horizontal zoom, turn a click track on and off, nudge events in time or pitch, set start and end for a playback loop and then move it around your timeline, in-

sert Patterns, change presets, trigger loops and samples in tight integration with Studio One's included Sample One XT instrument, and trigger drums and do all kinds of cool step programming in Studio One's included Impact XT drum instrument. Oh, and you can hide and show an Instrument's control panel with one click, something a lot of other DAWs should feature and don't (hint hint). The resulting workflow is fast and fun, it speeds up many routine tasks in Studio One, and makes great use of your time and screen real estate... a winner all around.

Final thoughts

The folks at PreSonus approached the ATOM in the right way. They did create a finely-integrated control surface for their flagship DAW, but they started with a grid/pad instrument that felt good to play and was easy to set up. Tweakheads and musicians alike will find the ATOM a real creativity booster, all at a price that beats that of many much less well-appointed controllers. ➤

Price: \$149.95

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