Bonus Report #3 – Essential Tips for Real & Electric Drum Kits

This is a topic of controversy that seems to be in most church worship services where I play. I've played a wide array of real and electronic kits in both small and mega churches alike. One would think just because you're in large church building you're automatically going to be placed behind a live acoustic kit. That is not always the case in my experience.

For instance, when I served at Prestonwood Baptist Church for three years in Dallas, Texas I played an electric kit for half my time there. The main sanctuary seats anywhere from six to eight thousand people. Their worship services were more formatted towards a large choir and orchestra. The technical director did not want the hassle of dealing with the stage volume or a live drum kit.

Over the years they seemed to have a change of heart and decided to build a literal soundproof house for the drums that were placed on the right side of the stage. Although I prefer to play real drums I do not enjoy the stuffiness of an enclosed drum 'cage' as I so affectionately call it. Though it did serve its purpose by enclosing and controlling the on stage volume of the drums, it defeated the purpose of providing the group the feel and natural energy of the drums.

There are pros and cons to both real drums and electric drums in a worship service and any venue you might play them. In the following statements I am going to echo the sentiments of many front of house soundmen and my experiences over the years. There is an argument for using real drums and electric drums. The argument is always won when the appropriate type of drums are used in the proper context.

For instance, at Eastside Christian Church, where I am playing on weekends, the church sanctuary is relatively small, very live, and not fit for real drums and real cymbals. With real drums in a room like that you have no control over the drums and stage volume even behind a drum shield. Even if you did put the drums behind a drum shield on a small stage in a small room, you'll have an aesthetic problem because of the clunky appearance of a drum shield. It just does not make sense to me, even as a drummer, that you'll go for ok sounds behind a drum shield and still have to tell your drummer to play softly and have no energy at all. There are many reasons why live drums on a small stage or room do not make sense.



Jon's drums at Eastside Christian Church

Electric Drums and VST Samples

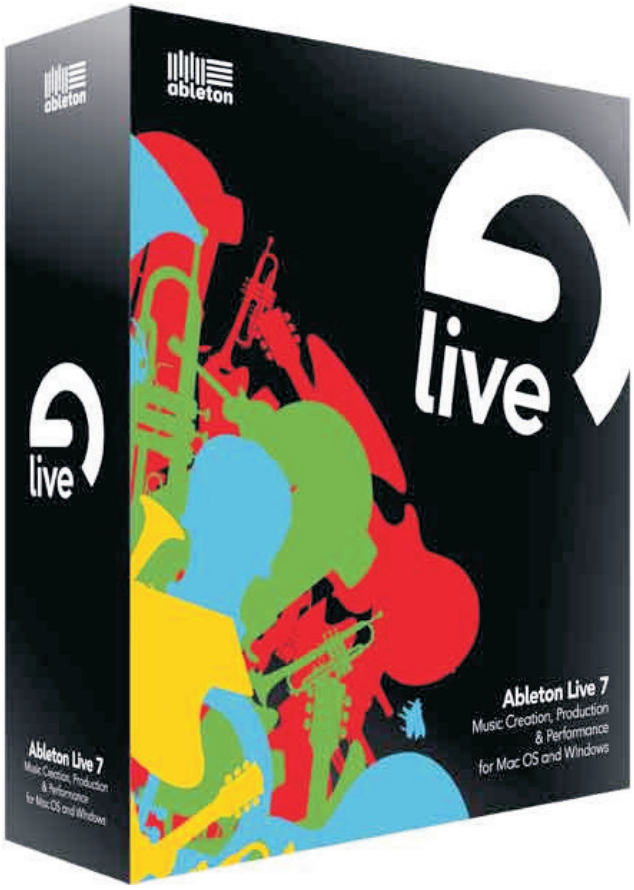
If you want to go the V-Drums route then here's a good tip about how to soup them up and make them sound better. Today, you have access to the world's best drum samples such as Toontrack's Superior Drummer 2.0, Addictive Drums or Steven Slate Drums. There are more drum samples but these are my personal favorites because they sound amazing and are relatively user friendly. Use a Mac laptop because it runs a very safe and smooth operating system that rarely melts down or crashes. You'll need to run an efficient program like Ableton Live to interface with an external I/O like an M-Audio Firewire 610 or Avid Mbox Pro/Digi hardware device to run to your front of house and monitor engineer. **You're basically bypassing the given factory sounds in the V-Drum or electric drum 'brain.' The electric drum kit becomes a midi controller and controls the sounds coming out of a sample library like Superior Drummer and Addictive Drums.** Here's a flow list for your electric drum kit VST library set up so you'll better understand it.

Assuming you already have an electronic kit with a brain unit and appropriate cables that hook into all drums and cymbals to brain unit, you'll need the following items:



Drum library software: You have to purchase a drum library program like Superior Drummer 2.0 or Addictive Drums. They will run anywhere between $200 to $400. I like these two libraries because they sound great and are relatively user friendly. My first choice is Superior Drummer 2.0 because I like the cymbal sounds better. I always have a harder time finding good hi hat sounds in VST libraries but Superior seems to be the best cymbal samples I have heard so far. Moreover, the signal chain Toontrack used to record with at the Avatar studios in New York seems to be a winner. They are only improving on it more and more.

Interface Software: My first choice for interface software would easily be Ableton Live. It might be tricky to learn at first but it's truly the most reliable and provides the best sounds. Ableton Live will cost you about $340 and there is an Ableton Live Lite version as well.



Hardware: You need a Firewire hardware interface that will easily transfer the sample information through the computer and into your sound system. Over the years I have had many experiences with external hardware I/O for running tracks. The M-Audio Firewire 610 Interface is one of the most popular choices. The back will have outputs to run your kick, snare, toms, and cymbals separately to the front of house snake or stage input.



M-Audio Firewire 610



Behind the M-Audio Firewire 610

Electric Drums with Real Cymbals

I have to be honest and say I have experienced this type of setup only once. It was at First Baptist Church of Garland, Texas. It was a very live room as far as I can remember. I can understand the good intentions most people have when they think this is an optimal setup. For me, the logic and feel of this setup is very awkward:

Real cymbals used with an electronic kit seem to be a paradox in my mind. An electronic kit can be volume controlled because it's simply pads that are triggering samples in a sound bank. And obviously a real cymbal will be heard at the volume in which you hit it and are hard to control. Drum shields are used many times for acoustic drumkits because of the loudness, frequency and shimmer cymbals project when you hit them. We know the rest of the drum kit is loud. I have to admit I'm told to hit cymbals more lightly than anything else on my drum kit.

The dynamics of real cymbals used with an electronic kit are hard to balance. On the other hand, electric drums work in relation to each other to create a feel of their own. The awkwardness comes from playing real hi-hats while playing a mesh head electric pad. Your right or left hand has to play differently to compensate for your left playing on a pad that only emits a sound through your headphones and a sound system. To me it's a very awkward feel that's only understood by a drummer and not a soundman. I remember being told to play my cymbals softer while I was playing the V-Drums at a church. To me that was a challenge - the whole situation seemed very illogical.

Real cymbals used with an electronic kit are a monitoring nightmare for the drummer. If you use inears or headphones to monitor then you must work hard to hear your cymbals in relation to your electric kit. It's key that you get used to the volume difference between the real cymbals and the electric drums. To me it's just not worth the frustration of having to constantly balance the two while you play. It could be a huge distraction and a struggle just to get through your set.

Real cymbals used with an electronic kit don't make sense when you can get great cymbal sounds from a sample library. Most electric drums are made with cymbal pads that look like cymbals and "give way" when you hit them. I believe many people started using real cymbals with electronic kits because of the

bad cymbal samples and the awkward feel of hitting a pad instead of a cymbal. I understand when you hit a cymbal there's a natural 'whoosh' and 'give' to really lay into it hard or hit it soft. I believe with the many adjustments Roland and Yamaha have made you can now get a better feel.

Real cymbals used with an electronic kit seem to defeat the idea of containing the drum volume in a church sanctuary that is too small for loud acoustic instruments. Cymbals are loud and can be the loudest part of the drum kit. The challenge for your sound engineer will be to manage a heavy-handed rock drummer bashing cymbals with the controllable snare and tom volumes.

There are a few electric drum kits that are integrating real feel type cymbal. They seem to have been successful in the electric drum kit market. If this type of kit appeals to you, then look at the Pearl E-Pro Live and the Alesis Dm6.





You might actually spend less money and save some frustration by going to this type of kit. You still get the cymbal type of feel and 'give' and you can also trigger sounds from any drum library that has been explained above. I believe it's a win-win situation.

This is my opinion and there may be some of you out there who can make this work. I've always taught my students to do what works best for them. Feel free to comment at JonSkaggs.net if you do use this setup and it works for you. I'm interested in how you've approached the situation.

Real Drums and the Drum Shield

If you're a drummer, I believe you're constantly fighting your soundman about putting your drum kit behind a drum shield. I say ‘”You’re fighting a losing battle!” While I do agree that is a bit uncomfortable being caged up behind a shield, it's not the end of the world.

There are major benefits to using a drum shield for acoustic drums in a small room. The benefits affect your ability to play a little louder and harder if you naturally play that way. I also know it's the only option for many churches and venues that use a lot of miked instruments - a shield prevents bleed into the drum mics and vocal mics.

There are also many churches and venues that do not use a drum shield. This is purely a technical decision. It's made with the knowledge that the drums do not affect the stage volume or contribute too much of a bleed problem to onstage mics.

Whether or not to use a shield often is a technical decision over which the drummer has no control. It's important to always have a good attitude about this if you're opposed to the drum shield. You are there, after all, to provide a service that has no bearing on technical issues. If you hit the drums harder than other drummers who’ve previously played without a drum shield, don’t be offended if the soundman uses one because you're a hard hitter. Just be thankful they are respecting the way you play, and are allowing you to play your natural way, instead of telling you to tone it down.

I personally don’t mind the drum shield as much as I used to. In my earlier days as drummer, they used to drive me nuts and bother me to no end! Nowadays, as a producer and having been around more uncontrollable sound situations, I see the benefit of using drum shields, and actually value them more than ever.

They are also not an end all to drum volume or bleed problems if you're a soundman. They are a means to minimize the volume and bleed. A drum shield, in theory, should decrease the drummer's decibel level by half, but you'll still hear a bit of frequency and shimmer issues with the cymbals depending on what kind of surface the drums are on. I think a carpet or rug is beneficial to soak up some of the refection and frequencies many cymbals project.

This is subjective issue with many technical staff in churches and venues across the world. However it’s a common sense issue. You’re either going to have to contain an erratic stage volume problem from your drum kit or fight the volume every weekend with uncontainable mic bleeds. I do think it's a great investment for every church to have one. Every drummer hits differently and every room is different. I say, "always be prepared to work in a situation that you have properly prepared for, but do not blame anyone else for an avoidable inconvenience."