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PRO AUDIO VAULT *BLÜTHNER DIGITAL MODEL ONE*

GRAND PIANO SAMPLE LIBRARY (MAC, PC)

by Richard Leiter

Grand piano sample library with Native Instruments Kontakt 2 Player.

PROS

Uncannily evocative piano sounds. Tremendous variety of piano tones. Exceptional audio quality. Relatively small disk footprint at 4.4GB.

CONS

Some latency issues. Preset parameters need better organization and labeling. Heavy CPU demands.

$299

Pro Audio Vault,
www.proaudio
vault.com

In 2005, sample mavens Dan Dean and Ernest Cholakis spent a week at George Lucas' Skywalker Ranch sampling the nine-foot Blüthner grand, a legendary old-world piano that was a favorite of composers such as Brahms, Bartok, Debussy, Liszt, and McCartney. Working under pristine conditions with some of the best recording gear and engineers in the world, they amassed a playable acoustic image of this to-die-for instrument, composed of over 2,000 individual samples. Among these, the close-miked waveforms are what came out of the instrument *sans* room ambience, *sans* reverb, *sans* everything but what you'd hear if you stuck your head under the lid. The raw data is exhaustive, including 12 volume layers for each note, separate samples for notes played with the sustain pedal down, and release samples.

Then, they did something quite unique, at least for piano libraries: They created sonic fingerprints — Timbral Impulses, or TIs — of dozens of the greatest pianos ever recorded. These impart the frequency response characteristics not just of famous pianos, but of what those pianos sounded like in the context of famous recordings and venues, such as Artur Rubinstein at Carnegie Hall in '73, Oscar Peterson at the Village Vanguard in '59, or Dr. John at Tipitina's on a sultry New Orleans night. For legal reasons, the documentation never comes out and says that the TI called "T 15 Pop 1969" is a recreation of the piano sound from the Beatles' *Let It Be*, but the provenance is strongly implied.

The Blüthner runs on Native Instruments Kontakt 2 Player (included), a serviceable if not elegant platform, and provides pull-down menus from which to select basic pianos as a starting point. Each piano in the library offers a style type (Classical, Jazz, Pop, R&B, Custom, Pianos and Vocals, which borrows the Timbral Impulse of spoken phonemes)

and six degrees of dynamic range from 45% to 100% — the higher the number, the greater the range between loud and soft in response to velocity. Let's say you load up a medium-sensitive preset such as "Blüthner_65_Jazz." Next, you pick a TI, say "T42 Jazz 1965," and a reverb, like "R31 RevH Warm." Instantly, you're playing something that sounds like a Bill Evans Trio session. You could just as easily choose settings that evoke Keith Jarrett onstage at Köln. The recreations are not exact, of course, and they're unsystematically labeled, so you need to do a lot of shopping before you get the sound you want. For instance, in using just one of the Pop pianos, you can choose from 59 pop TIs, 72 reverbs, and 10 pedal settings — that's over 42,000 possibilities. This is intriguing for perfectionists who want to explore, but less so for producers with deadlines. This quest for the best piano sound for your production could be streamlined by a more intuitive presentation of parameters, but that sound is certainly in there.

While the sounds are uncanny and emotional, the ergonomics are not yet as refined as, for instance, Synthogy Ivory (reviewed Mar. '05), the *de facto* benchmark for virtual pianos. Coming up with a velocity map that plays well requires some going back and forth between your MIDI controller to set the ideal velocity curve, and the software to find the preset with the ideal sensitivity. Pro Audio Vault will soon offer a free upgrade that adds a continuously-variable velocity curve. I also found that on my computer, a dual 2.7GHz PowerMac G5, the Blüthner's latency was perceptibly lower in standalone mode than when run as a plug-in, even at the same buffer settings. Tech editor Stephen Fortner found the same difference, though very subtle, on a dual 2.3GHz G5, but no difference on a 3GHz single-processor PC running Windows XP.

This is a haunting and evocative piano library, but also a work in progress. There are some quirks: All samples decay completely at 14 seconds, and I couldn't get the Kontakt 2 Player to see the audio files if I installed them anywhere but the main system drive. If you work around these issues, the tonal colors on your piano palette instantly become much more sophisticated. Despite some initial challenges, this is a brilliant piano rendition that I predict will reside on the hard disks of many composers and producers. **k**

VITAL STATS

PLUG-IN FORMATS
VST, AudioUnits, RTAS, DXi, standalone.

SUPPORTED AUDIO HARDWARE
Mac: CoreAudio. *PC*: ASIO, DirectSound.

SYSTEM REQUIREMENTS
Mac: OS 10.4 or higher, G4 dual or G5 1.8GHz or faster. *PC*: Windows XP, Pentium 4 or Athlon 2.8GHz or faster. *Both*: 1GB RAM.

COPY PROTECTION
Online registration via Native Instruments Service Center application.