



KETRON Midjay

By Marty Cutler

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The Midjay, from Italian synth manufacturer Ketron, is a MIDI-and-audio playback device that features an onboard sound module, auto-accompaniment styles, WAV-file rendering and playback, and even an RGB video output for projecting karaoke lyrics. Add to those a USB jack for computer connectivity, mic and instrument inputs, a 40 GB hard drive for audio and MIDI storage, and a 3.5-inch floppy drive, and you have a piece of gear that aims to be a one-stop solution for musicians who need to pack their accompaniment into a box. The Midjay comes with a lump-in-the-line power supply, two manuals, and no cables. (For more background, see the **online bonus material** at www.emusician.com.)



FIG. 1: The Midjay combines the functionality of a performance-oriented sequencer with a multitimbral sound module. Its faders control the volume level of MIDI and audio files, and the Master fader handles output on a global basis.

Topside Tour

The Midjay's small footprint belies its robust construction (see **Fig. 1**). A heavy-duty, high-impact-plastic top surface area overlaps and effectively recesses and protects the lower housing of the unit, which harbors all the physical connections and the floppy drive mounted on its side (see **Fig. 2**).

The controls peppering the top panel are divided into three main areas. On the top right, an alpha dial scrolls through lists or changes values, depending on the context. Four cursor buttons surround an Enter button; again, based on context, you can navigate up, down, left, or right, toggle an entry on or off, delete characters from a file name, or change a value. A vertically arrayed group of buttons on the left has context-sensitive functions for editing text, playlist orders, crossfades between songs, and so on. You use the same buttons to edit Registrations — templates for different styles of music that include instrument transpositions, volume, and patch selections.

The top center row of buttons, labeled Play List, serves two functions, allowing you to select song sections on the fly and to select files from a playlist. You can also use them to jump to any file with a single button push. If you place part markers in your song, you can access them quickly but not instantaneously; playback changes at the end of the measure to avoid discontinuities.

Just below the Play List buttons are Tap Tempo and global Transpose buttons. Notably, the drums do not transpose with the rest of the song — a useful touch in a gig-oriented box. On the other hand, I couldn't get the hang of the Tap Tempo button, which only toggles the tempo value on or off; of course, you can change the tempo with the alpha dial at this point, but that does not constitute a tap tempo function. The owner's manual was incomprehensible in this regard (more on the manual later).

To the right of Tap Tempo and Transpose, context-sensitive buttons serve as transport, recording, and playback controls as well as real-time split- and level-editing buttons for a Voice — Ketron's terminology for a composite instrument patch or multitimbral combination consisting of four instruments. Voices comprise up to four single instruments that you can layer, Velocity switch, or split. Because the Midjay is 16-part multitimbral, doubling up and

splitting instruments can help to conserve channels when you need to maximize available parts. In support of hefty doubling and layering, the Midjay gives you a maximum 100 voices of polyphony. The front panel's lower center portion supplies seven faders for adjusting levels of WAV files, loops, styles, MIDI tracks, MP3s, a mic input, and line-in devices; an eighth fader is the unit's Master.

Safe and Sound

Most of the Midjay's preprogrammed song material betrays its demographic target. Although it has enough built-in club-date and wedding-gig chestnuts to get you through a few nights of work, don't let that steer you away from it. You have plenty of room to play your own songs or just groove to the built-in styles. Many styles sound quite good, especially the lively Latin and Caribbean selections.



FIG. 2: All of the Midjay's inputs and outputs are on the instrument's sides and rear and recessed underneath its control surface.

The Midjay also holds up well in many critical sound categories. The brass and woodwinds have clarity, presence, and bite; they benefit from expressive programming, though the somewhat exaggerated sampled vibrato on the trumpet, violin, and flute can sound strained if you play too many sustained notes. You also get some special articulations, including brass-ensemble falls and trills. The electric pianos are sparkly, and the drums are nice and punchy, with fat kicks and crisp snares. I noticed one minor gaffe: the overdriven guitar is listed as the distorted guitar, and the distorted guitar is labeled overdriven. Still, they are nice-sounding instruments, and the selection of variations goes well beyond typical GM and XG choices (see **Web Clip 1**).

A few sounds don't withstand closer scrutiny. Most acoustic and electric bass patches settle into their loops too quickly, though that shouldn't be a problem in an ensemble situation. It also appears that violins, violas, cellos, and contrabass derive from the same sample map. Loops on the string ensembles stick out a bit too much, almost creating a tremolo effect (for the record, the GM Tremolo Strings patch is different, relying on a gating effect). Again, it sounds to my ear like the entire string ensemble sound set relies on a common set of samples, and many of the synth pads follow suit. It's important to note that the sounds are nicely balanced, and that's an important feature to anyone needing to create large-ensemble performances with a minimum of EQ and volume tweaking.

Because the Midjay's synthesizer architecture confers a reasonable amount of programmability, you aren't restricted to simple preset tweaks. Unlike many dedicated General MIDI devices, it gives you access to ADSR values as well as filter cutoff, resonance, and LFO rates and depth.

Another terrific feature is its ability to play WAV files as loops in sync with MIDI tracks in a song arrangement. Of course, you can also drop in one-shot samples. You can even perform on-the-fly time compression and expansion, which sounds quite good over a wide range of tempos and pitches. You can render the whole shebang — MIDI data, audio loops, live instruments, and input from a microphone — to a stereo WAV file. The manual provides clues to a sound-on-sound method of creating songs by reimporting rendered tracks into new song files, but erroneously refers to it as multitrack recording. Nonetheless, it's a useful feature for building dense arrangements, especially with its ability to shunt files to the computer (for optional additional processing) and back.

Building a Better Idiot

When I first connected the Midjay to my 3.06 GHz Windows XP notebook (with 1.5 GB of RAM) using a USB cable, it immediately appeared on the desktop as the F: drive when I powered up. Once the Midjay's drive shows up on the computer, you are in familiar drag-and-drop file-management territory. Unfortunately, however, I needed to disconnect the USB cable to reset the unit to receive or transmit MIDI data. The Midjay cries out for the ability to toggle between file-transfer and MIDI tasks without yanking cables or rebooting. Occasionally it just locked up, particularly when I was randomly pressing buttons. That could prove to be a problem on a darkened stage with last-minute changes and fumbling fingers.

Many problems could be solved with a better-organized and indexed owner's manual, but the slim guide relies on a referential style rather than providing a graduated, tutorial approach. The page explaining the file-transfer state appears in the middle of the manual rather than at the very beginning, where it would be most effective — so much for instant gratification. On an adjacent page, a section on saving the startup state presents a confounding list of 39 unrelated parameters you can save, without giving any reference to the pages on which they are covered.

Electronic Sideman

The Midjay offers plenty of power and flexibility to anyone seeking a compact source of interactive musical accompaniment. Its robust construction provides a strong argument against schlepping a comparatively fragile laptop. Why bother, when you can prepare your MIDI tracks and loops on a computer and send them to the Midjay for playback? My only major concern is the possibility of the device locking up onstage during a moment of overzealous button pushing.

Clearly, the Midjay is not a device to bring to a gig fresh out of the box. You'll need to invest a good deal of time getting comfortable with its menus and conventions. Because it is a relatively deep instrument, the provided owner's manual is its worst enemy. With another OS update (I used version 4.0) and a rewritten manual, Ketron's Midjay could take a major leap to the head of the class.

Marty Cutler wrings a living from his 5-string banjo and his MIDI and writing smarts. Check out his Web site at <http://web.mac.com/martycutler>.

PRODUCT SUMMARY

KETRON

Midjay

synth/sequencer module
\$2,167

FEATURES	4
EASE OF USE	3
QUALITY OF SOUNDS	4
VALUE	3

RATING PRODUCTS FROM 1 TO 5

PROS: Many good, well-balanced sounds. Plays back sequences and WAV files in sync. On-the-fly song arranging. Easy data exchange with computer. Construction is solid.

CONS: Occasional lockups. Some sounds prematurely looped and truncated. Must disconnect USB to change data-transfer modes. Awful owner's manual.

MANUFACTURER

Ketron
www.ketronusa.com