Acousticsamples' Arnaud Sicard

By Peter Lawrence Alexander / October 15, 2009

Arnaud "Arno" Sicard, President of *Acousticsamples*, talks about the passion, art and state of sampling.

Sicard is the President of *Acoustisamples* located in Paris, France. He sat down with Peter Alexander to talk about his company and his new Kawai EX Sampled Piano Library.

SC – What's your musical background? Instrument you play? Did you go to music school? Play in a band?
AS – I learned the Piano when I was four in a conservatory, but only for two years as, as I said it back then, "there was too many notes"… so I switched to the drums that I learned for like twelve years at the conservatory. Then I have been playing and practicing it on my own. I also have learned electric bass for six years and then Upright Bass for another two.

That was the music studies part, but I am also graduated in physics and have two masters, one in acoustics (at the IRCAM research institute in Paris), it's called ATIAM (Acoustics, Signal Processing, and Computer Science Applied to Music), and the second one in Architectural Acoustics.

So I've been studying a lot, but I have also been playing music in various bands, mostly jazz and funk bands, and more recently in an acoustic drum'n bass band that I started where we played my compositions. Now I am creating a new one with three friends of mine that are professional musicians, but as you maybe know, good musicians are pretty busy, so it takes some time 🙂

SC – When did you decide you wanted to sample sounds?
AS – I always have loved electronic music, some of them like Amon Tobin are sampling all kinds of old Jazz or Funk records, and I wanted to do the same. At first I sampled my CD's, tapes or vinyl records, then I realized I could record stuff on my own with my brand new mini-disc and the various instruments I had. I began copy-pasting every wav file into my sequencer, and I realized that having like 20 snare samples in the same measure would be easier to deal with if I were using like… a sampler… and I made my first libraries.

Sampling was also a need. When I started that drum'n bass band, I had to show the people I wanted to play with, something to make them trust the project, this is where I started to make larger sample libraries of my own instruments. I thought about buying some libraries, but on one hand when I was listening to the demos, I wasn't convinced and thought mine were not that bad compared to it, and on the other hand, of course they were too expensive for me at that time 🙂

SC – When did you realize you could turn it into a viable, money-making business?
AS – At first I began selling stuff on a simple website and I only thought I could earn a little money with it as a side job, but with time I saw that people really liked my job and were encouraging me. At that time, I was a computer science engineer, and I didn't like it so as I saw that it was growing and that companies like Native Instruments and Mach Five [ed. note: Digital Performer] were interested in my products, I thought I would quit my job and give it a shot!

SC – Is your total focus on acoustic instruments?
AS – For now, yes. As I told you before, I studied acoustics and really loved the part about mechanical behavior of instruments, in fact I loved it so much that I almost began a luthier career. I even builded like 7 upright basses! They did not sound as good as I wanted them to, but I really enjoyed myself. In a way, sampling instruments is also trying to simulate its behavior, at least that's how I see it.

I still may give it a try someday because I love electronic music and strange noises.

SC – Of all the instruments you've sampled so far, which did you find the most challenging and why?
AS – That really is a hard question. Every instrument has its own sampling difficulties. The pianos and keyboards are quite simple because they are supposed to be played with a keyboard too, all the MIDI standards are keyboard oriented, but the time and consistency you need to record them is really enormous. It takes a lot less time to record a bass or a guitar, but then the hard part is on the scripting and articulations.

So I guess that the hardest instruments would be the horns as I am working on a horn library right now and it really is harder that everything I've been sampling until now simply because the way it's played is completely different from a keyboard.

SC – What for you is the challenge in sampling a piano?
AS – For me the challenge is to reach playability and the feeling that when you play it, it actually behaves as a real one. There is a huge debate on whether the sampled piano or modeled pianos are the best. I think it can be summarized as: the sound is a lot more realistic with sample libraries, but modeled pianos just feel like a real playing experience. So my part is to make the sample libraries act and feel real.

SC – With so many sampled pianos on the market, why did you feel another one could be commercially successful?
AS – Just because I think that this Kawai-EX does feel like a real piano when you play it 🙂

I'm also thinking that people have a lot of different piano libraries because they love to have different sounds, most people that compose music on their computers are sound lovers and collectors.

SC – In creating your sales plan for each new sampled instrument, what for you is your measure of success both artistically in your work and in your sales?
AS – In my work, it's when I release a library and am fully satisfied with it, most of the time, it's not the case, I have the feeling that I could have done better.

In the sales, it's obviously when a lot of people buy it as it means that people like it and recommended it to other people. But the best reward is when people send me some messages or talk about it in the forums saying that they love it AND use it.

SC – As a developer, why do you see so few companies creating product for the EXS24 since you have an automatic built-in base of customers?
AS – I think it's mostly because it's Mac only. There is still more than half of the audio community that use PCs. Then you have use Logic, I love Logic and am using it for absolutely everything, but some people prefer Pro Tools, Digital Performer or Cubase and they can't use EXS. In terms of the software itself, the disk streaming is really well implemented, but there are also some basic features that are missing like the time envelope for releases that cannot go over two seconds (unless you're using Keymap) or a good legato function. Most of all, there are no scripts and that's why Kontakt is used the most.

SC – For you, what are the advantages of working with Native Instruments' Kontakt program? Is there also a downside?
AS – The scripting feature is really a must in Kontakt. First you can build a product that will have a dedicated interface and some user interface controls, not just a simple .nki file that you open and looks the same as the other libraries. Secondly, the scripting capabilities allows you to simulate an instrument behavior, as a simple example, you can play a pedal noise when you press or release the sustain pedal on a piano.

Until now I did not see any downside apart from the fact that people that want to use it need to own Kontakt.

SC – Do you use the same micing techniques for each acoustic piano you sample?
AS – No, absolutely not. I've learned a lot about instruments acoustic radiation, microphone

positioning techniques and room acoustics and you always have to take those three factors in account. The sound esthetics you want to get is also really important. For example, a jazz piano will need to be recorded closer to the strings than a classical one.

SC – From the day you started recording to the day you finished editing, how long did it take you to sample the Kawai EX?

AS – Actually, on the Kawai EX, I've been working with Lance Herring and he has been recording the piano and cutting the samples. My part was more the script and patch building, but this piano was sampled like 10 month ago 🙂

SC – Which for you is the most demanding: recording or editing?
AS – Frankly, I don't know. The recording takes a lot of time and is really tiring. You really have to stay in front of a piano playing it without breathing or making any noise and, of course, stay focused and consistent on what you play. The editing is even a longer process because you have to take care of every file making sure that there is no unwanted noise in it, or that you don't trim it too much, but that's when you begin to hear what the library will sound like and most of the time this is when I get excited.

SC – What's next for Acousticsamples?
AS – Ha, good question! I have a lot of projects going on for all kinds of instruments, but I guess the one I'm the most excited about is the horns library I was talking about earlier.

I also have another piano in mind that will feature everything I've been thinking of while doing the Kawai 🙂

Oh and maybe I will partner up with a sampler maker to make my libraries available as virtual instruments…

This article was previously published at the SonicControl website.