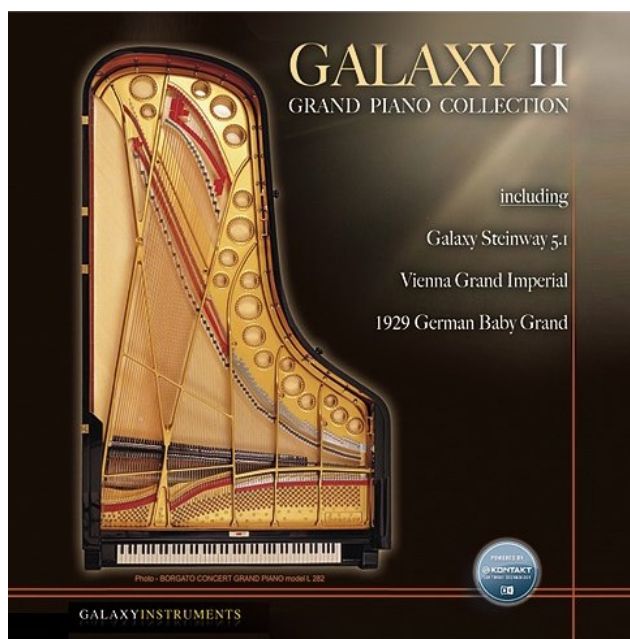


Best Service Galaxy II Pianos

By Peter Lawrence Alexander / August 10, 2008



If there's a best-kept secret in the world of sample library collections it's Best Service. Best Service consistently creates great usable libraries. And even through the financial differences of the dollar vs. the Euro, Best Service creates libraries of enduring value. Such is the case with the new *Galaxy II Piano Collection* which includes a Galaxy Steinway in both stereo and 5.1 surround, the Vienna Grand Imperial Bosendorfer 290 with the extra octave, and the 1929 German Baby Grand Bluthner.

The library is in 24-bit. It introduces Sympathetic String Resonance with real overtones, Sostenuto and Redamper pedal functions, 13 velocity zones, real Soft Pedal samples, and adjustable Hammer, Pedal, Damper and String Noises.

All the pianos are in the Kontakt 2 player. Each piano has specially designed pop piano sounds, a warp section for sound design, and a built-in convolution reverb with rooms, halls and ambiances.

Each of the three pianos comes with the main sound, Styles, Pads, Warped Sounds and Really Warped sounds (so warped you don't know it's a piano replication). Styles represent various performance scenarios shaped by a compressor.

Street price is under \$350US.

System Tested With

I tested this with a Yamaha S90 keyboard, Dual 2.7GHz Mac G5, RME Fireface 800, KRK VXT8 monitors and Logic 8. The KRKs have been ideal for these reviews because their frequency range covers virtually the full orchestral spectrum from basses to piccolo.

How Tested

First, I cheated. My mother-in-law is a classically trained pianist and I had her play all three pianos. I then tested each with Hanon exercises, the Berklee Level 1 keyboard manual, scales, and a Debussy MIDI example created in Sibelius and imported into Logic.

Vienna Grand Imperial Bösendorfer 290

The original Bösendorfer 290 was 9'6" long and had an extended octave with 97 keys. The number 290 represents its length in centimeters. The Bösendorfer's sound is considered to be dark rich when compared to the Steinway or Yamaha. The Imperial Grand contains nine extra bass notes after the last pitch; A. These were added so that Busoni's transcriptions of J.S. Bach's organ works requiring the 32' bass pipes could be performed.

1929 German Baby Grand Bluthner

Bluthner Piano was started in Germany in 1853. The company is still going today. Owners of the Bluthner include Johannes Brahms, Gustav Mahler, Béla Bartók, Claude Debussy, Max Reger, Richard Wagner, Johann Strauss, Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, Dmitri Shostakovich, Andrew Lloyd Webber, Wilhelm Kempff, Yehudi Menuhin, Wilhelm Furtwängler, and Marlene Dietrich. A Bluthner at Abbey Road in London was used on a number of Beatles' tracks. Bluthners are known for their singing tone.

Steinway Model D 270

This is one of the best-known Steinway Concert Grand Pianos. It was recorded in Belgium. Needless to say, Steinways are still made today. I found details on the Model D at the Steinway website. In this sampled collection, the Steinway is recorded both in stereo and surround.

Colors

The Vienna Grand Imperial is a very powerful elegant sound. If you want to do a dramatic cue with staccato punches in the low end using a 12-tone row, this is your piano. I was particularly impressed with how natural sounding the upper end is.

The Bluthner is a very elegant sound; softer, and a little duller when compared to the Vienna Grand Imperial and the Steinway. Noodling with seventh and ninth chords produced a lovely warm sound.

The Steinway is the brighter sounding of the three. It's clearly the workhorse and is very flexible. In comparison to the other two, if I had to assign an adjective to describe the sound, I think it would be happy. There's a lilting quality to the sound. Noodling around with the same seventh and ninth chords I didn't feel the intimacy or the elegance that the Bluthner captured. The chording struck me as being more incisive.

Applications

If I could assign a single word to describe the Galaxy II Collection it would be versatility. There are three different pianos each with its own sound and feel. This enables you to select a piano sound by color, by feel, by power and projection. If you're using a piano in a cue or with any other ensemble, you have the opportunity to select which piano blends best with whatever instruments you're selecting.

That is a singular advantage for the Galaxy II Collection.

Since I only have arranger's chops (if that) for keyboard playing, I downloaded from Classical MIDI Archives Debussy's *The Girl With the Flaxen Hair* and *The Sunken Cathedral* to compare each sampled piano using the same two pieces.

On The Girl With the Flaxen Hair, to me, the clear winner was the 1929 German Baby Grand for both sound and articulation. All sounded good, but the pedaling that was programmed into the file just worked better on the Bluthner.

For *The Sunken Cathedral*, the Vienna Grand Imperial really brought out the power of the piece as did the Steinway. The difference between the two is that the Bösendorfer, even at -10dB in Logic was spiking! Also, the way the MIDI file was “pedaled” didn’t quite work in the Bösendorfer’s favor. So of the three, I thought the Galaxy Steinway worked the best.

The lesson here is not to rely on generic pedaling. These are very sensitive pianos. Had these two pieces been performed live on them, or if the MIDI programming had been created specifically for them, the pedaling would have been spot on. So the message here is that you have to edit for the specific piano sample vs. relying on a generic pedaling that can be applied to any piano sound. For the Galaxy Collection, this is very important since both the Vienna Grand Imperial and the 1929 German Baby Grand have special pedaling samples that weren’t available when these MIDI files were created.

Live Performance

Any of these pianos would work well in a live performance setting. The key for live performance is selecting a really responsive master MIDI keyboard controller with pedal, along with a good audio card and sound system.

Editing Features

The Galaxy II Collection comes with plenty of editing power including the ability to add/subtract hammer, damper, pedal and string noise; tone via color, warmth and loudness; anatomy where you can configure playability and tuning, and many other features.

I haven’t touched on these options, extensive as they are, because my first concern is how well the collection sounds right out of the box with no tweaking whatsoever. The answer is, it sounds great. The Galaxy II Collection is a valuable collection for any composer and any style of music.

This article was previously published at the SonicControl website.