

Products



Soundbeam 5

From £2,695
(desktop version from £1,695)
www.soundbeam.co.uk

Pam Ayling

Soundbeam 5 is the latest version of the 'invisible, expanding keyboard in space' originally developed for dancers but with countless potential uses throughout education. It is a MIDI controller that uses ultrasonic beams and switches to turn movement into sound.

Widely used in special education because of its accessibility, it is a tool which can engage students from pre-school onwards because it enables sound-making on so many levels. For instance, a student with very restricted mobility can activate almost any sound using any part of their body, or a group of performing arts students could use the system to work with sound and images generated by a computer as they explore movement and dance. A student who cannot hold a saxophone can improvise using the saxophone sound in the sensor along with other musicians playing more conventional instruments.

I was very keen to put Soundbeam 5 through its paces. Practical use of the previous systems in many different educational contexts has inevitably left me wishing for some modifications and I was pleased to find many have been implemented in the new version.

The most far-reaching change is that the main unit now has an **internal, integrated sound chip** which removes the need to connect to an external MIDI instrument. It is named Soundbeam 5 because it has five functions: synthesiser, sampler, amplifier, drum machine and soundbeam, requiring only the connection of speakers and sensors. This simplifies use considerably; but at the same time the dual MIDI in/out ports and the USB connector in the back of the unit allow expansion. In addition, the system can make use of external MIDI equipment and computer software such as Cubase, Reason and ArKaos.

The system comes with 30 built-in **soundsets**, which means it is usable in the classroom straight away. There are 15 varied improvisations ranging from 'funky house' to 'tabla'; nine 'environment' soundsets including 'space' and 'jungle' and six well-known tunes such as *Old MacDonald* and *Air on a G String*. I found the tunes quite challenging to perform effectively and would have liked some more contemporary examples, but the concept is a good one.

The provided soundsets make use of in-built note sequences and sampled sounds, all of which can be used and modified as appropriate. A great feature is the ease with which the soundsets can now be previewed just by pressing a button. Each sound attributed to a switch or beam can be previewed separately on the main unit, which makes adjustments of the MIDI sounds quicker and experimentation

modification which allows much more freedom in the working/performing space. The switches can also be individually programmed – it is now much easier to monitor the volume levels and finer details of individual switches and beams, as the mixer function can be viewed in the display. To give the players more control, a switch can be set up to select different sound sets, and another can control key changes.

Sounds and editing: sampling works well using a microphone or other sound source. The samples can be edited directly on the main unit, although I personally prefer to edit them on a computer using a card reader. Soundbeam 5 comes with a 2GB card providing an alphabetically organised sample library including rhythm loops, and room for the user's own recordings. Whole performances on beams and switches can also be recorded and stored. For those willing



much more straightforward. There are plenty of empty soundsets for the user to program, and Soundbeam are developing themed add-on packs which will be really useful. These, together with software upgrades and extra sounds, will be easily downloadable thanks to the USB connection.

The **design** of the controller unit is well thought out. The yellow wheel of Soundbeam 2 has been replaced by clearly coloured and labelled buttons. The display is slightly larger and the function buttons intuitive to use. The sensor and range buttons form a mini keyboard layout, which makes inputting user note sequences much easier.

Up to four beams can be attached to the unit and each can be assigned notes, chords or sounds as required. The range of the beams, how they react to movement, how many notes or chords they make available and their pitch can all be programmed by the user. The optional switchbox, which allows the use of up to eight switches, is now wireless – another practical

to delve into more complicated aspects of MIDI, fine-tuning of sounds is available for such things as panning and chorus effects.

Soundbeam 5 is an excellent tool with a wealth of features and practical applications across the curriculum and beyond. Its capabilities can be extended in many ways as the user becomes more confident and perhaps slightly addicted (!) to what it can offer.

Overall: ★★★★★

Best new features: integrated sound chip and sampler, wireless switchbox, preview.

Ease of use: logical and open-ended; the manual is rather basic, but may be soon developed.

Most useful for: many types of performing, integration of the arts, inclusion.

Pam Ayling works for Sheffield Music Service as a peripatetic and uses technology to help students who have a wide range of special needs access music-making.