

DETUNIZED.COM: Postmodern Sound Alchemy Gets People Downloading, Tweaking, and Playing

By Mark A. Galang

No day is ordinary for Dresden resident Stephan Marche. Each day for him is a different adventure. Similar to guys such as Pierre Schaeffer, Stephan's love for sound has led him to create DETUNIZED.COM.

DETUNIZED.COM seems to steer clear of trends and fads as we find Stephan in condemned buildings for an old Rhodes, the Eastern bloc for Russian cold-war era synthesizers, or the scrap heap for a rotting piano. The phrase "One man's trash is another man's treasure" rings true for Stephan.

Users of Ableton Live are blessed to have DETUNIZED.COM bringing out new sample-based instruments. DETUNIZED.COM is in tune with new techniques by being dedicated to Ableton Live.

Being a "test" user of Stephan's Live Packs, I was interested in how a man can create fascinating timbres out of instruments considered to be trash or unusable. I hooked up with Stephan to talk to him about himself, DETUNIZED.COM, and his current projects.

MAG: I feel honored that you took some time off your busy schedule for this. Can you tell me a little bit about yourself, your background, and how DETUNIZED.COM came into being?

SM: In my career as a video editor and passionate sound designer, I am a direct witness to the integration of sight and sound. I am fascinated by how powerful sound and music can contribute to a picture's impact. I feel disappointed with how a lot of pictures are fitted with inappropriate sounds. I also find that a lot of sound libraries today are costly, occupy too much space, and too difficult for most computers to handle. I also have a perpetual interest in sound and its inner structure. This led me to find a way to conserve them for the musicians and sound designers that will come after us, hence I founded DETUNIZED.COM

MAG: It is no secret that your instruments are made exclusively for Ableton Live. Why Live?

SM: I am fascinated by the way Live organizes sounds and the way it can easily change sounds within its device chains. You never have to stop running your sequences and you can easily swap devices, getting closer to your goal in an intuitive way.

MAG: What is DETUNIZED.COM and how exactly does it work?

SM: DETUNIZED.COM is a way to create a growing library of sounds whether they are "wanted", "unwanted", "good", or even "bad" sounds. Sounds are neutral so it really depends on how they are used and perceived. It works as a subscription service, like a monthly print magazine with one new release per month.



MAG: Are customers obliged to finish their subscription term? What if they miss an issue or decide to cancel a subscription halfway?

SM: A subscribing user won't be a lifetime slave to DETUNIZED.COM. A subscription can be canceled at any time without further obligation. People who miss a release don't need to worry. All previously issued Live Packs can be found in the back catalog.

MAG: Where do you primarily get ideas or inspiration for each release?

SM: I find inspiration and ideas from a lot of things. Things such as interesting hardware or books, TV programs, technical papers, and art magazines can be sources of ideas. Some musicians I know also have their influences on my work. Being open-minded and "open eared" is the most important thing with this.

MAG: Is there any planning involved or do you just take random trips and jabs?

SM: I have a rough schedule. Sometimes, there are directions for a release that leads me into a deadlock. There are times, however, that better doors open up unexpectedly.

MAG: Is there a release that came out as a result of an unexpected turn?

SM: I think a good example is "Rolfing" Live Pack. One day, I got a call from an acquaintance who reported a rotten piano in a backyard of a Dresden suburb. I stopped working on another release immediately to get there. Indeed, there it was! You get the sense that it must have been a real upright piano back in the days, but all we found was just the housing and about 90% of the strings. We hauled it in, brought it to the studio, and started recording immediately. Two weeks later, I knew I made the right decision; the house where the Rolfing was burned down.

MAG: How does your "crew" work through instrument development such as in the case of Rolfing?

SM: The sound of a piano is among the most recognizable, even for people who have nothing to do with sound or music. With that in mind, my task was to find a way to capture what

can be obtained without any reference tone or any chance to let that piano to sound consistent across its whole audible range. It had a seemingly endless reverb that I found fascinating which evolved when pulling the deeper strings; it was also frustrating at the same time to realize that because it lacked dampers. The reverb can also be disruptive because of strong resonances. I made compromises to get good results. Fortunately, my crew managed to bring this piano into a usable format.



MAG: Another fascinating Live Pack is the “The Vox Populi Synthesizer” based on the Polivoks. How did you acquire the synth and what inspired you to name the Live Pack that way?

SM: Back in the early nineties, I got my hands into a working Polivoks when I was in Russia. I found it in a garage sale near Smolensk. I had some trouble getting it across the border but I got things sorted out. It cost me more than what I paid for the unit itself but it was worth the effort. As for the name, I was aware of the term "Vox Populi" from my TV work and I thought it fits perfectly with the place where the synth came from and the events there from a few years ago.

MAG: The Casiopeia is also a curiosity for me. It looks like it was sampled from a "toy" but it sounds like a DX7. How were you able to do that?

SM: Through proper treatment of the sounds I pull out of units like this along with Ableton Live's capabilities. In the Casiopeia Live Pack I used the more advanced Sampler features to come up with original sounds spiced up with the Ableton sound. With this experience, it's clear that Live was developed by hardware-using "full-blooded" electronic musicians, making not only a 1:1 copy of a standard hardware sampler but going further by implementing features that only software can do.

MAG: You also have a project in the works based on the Curetronic synth. Can you give the readers and I more details about the project as well as what they can expect from it?

SM: The Curetronic System is a classic modular synth system developed by Matthias, an even bigger sound freak than I. He offers a great variety of synth modules in the same spirit as Moog, Buchla, etc. As with every modular system, you always follow the "1-to-2 rule." You have to establish at least two connections; otherwise, you won't hear anything! (laughs) But believe me it's worth wrestling through the cable jungle until the patch is set!

MAG: In my opinion, softsynths puts music creation in a more accessible and compact format, but tangible hardware's advantages is something that software can't beat. How good do you think is the acceptance of softsynths in a community still fascinated with hardware?

SM: That lies within an individual's decision. My customers appreciate my "I deliver you good bread, but you have to put the cheese in it" approach. They just don't have the luxury of time for the kind of work I do and have to deliver just in time the music their clients expect. Most of them, however, are excited by operating knobs, switches, etc. Like having your regular car and a vintage vehicle in your garage, both items get the job done. With the fast growing controller market, the industry is on the right track to connect both worlds at their strongest points.



MAG: How do you think your Live Packs open up more windows of opportunity for hardware instrument makers like Curetronic or custodians of vintage synthesizers?

SM: With my treatment of old hardware synths, I'm safeguarding them for later generations to appreciate and be used to make good music. As for new hardware synth makers, the least that I'm doing for them is provide awareness for this generation and the next, resulting into deeper appreciation for their art. To those who find it impractical to have something like a Curetronic system yet would love to have that sound, my Live Packs are there to provide a very close alternative.

MAG: Thank you very much for your time. It was a pleasure discussing about your insight over a lot of things. Any last words?

SM: More euphony in between silences.

As a taste of what DETUNIZED.COM can deliver, "SYNMAG BANGBOX" is included in the DVD packaged with this issue. Feel free to try it out and experience the vast possibilities that Stephan's Live Packs can offer.

To know more about Stephan Marche as well as purchase any of his instruments, log on to www.detunized.com.

Mark A. Galang is a composer, studio musician, and freelance writer currently residing in the Metro Manila, More info about him as well as downloadable compositions/recordings can be accessed through <http://www.sterilium.tk>