

PRODUCT CLOSE-UP

TAMA

starphonic snare drums

by Anthony Riscica



After three years of research and development, Tama has released its Starphonic series snare drums. Available in four models, these drums offer brand-new features along with some supremely sophisticated sounds. We were given all four snares—maple, bubinga, brass, and aluminum—for review. Let's start with their common components and then take a look at their individual characteristics.

INNOVATIONS FOR ALL

Probably the freshest thing about these drums is the grooved hoop and the "freedom" lug/claw hook. Instead of your standard hoop that has holes built in, Starphonic hoops are made completely solid, with a small lip that runs around the outside. The "freedom" lug and claw then clamp onto this lip, allowing you to remove the hoop without taking the lugs all the way out. A hinge on each of the lugs allows the rod to be pushed away from the shell for hoop removal. The innovation works well for quick changes but has one small flaw. In order to get the hoop off, you must loosen each tension rod almost to the point of coming out completely. So if you twist the key about half a turn too much, the rod will come out of the lug—defeating the purpose of the "freedom" lug altogether. A longer tension rod would help prevent this.

The top of the hoop has a new design as well. Instead of curving out like a normal triple-flange hoop, the grooved hoop bends in. This is said to enhance the natural sound of the drum and offer more sensitivity and control. It's also a lot kinder to drumsticks, especially when you're hitting heavy rimshots.

Other noteworthy features include a rubber gas-

ket in each claw to retain tuning, a ratchet-style snare adjustment that clicks into place to keep the snare tension from slipping, and a linear-drive strainer that prevents the snares from slapping the bottom head when being engaged. These are all very useful attributes.

DRUM BY DRUM

All four Starphonic snares are 6x14. The first drum I took out was the seamless aluminum (\$614.99), which reminded me of my 1960s Ludwig Acrolite in appearance. After playing this model, I was amazed at how close it sounded to the Acrolite—and even better in some respects. The lightweight drum offered an open, resonant sound. I couldn't find a tension that didn't work well on it, or on any of the other Starphonics for that matter. The rimshot sound toward the edge of the drum released a metallic "kang" sound that was delightful rather than frightening. The tone was deep, and the drum produced a nice punch even when cranked up, while still maintaining loads of sensitivity.

Like the aluminum model, the nickel-plated brass Starphonic (\$768.99) had some sweet rimshot tones, but with added volume and a rock 'n' roll sensibility. With the combination of the drums' wide tuning range and snare tension system, you can make these Starphonic snares sound just about any way you want. The rimclick was great, which can be credited to the new hoop design.

Next up was the 8-ply bubinga snare (\$768.99), which is wrapped in a single outer ply of cordia, in an earthy matte finish. Because of its increased shell density, this model provided a massive sound with a full low end. It features a thinner shell (7 mm) than Tama normally makes from this wood. The reduced thickness gives the drum a softer, warmer sound than I had previously experienced with bubinga. Even though bubinga generally doesn't produce the most versatile drums, this one had great range and sensitivity. I especially loved the full, throaty sound I got when I loosened up the tension rods and the snares. And the drum didn't choke at higher tensions, which can sometimes happen with denser woods. This increased resonance is due in part to Tama's ultra-refined bearing edge, where the outer edge makes full contact with the drumhead.

The classy-looking fourth drum is 6 mm/6-ply maple, wrapped in an outer ply of mappa burl (\$768.99). Its timbre was extremely warm, and its soft tone was reminiscent of a lot of vintage wood snares I've played, but with a more open sound. The only thing this drum lacked was volume, but that's not what a maple snare is known for anyway. The sensitivity was superb. I used this model on a jazz gig, and everyone loved it. From brushes to sticks, it came through with a warm, natural wood tone.

With the Starphonic line, Tama has succeeded not only in creating innovative hardware designs but also in producing some of the nicest-sounding snare drums I've ever played. With four different shell types, there really is a Starphonic drum for everyone.

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Quicker, More Efficient Head Changes

In addition to its innovative hoops and claws, each Starphonic drum also features a detachable butt plate. This allows you to take off the snares without having to mess with the tension of the snare wires. To make things even easier, the bottom hoop has an open frame, which allows you to lift the snares right off the head instead of having to go through a hole in the hoop. These new designs, plus the "freedom" lugs, made changing a snare-side head quicker than usual.