

RBH DRUMS

MONARCH DRUMSET

by Michael Dawson

MODERNDRUMMER
DIGITALLY ENHANCED

RBH Drums is based in Virginia Beach and is operated by Bruce Hagwood, who's a trained percussionist, retired firefighter, and master woodworker. Hagwood got into building drums in the early '90s, mainly because he couldn't afford to buy the drumset he wanted at the time. After a few years of experimentation, RBH was launched in 1998.

All RBH drums are handmade from steam-bent and ply shells formed by

Combining classic 3-ply shell construction with more exacting building methods, RBH Monarch drums provide everything you'd want from a vintage kit and more.

the company's own molds. The kit we were sent for review, which includes a 16x20 bass drum, 8x12 and 14x14 toms, and a 6x14 snare, is from the Monarch series, and it features 3-ply mahogany/poplar/mahogany shells with a curly maple veneer, brass single-flange hoops, low-mass lugs, round bearing edges, and Remo drumheads. The 8-lug

snare is outfitted with a Trick throw-off and a set of twenty-strand wires. All of the drums feature solid, steam-bent reinforcement rings.

THE SOUND OF KINGS

As stated in the accompanying brochure, "Although they are based on the drums of the 1930s, '40s, and



'50s, Monarch drums are much more than merely vintage replicas." The classic part of the formula is the mahogany/poplar/mahogany shell, which can be found in many brands' kits from the early part of the twentieth century. Unlike with many of those vintage drums, though, RBH is able to craft a much more consistent shell, using only the highest-quality materials and much more exacting machinery. The result is a flawlessly made drum that produces a deep, dark, warm, and punchy tone with a nearly limitless tuning range. Whereas most older drums have one or two sweet spots, the Monarchs sounded full, open, and highly expressive at any tuning.

We started our test by taking the toms up as high as they could go, balancing out each head, and then fine-tuning the top-to-bottom ratio so that the resonant head was a full step higher than the batter. The bass drum was tuned as tightly as it could go. For the snare, we started with a medium-tight batter head (85 on the DrumDial) with even tension all the way around, and then we tuned the bottom head a perfect fourth above the batter. This got the snare heads balanced and singing together, and then we cranked up the batter head until the drum was a minor third above the rack tom.

Even with all of the heads tuned so tightly, these drums sang beautifully and produced a clear, musical note. RBH says Monarch shells are designed to be low in pitch, which helps explain how they were able to handle the higher tuning without sounding choked. Beboppers and modern jazz drummers are unlikely to find a kit with a better combination of clean articulation and thick tone at such an extreme tuning.

As we gradually backed off the tension on all of the drums, the pitches decreased evenly, the tone remained rich and musical, and we didn't encounter any sour spots. It was super-easy to tune this kit to exact pitches, and we didn't have to do any fine-tuning to clear up overtones. We also didn't need to use any muffling, even with the head tension very low.

The bass drum, which came outfitted with a Clear Powerstroke 3 batter and a Fiberskyn front, went from sounding round and melodic at higher tunings to fat and punchy at lower tunings, and the resonance remained focused and controlled. The same was true of the toms. At higher tension they sounded pure and round, and as I loosened the heads the tone became fatter and punchier without losing pitch clarity. Tuned low, the 14" floor tom sounded bigger than its size would suggest, and the snare had a nice woody crack, followed by an even, controlled decay, at all tensions. The kit sounded stellar acoustically and recorded beautifully, regardless of how it was tuned.

Although you could get lucky and find a similarly designed vintage drumset in decent shape for a fraction of the cost of an RBH Monarch (the review kit, with snare, retails for \$6,350), chances are it's going to need some edge work or replacement hardware in order for it to be fully playable. And even then, it's very unlikely that it's going to be as versatile, responsive, or reliable as one of these meticulously well-crafted instruments. Highly recommended.

rbhdrumsusa.com

