Drum Production – Step Sequencing

By Eddy Mentzel

For this session you will need a laptop, tablet or phone which is connected to the internet. Headphone's are advisable but not essential.

Drums help to determine the rhythm in a piece of music. They add energy and pace to a track and help drive things forward. Imagine 'Bohemian Rhapsody' or 'Thriller' without the drum parts. How much softer would they feel? When a drummer plays a beat, they are constantly making decisions about which drum to hit at which time and which combinations of drum sounds to play together.

We don't all have a drum kit available to play and create our own patterns, but there are software alternatives we can use. Music producers regularly create their own drum parts without ever touching a kit – this is called 'drum production'. Producers draw on the same philosophy's a drummer would use – such as timing, rhythm and velocity – to create live or electronic drum parts for their music digitally. Artists from Billie Eilish to Diplo work this way, creating drum parts for their tracks without ever picking up a drum stick!

There are a variety of options available to help us do this, one of which we are going to explore in this session – **step sequencing**. There are hundreds of step sequencing software options available and once you know the basics of how they work your skills will be transferable across any one you choose to use! Using a step sequencer is also a great way to better understand how one bar of music can be broken down into smaller parts, which supports the development of general music skills.

So, let's get started!

To do: Open this link in your browser on your phone, tablet or laptop. If you have problems using the link search for 'Drumbit' on Google and open the top result. You will be taken to a site that looks like this:
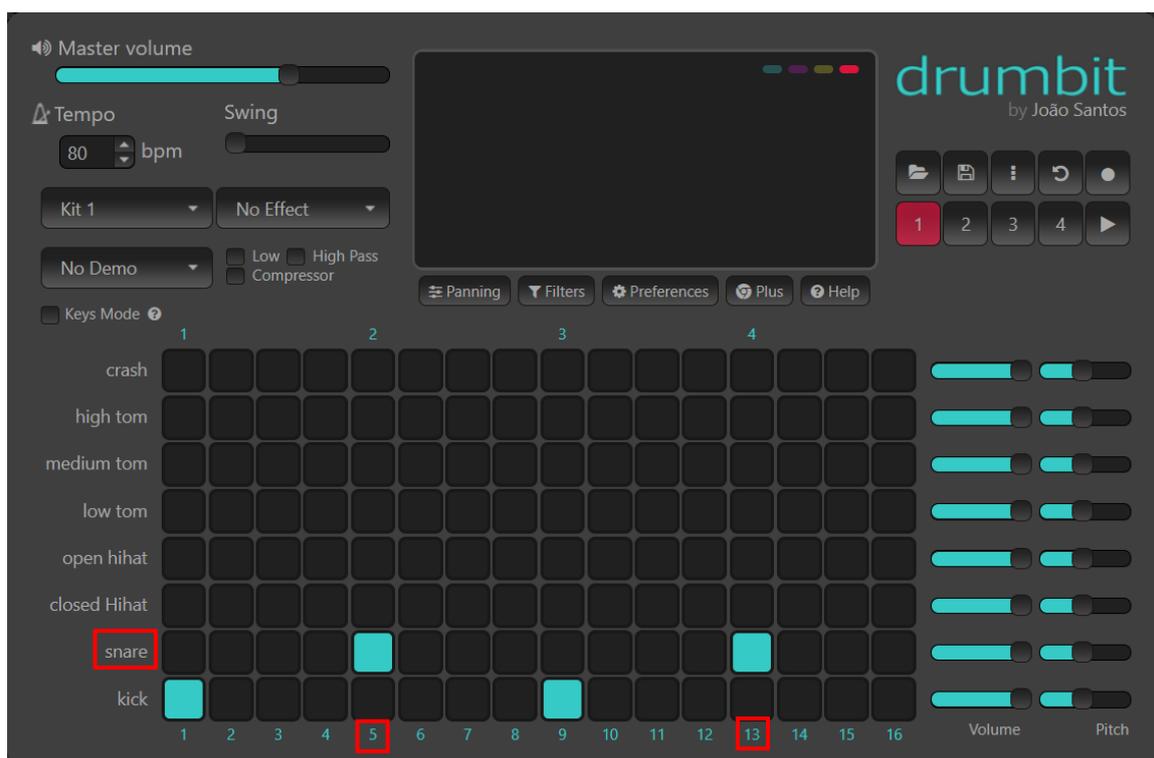
This is a free online **step sequencer** for creating **drum patterns**. A step sequencer is a way of programming musical parts using a grid pattern. Step sequencers are usually 16 'steps' long, with each step representing 1/16 of a bar of music.

To do: On the line representing the **'kick'** sound click the steps **1, 5, 9 and 13**. Your step sequencer should look like the image below. Now press the triangle button to play the rhythm.
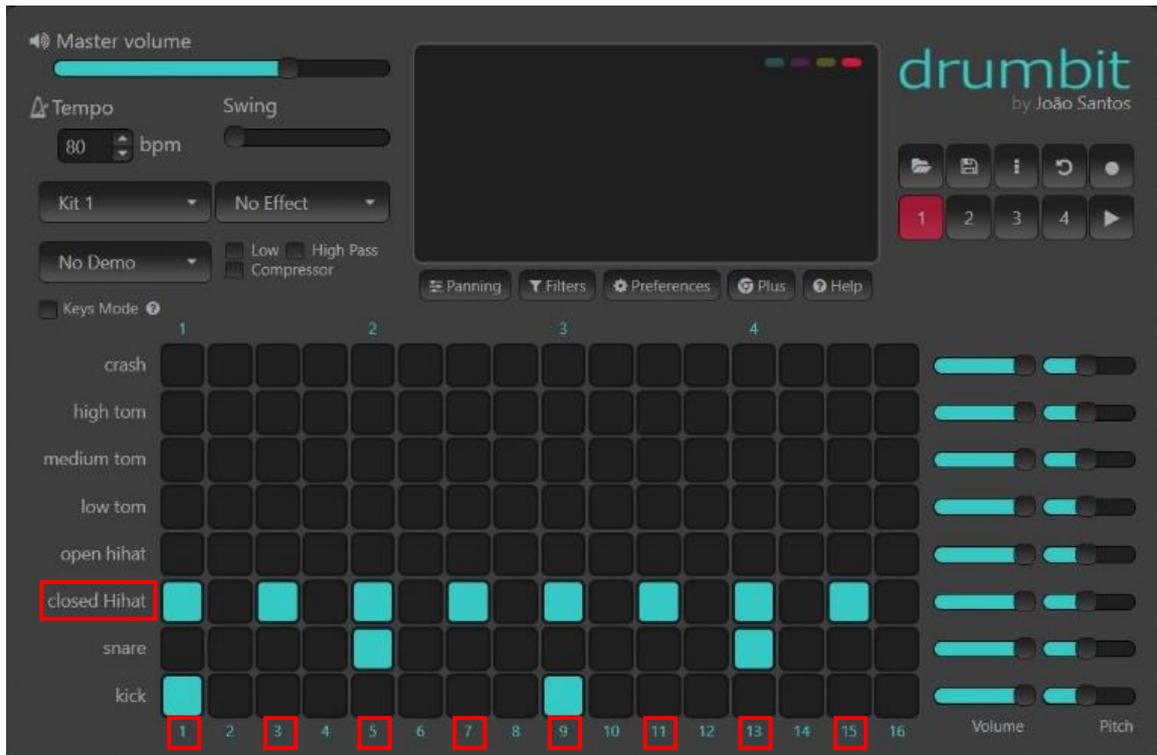

This rhythm is called a 4/4 pattern. The beat plays 4 times in 1 bar of music.

To do: **Remove** the **'kick'** on **step 5** and **13** with and **replace it** with a **'snare'** – and press play. Your step sequencer should look like the image below:

To do: Then **add** a **'closed Hihat' on every other step** and press play. Your step sequencer should look like the image below:

You have now created your first basic drum loop using a step sequencer! There are further adjustments we can make to give our drum patterns more life and energy.

One consideration is the volume of each individual drum sound; not all drum sounds need to be full volume! In modern music, producers often use background or 'ghost' drums to add more interest to a drum loop. Varying the 'velocity' or how hard each drum hit is played is another a great way to add more groove to your drum part too.

To do: Add **steps 4, 7, 12** and **15** on the **'low tom'** and **turn its volume down to 2**. Then **lower the volume** slider on the **'closed Hihat' to 5**. Your step sequencer should look like the image below:
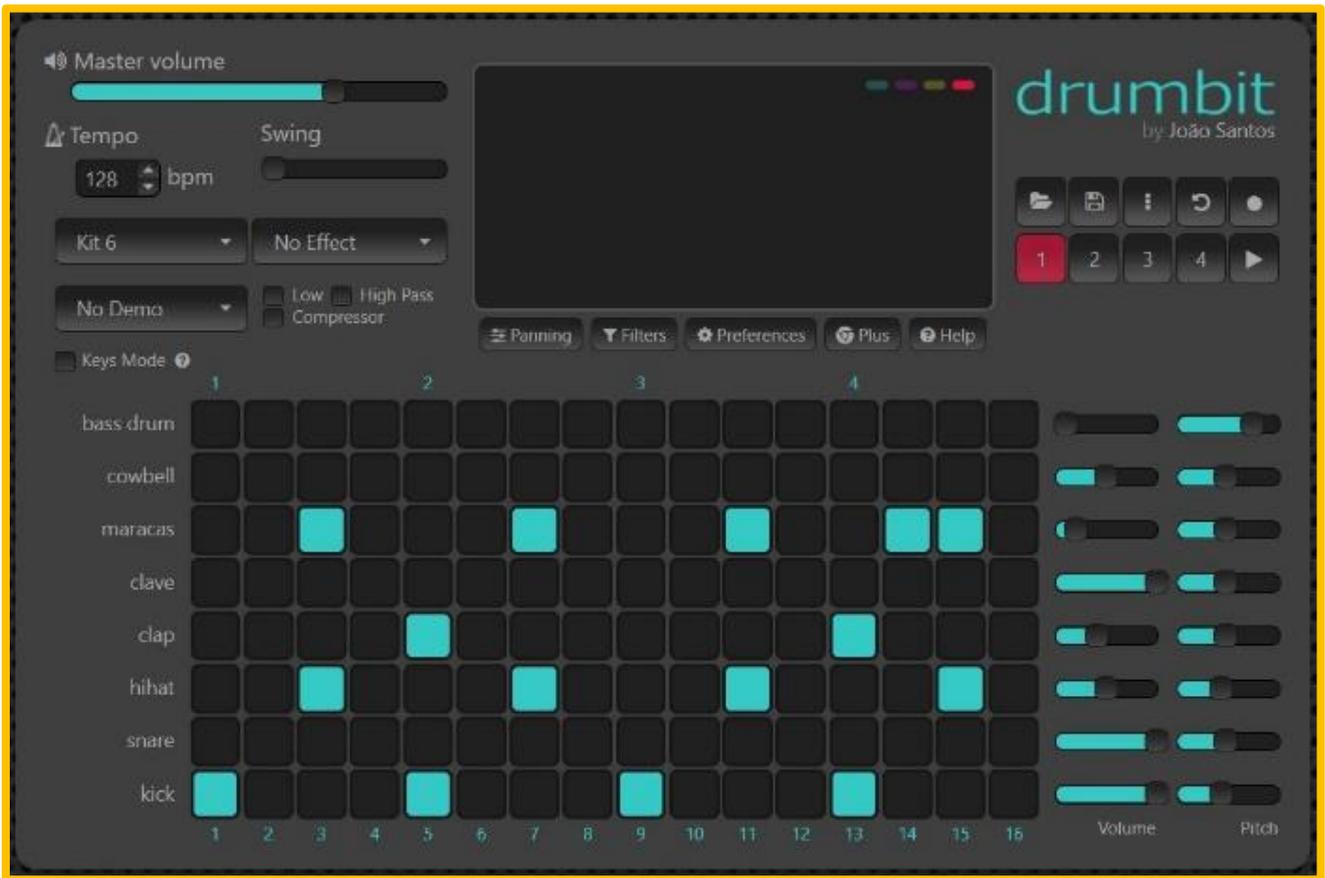
Here are some suggestions of other ways to manipulate your drum loop.

1) Adjust the **'tempo'**, or speed, of your drum loop. Play the drum loop at 120bpm, 140bpm and 170bpm and listen to how the energy of the loop is increased.

2) Change the **drum kit** to hear a different set of sounds playing the rhythm.

3) Adjust the **pitch** of your drum sounds. Playing a drum higher or lower pitch can substantially change how it sounds.
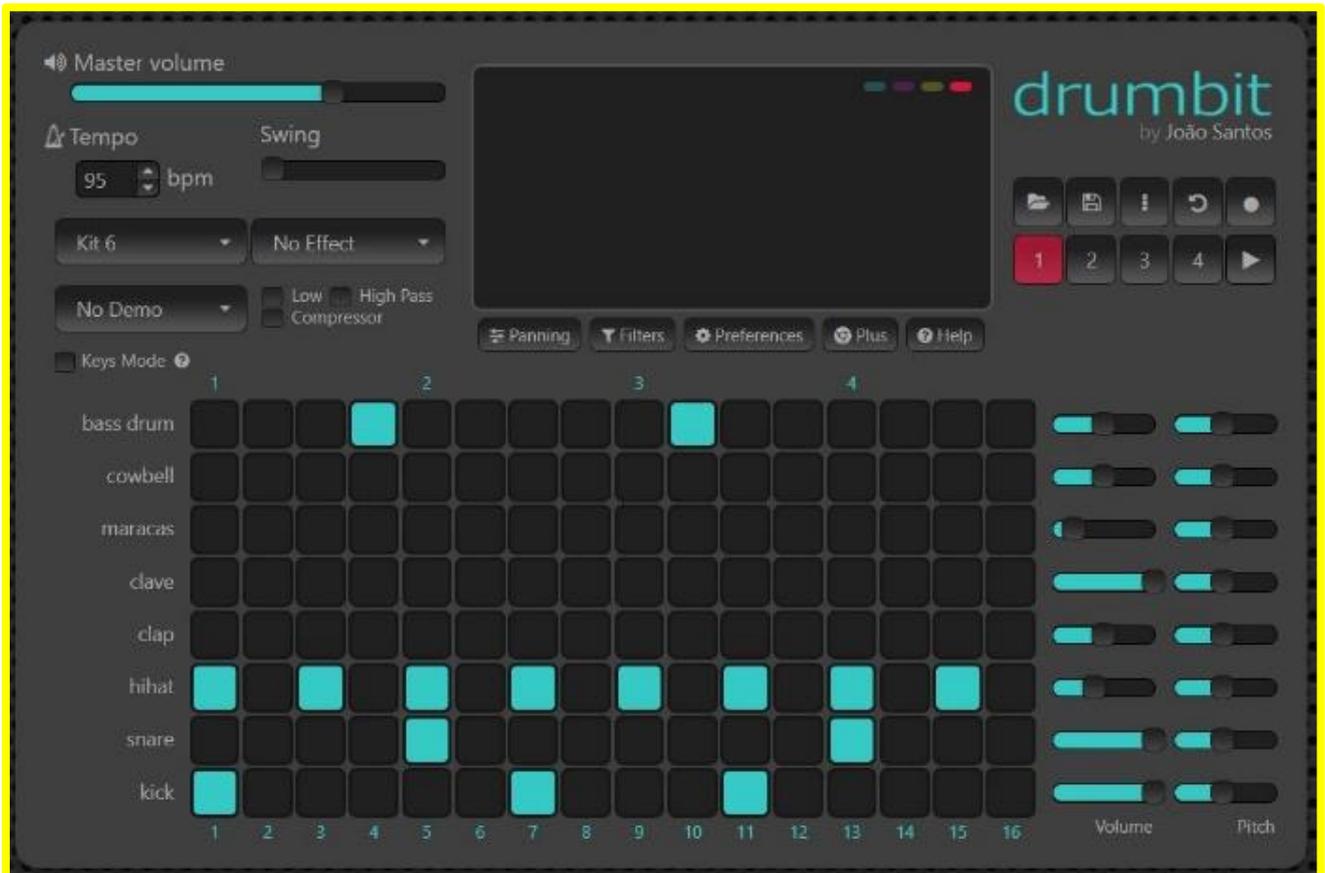

To do: Clear your steps and experiment with creating your own rhythm's. Keep the 'snare' on step 5 and 13 but begin adding your own patterns utilizing what you have learned so far.

And finally: If you are stuck, on the next page there are some recognisable drum patterns you could create. Don't forget to **copy** the **tempo**, **drum kit** and **volume information** as well as the steps.
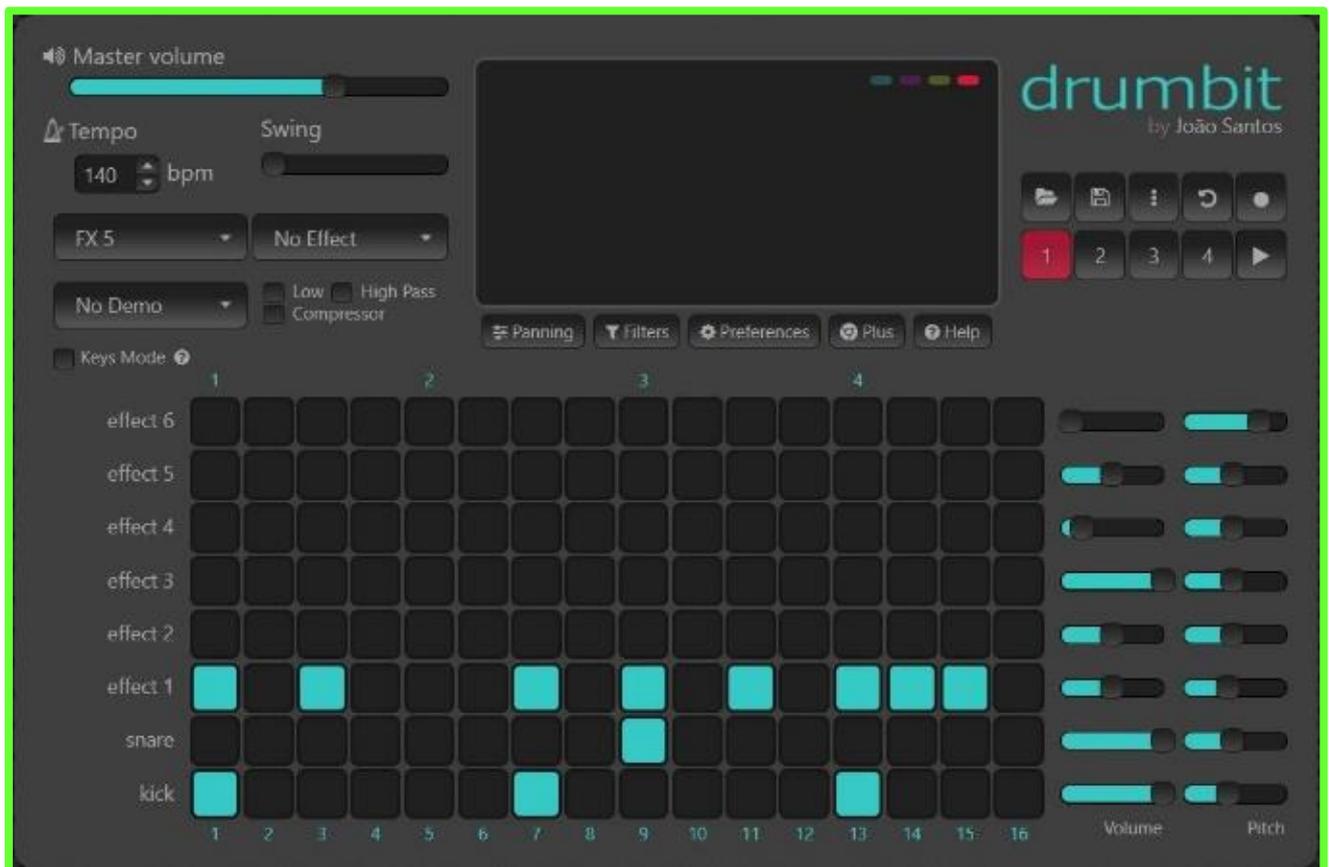
House

Hip Hop

Drum and Bass

Electronic

Further Resources

Below is a list of some tried and tested step sequencer apps for drum beat creation you can download. Some are exclusively step sequencers, some have a step sequencer as part of broader music creation.

Garageband (IOS) - Free

Fingerlab - DM1 (IOS) - £4.99

DMACH Drum Machine (Android) – Free

n-Track 9 Free Edition (Android) - Free