

# Korg MS2000

The MS2000 harks back to Korg's analogue roots, but with with the practicality of digital. Gordon Reid gets all misty-eyed with nostalgia.

In 1978, I bought one of the first MS20s to arrive in the UK. I had been on the verge of buying a Korg 770, but I was lured away from it by the promise of the patch sockets to the right of the MS20's control panel. In retrospect, it was exactly the wrong decision. Sure, the MS20 offered a huge range of sounds, but I wanted Moog or ARP style leads and basses, and those were the two things that the MS20 simply couldn't do. Consequently, I sold it – mint and still boxed – in 1988, for just \$220.

Of course, times and tastes change, and the MS20 soon

became a classic.

The world discovered its squelchy filters and signal mangling capabilities, and its price shot upwards. In 1996 I began to regret my rash decision, so when an 'educational' MS20 (a huge version that looks like a classroom blackboard) drifted my way, I eagerly snapped it up.

Today I respect the MS20 for what it is, rather than deride it for what it is not. However, wouldn't it be nice if there was a synthesiser with the facilities, the immediacy, and the sound of the MS20, but a whole lot more besides? Maybe there is...

## MS Technique

The MS2000 is a four-note polyphonic, DSP-driven synthesiser/vocoder. It is also bi-timbral, so you can create two completely independent synthesised sounds, and layer or split these across the keyboard as desired. Nevertheless, its name is clearly an attempt to invoke the spirits of Korg's early monophonic, analogue synthesisers, and a quick glance (lots of knobs and wooden end-cheeks for starters) demonstrates that its philosophy is firmly rooted in the seventies. Indeed, it seems to be a cocktail of all the facilities from Korg's late '70s semi-modular range: the

MS20 and MS50 monosynths, the SQ10 sequencer, and the VC10 vocoder.

MS2000 patches are based on a conventional two oscillators per voice architecture. In addition to standard analogue-esque waveforms, these offer the unusual 'Vox Wave' (for vocal sounds) and a set of 64 'DWGS' waveforms derived from Korg's DW-series synths. As you might imagine, these take the MS2000 way beyond the capabilities of any conventional analogue synth. Oh yes, and if you're not satisfied with these sources, you can feed audio signals to either of the external signal inputs, and use these instead of the internal oscillators.

The MS2000's filter section is, perhaps, the one area in which it doesn't match the power of its predecessors. Whereas the MS20 had two filters (a resonant low-pass and a resonant high-pass) the MS2000 has just one. However, this single filter offers four modes, a dedicated ADSR envelope generator, velocity sensitivity, and keyboard tracking (all with positive and negative capabilities) so a huge range of sounds lurks within it. Likewise, the amplifier has a dedicated envelope generator, velocity sensitivity, keyboard tracking, pan (the MS2000 is, after all, a stereo synthesiser), and a 'Gate' mode as found on the old Roland Junos. However, the real strength of the amplifier section lies in its variable distortion, which allows you to thicken and overdrive anything passed through it.

The MS2000 also offers two effects sections: one with chorus/flanging, ensemble and phaser effects; and a second with stereo, cross, and left/right delay algorithms. Oh yes... and there is a simple two-band EQ for final tweaking. The effects themselves are limited, but they act much like the '70s pedals that I hooked up to my original synths. As such, I found them rather well suited to this instrument's needs.

The modulation power of the MS2000 lies in its 'virtual patch' system. Some people have suggested that this is, in some ways, more limited than the freely patchable sockets on the MS20, but I beg to differ. With four 'slots' – each of which can host any one of the eight sources and any one of the eight destinations in the matrix – you can build some wonderful rich textures.

## It's Ups & Downs

Unlike the MS20, the MS2000 offers an arpeggiator. In addition to the standard Up, Down, and Alt modes, this offers 'random' – always my favourite way to add sparkle to a sound. The MS2000 also covers SQ10 territory with its three-row step sequencer. This is very 'analogue', with 16 knobs that control parameters like pitch, step length



and note duration (good for constructing real tunes rather than just up/down Donna Summer bass lines). In fact, almost any parameter on the MS-2000 can be chosen for each of the three sequencers. And you can record sequences just by turning a knob on the panel, or tweak them by using the step-sequencers' 16 dedicated knobs.

The MS2000 is also a powerful four-voice vocoder. The two external inputs allow you to present both carrier and the modulator to the instrument, but if you don't have an external signal to modulate, don't worry... you can always use one of the seventy or so internal waveforms. Indeed, you can mix, filter, amplify, contour, and modulate (although with more limited options) the vocoded signal, or even add effects, and arpeggiate the result. This makes the MS2000 far more powerful than any vintage unit... a powerful tool for manipulating all manner of signals, not just for creating Darth Vader impersonations.

### Towards 2000

Okay, but what's it like to play, and how does it sound? If you look at the large top surface, you'll see that the MS2000 is laid out much like a '70s synth, and that everything – even the virtual patching section – is clear and simple. Korg has even seen fit to include signal path diagrams, effects diagrams, and a parameter list on the panel, so you have no excuse for being unadventurous. (Actually, cut off these diagrams and tables, and mount what remains in a 19-inch rack, and you have something that is almost exactly the MS2000R rackmount version.) Sure, some facilities are only available via menus, but I think that we are all becoming used to the 'important stuff gets a dedicated knob, less important stuff gets shoved into a menu' approach, so this didn't cause me any hardship.

Consequently, I was creating new sounds long before the manual left its wrapper. In fact, I found many of the factory sounds could be improved on, so I urge you to twiddle a few knobs when you audition the MS2000 – I suspect that you'll be more impressed than if you simply step through the 128 memories. I particularly liked the inclusion of the 24dB/oct filter mode because this gave me access to all the powerful sounds that my original MS20 lacked. Also high on my list of 'positives' is the distortion which lets you add anything from a subtle overdrive to serious grunge – I found myself using this a lot.

Hooked up in my studio, the MS2000 immediately made itself at home, and, since the LFOs, arpeggiator and sequencer all synchronise to Midi clock, I was soon integrating it into my work. I liked the way it let me split/layer voices and, in particular, use the arpeggiator to drive just Timbre1, or Timbre2, or both simultaneously.

Apart from the limited polyphony, I have just two complaints. Firstly, you can't mix a vocoded timbre with a synth timbre. The two sections are entirely separate. Secondly, the MS2000 does not generate aftertouch from its (otherwise very playable) 44-note keyboard. This precludes my favourite '70s playing techniques, (I remain a huge fan of the pressure-sensitive ARP ProSoloist). Strangely, the MS2000 will generate aftertouch using a pedal, and it will respond to it via Midi.

### Sound Proof

If you buy the MS2000 as an up-to-the-minute repository of dance music textures, then you won't be disappointed, the factory sounds offer a large variety of basses, FX, filter sweeps, and four-on-the-floor sequences. These co-exist alongside a number of more conventional leads and synth basses, plus a handful of pads and brass sounds.

Furthermore, if you enjoy programming and sound creation you won't be disappointed either. I found the DWGS waves, in particular, opened the doors to sophisticated timbres covering the whole spectrum from FM-like digital cleanliness to lush analogue warmth. I recreated my favourite Odyssey trumpets, oodles of '80s electric pianos and Clavinets, chimes, bells, and a host of organs and pad sounds. In particular, I loved DWGS waveform #35, 'Endless', which generates a Shepherd tone (one that sounds like it has the same pitch in every octave).

Even sticking to the more conventional sawtooth, pulse and triangle waves, the MS2000 offers more sounds than you might expect. This is because each of the waveforms on OSC1 offers wave-shaping, while OSC2 provides 'sync' and ring modulation. Indeed, the MS2000 proved to be quite a chameleon. Hooked up to a spring reverb it could be instant analogue nostalgia, while a moment later – patched through a modern, digital effects processor – it was almost anything I wanted subject, of course, to its 4-voice polyphony.

I should also take a moment to compliment the sound of the vocoder which, in normal use, proved to be an extremely usable recreation of the classic sound. However, when I wanted to take it to the wilder regions of signal processing, the MS2000 provided formant shifting and envelope shaping parameters for the 16 resynthesis filters. Great fun!

### Come Out To Play

I could ramble on a lot more about the types of sounds I programmed, and about how I used them. I could also start a multi-page discourse about the myriad Midi and other control facilities I've not had a chance to mention in this review. But I won't. The most important thing I can tell you about the MS2000 is that I found it a hugely playable instrument. Sure, it doesn't have the full feature-set of more expensive synthesisers and workstations, but Korg was not trying to make a mega-synth. What Korg aimed for is something affordable, something simple to use, something flexible, and something with the sounds and features that many of today's producers are looking for, and, to their credit, they've achieved that.



---

### Distributed by

• *MusicLink*

(03) 9765 6565

Korg on WWW: 'www.korg.com'

MusicLink on WWW: 'www.musiclink.com.au'

### Price

• MS2000 \$2,499

MS2000R \$1,899