

KORG M3

The M1 was one of the most successful synths ever, the M2 is a gridlocked freeway, and the M3 is a bold new-generation synth workstation.

Text: Brad Watts



► Korg is one of the mainstays of the musical instrument industry. Alongside Roland and Yamaha, the company will go down in history as one of the ‘big three’ synth manufacturers of all time.

From its humble beginnings in the ‘60s building drum machines, Korg has had its fair share of ups and downs in this fickle business. The company’s greatest rebound came during the late ‘80s with the hugely successful M1 music workstation. Over 200,000 M1 units left the factory during its reign.

Korg wasn’t, however, the first to go down the workstation path – Ensoniq instigated the format with the ESQ-1 in 1986. But the M1 became *the* killer workstation with realistic waveforms, a useful sequencer and true multitimbral support. The M1 became Korg’s model for a plethora of workstation designs that have continued their evolutionary growth throughout the T series, 01W line and of course the Trinity and Triton range.

CHEEK TO CHEEK

In a return to the M prefix, Korg has released the M3. Not to be confused with the M3R module released in the early ‘90s, the M3 is the 2007 incarnation of Korg’s family of workstations.

First impressions of the M3 are that of futuristic designs; the hard white surfaces providing an immediate reminder of countless Apple iProducts. The M3 has also been compared to various domestic white-goods among the user groups across the world-wide-why-aren’t-I-doing-something-else. In the interests of tradition, however, Korg has placed nicely stained wooden end-checks on the M3 – a pleasant (if slightly kooky) touch.

The M3 is actually two separate parts – the keyboard and the M3 module. Korg’s concept here is the Korg Komponent System. Buy a 61-, 73- or 88-note keyboard that houses a joystick, ribbon controller and a couple of soft-switches and then decide what units you’ll install into the keyboard. In this case, the unit includes a single M3 module, but with the larger keyboards you can physically install two M3 modules or an M3 alongside a Korg Radius R analogue modelling synth.

While you may not be able to fit two M3-M modules atop a 61-note keyboard you *can* connect up to two modules. It’s a nifty little setup that allows quick removal of the module from the keyboard – handy if you want to nip out with only the module under your arm. This also allows for the entire module to be mounted at an angle to better aid screen viewing and parameter adjustment. Connection of the module to the keyboard is via a single nine-pin cable. The module section of the M3 is not the standard 19-inch rack size. It is in fact much wider than that, so where you put it will become a case of invention, space and necessity. It does have shades of the home-keyboard about it but I got used to the look pretty quickly, and the angled surface avoids the aching muscles you can suffer from constantly lurching above a synth. If you’re into that kind of pain – or you need to put the M3 into a case – you can leave the module sitting flat within the keyboard. The 88-note version is, as I understand it, a weighted model similar in feel to the OASYS keyboard, with heavier weighted keys in the lower register than at the top – like a piano. The 61-note synth-action model I was sent had an awesome action to it. Apparently Korg has ceased sourcing its keyboards from Fatar and Yamaha, and has started manufacturing its own designs – all for the better I’d say. It’s well weighted, doesn’t have that Triton ‘clack’ about it and plays exceptionally well. The unit also transmits and receives key and channel aftertouch information. The joystick is surrounded with white LED lighting – adding further fuel to the iKorg look.

M3 FUEL

The module section of the M3 includes eight velocity sensitive touch-pads. These can play back single notes or be programmed for playing chords of up to eight notes each. Again in iWhite, the pads are situated directly below the 320 x 240 colour LCD touch-screen. Besides providing easy access to a bucketload of editing parameters, the touch-screen doubles as an X-Y control pad – borrowed from Korg’s Kaoss technology. Immediately to the right of the screen are buttons for the deployment of X-Y mode and a contrast control pot.

Connections to and from the module include left and right unbalanced jack outputs and four additional jack



outs. Input for sampling and direct throughput is via L+R unbalanced jacks with a switch for mic or line level input and a gain pot. A headphone TRS jack sits out the back along with TosLink optical S/PDIF ports. There's a damper pedal input and two assignable jacks for switches or pedals. There's the obligatory MIDI trio and a collection of USB 2.0 ports. A USB B port for connection of the M3 directly to your PC or Mac, and a further two USB A ports for connecting USB storage devices such as hard drives and memory sticks. A soon-to-be-released EXB-FW card adds two Firewire ports that will eventually allow direct porting of both MIDI and audio information directly from the M3. And speaking of bilateral communication, Korg supplies both a stand-alone editor for the M3 and a VST, AU or RTAS plug-in for controlling the synth.

I've really got to hand it to Korg for its plug-in software. Instigating the AU plug doesn't require setting up any weird-arse MIDI routing – you just instance the plug and it sorts itself out over USB – it's really quite bulletproof. My only grievance is that the plug-in scans every MIDI port available to your system before it's ready to run; a process that took a few minutes on my system – no doubt USB 1.1 slows things down here.

OASYS ANCESTRY

As far as synthesis engines are concerned I must point out that the M3 doesn't use the same systems employed in Korg's flagship OASYS machine. The HD1 synthesis architecture of Korg's megasynth is supplanted by an EDS (Enhanced Definition Synthesis) engine. This is primarily a PCM sample playback-based system allowing the use of up to eight stereo waveforms, up to four filters, five LFOs and five envelope generators. EDS is based upon the OASYS's HD1 system but is driven via a proprietary chipset rather than software running on a generic PC processor. Polyphony is a lavish 120 voices as compared with the OASYS's outlandish 172. The waveform ROM is a compressed 256MB in contrast to the 628MB of uncompressed waveforms found in the OASYS monster. Equally, sample RAM is in lesser quantities in the M3, with its largest RAM allowance being 64MB, expandable to 320MB as compared with the OASYS' 1.5GB. The EDS system also foregoes any wave-sequencing or vector envelope abilities. While much of the M3's concepts and waveforms may have been conceived within the OASYS framework it is a completely new machine – and a third of the price of OASYS. The M3 also lacks an internal hard drive and CDR – devices one can connect via the USB ports.

“M3 is awash with luscious and/or continually evolving pads”



“There’s plenty of character and a feature set that can take you where very few synths can.”

What has made it through from the OASYS unscathed is the KARMA 2 engine. This first appeared within the OASYS and is a mind bogglingly incredible system of realtime music/sequence generation. KARMA has its detractors who claim it’s merely a beefed-up arpeggiator, but spend 10 minutes within KARMA and you’ll be coming up with idea after idea, without once treading over old ground. Personally, I like it and agree that this is where traditional arpeggiators have been left in the mud to fossilise. If you want to upgrade from KARMA 1 without shelling out for an OASYS then this is the only option.

One feature not seen in OASYS land is the M3’s drum track programmability. Each program can store its own kit and preset or user drum pattern. There’s a dedicated button on the front panel to turn this drum track on or off. Some will find this brilliant if they aren’t acquainted already – others may find it a tad ‘bontempi’.

Another advance the M3 has over the OASYS is improved sequencer resolution. The OASYS sports a rather last century 192ppq whereas the M3 can sequence at a far more precise 480ppq. Less song slots are available however – 128 instead of 200. Not a huge loss though. The big omission is the lack of real-time audio record tracks. The OASYS provided 16 hard disk record tracks but due to the lack of an internal drive Korg has seen fit to shelve this feature. You can of course sample live snippets into the standard 64MB of sample RAM (320MB, once you add the proprietary expansion RAM board) and have these snippets retriggered via the sequencer. Korg call the feature ‘In Track Sampling’ and it could easily cover for the lack of proper audio tracks – all within those RAM limitations, though. As for importing samples from other libraries, like the OASYS the M3 can read WAV, AIFF, Soundfont and Akai sample formats. Older Korg formats can be read too but only the waveform data, as the EDS engine is a different beast to previous Triton and Trinity systems. Weirdly, and just like the OASYS, only 48k sampling is supported, which, like the sample RAM constraints, seems a bit short-sighted on Korg’s part.

Other more inspiring expansion boards include the EXB-Radias board. This is a 24-voice version of Korg’s RADIUS analogue modelling synth and vocoder. Adding this to the M3 could well leave you needing nothing else for synthetic sound design, as it’s one of the ultimate analogue emulations. Korg’s Multiple Modeling Technology (or MMT) synth engine offers dual oscillators, which will combine to provide analogue-modelled waves, PCM waveforms, noise, ring modulation and cross-modulating waveforms. Combined with Variable Phase Modulation and believable Unison modes the Radius board is well worth the extra lolly. Plus, it will bring your polyphony count up.

M3 – GOING PLACES?

So how’s it sound? Korg synths often have a habit of sounding far too ‘nice’. Not that one should necessarily complain about this but sometimes I find myself looking for something a bit grittier. That said, it’s always easy to carve some grit into a sound rather than take it out. Like one would expect from Korg, the M3 is awash with luscious and/or continually evolving pads. When this is combined with the KARMA system, per-program drum tracks, the steroid-enhanced sequencer and a Radias board, I can’t see many needing much more if they intend to pair the unit with a computer. I only mention the computer, because without true record tracks and situations where the M3 sample RAM isn’t pulling its weight, you’ll need one to be self-sufficient. The pianos are definitely not of the calibre of the OASYS’s tinkling ivories but there again, the M3 doesn’t stash the 1.5GB required for some of those timbres. That said, I’m pretty sure there’ll be quite the queue for the M3, as many will see this as the OASYS they <<can>> afford. As I said earlier, and I’ll say it again, it’s not the same, but there are a world of possibilities in the M3 that aren’t available from anything but the OASYS and the M3. As far as the sound is concerned I’d personally be opting for the M3 over the older Motif and Roland workstation synths. There’s plenty of character and a feature set that can take you where very few synths can. A worthy successor to the legendary M1. ■



NEED TO KNOW

Price

61-note: \$4999; 73-note: \$5499; 88-note: \$6499; M3-M rack: \$3999

Contact

Music Link
(03) 9765 6565
atdept@musiclink.com.au
www.musiclink.com.au

Pros

Fantastic sounds.
Great keyboard.
KARMA 2 for those that can’t afford the OASYS.
Perfect computer integration.
Versatile keyboard/module form factor.

Cons

Lacks audio track recording.
Not nearly enough sample RAM.
Difficult to keep clean.

Summary

A new generation of workstation bearing the ‘M’ moniker needed to deliver, and it has. Great sounds, lots of grunt, better keyboard action, good expansion possibilities, and seamless computer integration. A sound investment.