



# Korg Electribe EA-1 & ER-1

T  
E  
S  
T

Korg have released these units as part of the new Electribe range, aimed at the DJ and dance producer. Christopher Holder finds that every cloud has a silver lining.

It's amazing how things work out for the best sometimes. I'll set the scene: I powered up my home studio like any other night and booted up my copy of Cubase... like any other night. But tonight was destined to be different, and my computer setup that's been happily chugging away for three years without alteration decided that it had enough of this 'trouble-free operation' lark, and gave me an error message. 'Copy protection key not recognised, Please attach key and restart.'

What!?! You guessed it, no amount of jiggling, resetting or accusing my wife of knocking my PC with the Hoover would do any good. My dongle had given up the ghost.

Then these Korg Electribe units arrived at the AT offices. Standalone, groovy, analogue-style beat/bleep boxes. Fantastic. Without my software sequencer I could really get into the on-board pattern programming and song construction. Bigger the computer, I was re-enrolling into the 'old skool'.

The Korg Electribe range are squarely directed at the DJ and the dance producer. The ER-1 is the drum machine (remember 'R' for rhythm), while the EA-1 is the bleep box (remember 'A' for analogue). Both offer looped-based composing and hands-on real-time control of the sounds, and with their appealing silver appearance it's quite easy to think of them as the TR606/TB303 dynamic duo for the modern age.

## Reach Out & Tweak

I'm glad that circumstances forced me to treat the EA-1/ER-1 as self-contained synths, because although it's possible to use the EA-1/ER-1 as tone modules controlled by your sequencer, I believe that's missing the point. These are synths that invite you to get your hands dirty, they're not faceless tone modules you file away and operate remotely. Along with the sound quality, it's the usability and the 'reach out and grab it' immediacy that are the principal selling points. For instance, with the ER-1 drum machine I started out by finding a preset loop that I liked the sound of, in this case an electro-style four

bar loop (it was all I could do to stop myself dancing 'the robot'), resaved it to a blank user memory location and began tinkering with it. The loop comprised a fat, round, 808-style kick, a skinny CR78 style snare, a hi-Q sound, and a special effect along with the mandatory hats, cymbal and clap. Along the bottom of the ER-1 are the 16 pads representing the 16 quarter notes of a four beat bar – although other time signatures are possible. Just like the drum machines of yore, you can reach out and tap the relevant pad to introduce more of your selected sound. Tap the pad again to get rid of what you've done. After driving the ER-1 for less than 15 minutes I had my own killer electro beat.

Right, time to find the perfect bass line.

I plugged the Midi In on the EA-1 into the Midi Out of the ER-1, and hit 'go' on the rhythm box, which prompted the EA-1 to run the selected pattern in perfect sync. Flicking through the presets you can hear the full ambit of well programmed factory presets that span all flavours of techno, big beat, drum & bass, house, garage, reggae dub, and special FX. I was more interested in the raw bass sound and not necessarily the pattern. I picked a pattern that employed a deep bass that found the resonant frequency of my entire flat, saved the pattern somewhere else and got to work programming something funky to go with the electro rhythms. Easy as you like. You can program the EA-1 in steps but it's quite painstaking, and if you can pull it off, it's best to play your pattern in real-time and fine tune it later.

Song construction is as easy as copying and pasting your patterns until you're satisfied. This process prompted me to program some extra fills and bass variations. To get interesting variations, Korg has included a feature called Motion Sequence. The idea is that you can save knob movements with your pattern. Press the Motion Sequence button, then Record, and adjust the appropriate knob to taste. The constraint here is one knob per part. Still, you can get that snare panning side to side, have that bass sound subjected to a fierce filter sweep, or anything else that you can reach out and grab.

Additionally the ER-1 and EA-1 feature two ring modulators that may be applied to the modelled parts, which provide some more strength to your sound designing arm.

Another area that offers variation is the effects section. A choice of delay or chorus is on offer. In the case of the EA-1 the effect can be individually tailored to the two parts, while for the ER-1 the effects are good for the whole synth. Don't be put off by the fact that there are only two parameter knobs, Depth and Time – these effects are clever. In the case of delays, the Depth control gives you more delay and feedback. Alternatively, with the chorus, Depth brings on a more extreme chorus or flange. The Time knob works superbly. In the case of delays you can tweak it in real time without it answering back with digital noise. The reason is that the values the knob can access are stepped, each value makes sense in the context of the tempo of the pattern. Namely, the values move from fast 1/64 note delays all the way to two and four quarter note lengths.

### Going for a Song

Once I had my song constructed, it was just a matter of pressing Play and basking in the glory of my creation. It was good, but I wanted a little more. With the help of another Midi lead I added my Roland R8 MkII drum machine into the chain. I had some more complementary stuff going on from that, using side sticks as well as a bigger more acoustic snare sound, some detuned cow bells and the like.

I suppose all I'm pointing out here is that the ER-1 offers enormous variation for the eight sounds it has on offer but isn't going to entirely replace your existing sample-based drum machine or sampler full of drum hits. All the sounds analogue emulations, there are certainly 'real' sounding rhythms. I'd suggest that ER-1 is the perfect complement to your existing rhythm section, not a straight replacement.

Meanwhile the EA-1 will quite happily your only bass module in a studio that mostly revolves around the dance genre. Each sound can comprise two oscillator with a choice of three waveforms, and oscillator modulation (including ring modulation, oscillator sync and Korg's own Decimator). The results give a tremendous variety of analogue bass and lead voice emulations.

For further flexibility, both units offer inputs for two external mono sources (or one stereo source in the case of the ER-1, which has a panning control), the idea being that you patch a signal in and then use the filter and effects to alter the raw signal. By way of further potential the EA-1/ER-1 will only allow signal to pass if you have one of the Audio In parts activated on the sequencer – so essentially you treat it like any of the other on-board

sounds. The results naturally lend themselves to instant gated vocals, stuttering strings or, with a bit more imagination, whole drum loops can be rerouted back into the unit and filtered in real-time (useful for those without a sampler). This Audio In feature is certain to be one that benefits from a good amount of experimentation and is sure to be an original and powerful selling point.

### 'Tribal Gathering

Both units use Korg's DSP synthesis modelling technology, as we've seen on the likes of their Prophecy and Z1 synths. The ER-1 has four different modelled sounds or parts on offer, and four more fixed samples (cymbal, clap, open and closed hi-hats). Just press the relevant part button to access its parameters. The four modelled parts use the source wave parameters as well as the tuning, filter and amplitude envelope controls that all the parts share. You can design the sound of the modelled parts from scratch, although most presets use them to accommodate a kick a snare and two special effects.

I won't dwell on the system controls or the pattern and song controls, but suffice it to say that there isn't any multiple level menus and the basic three digit display is more than adequate. The principle system operations are easily accessed via Korg's simple matrix-style user interface.

Once I found a replacement dongle for Cubase and my brain was firmly back into a sequencer-centric frame of mind, I still went back to composing my patterns on the EA-1 and ER-1. From this basis I found it easier to use the Electribe combo by changing the patterns from Cubase (using program change messages). That way I



got the hands-on immediacy of the EA-1/ER-1 but also the song construction power of the sequencer. Of course I eventually (and reluctantly) configured the system to have the EA-1 and ER-1 acting as sound modules. All of the features were accessible via control change messages etc., but I almost felt guilty doing it. In some respects the EA-1 benefited from remote

operation. Often it was easier to get the bass loop spot-on from my master keyboard, than it was to use the EA-1's keypads or step compose functions.

I haven't reviewed the EA-1/ER-1 combination from the perspective of a DJ, although there are obvious DJ applications there. From a studio perspective, these are niche products – albeit a very large niche. The ER-1 isn't a one-box rhythm solution any more than a Roland TR series drum machine is a one-box solution in a modern studio, but the analogue drum emulations are excellent and the breadth and variation you can achieve within those constraints is extraordinary. It takes a tad more perseverance with the EA-1 to achieve your own personalised high quality results, but the actual analogue-style timbres are very realistic – the EA-1 isn't an analogue-style digital compromise like those that other manufacturers have tried to palm us off with in the past, these sounds are definitely the business. Again the timbral variation you can achieve is considerable.

### Hands-on Approach

You have to remember that the functions on both units point to quick and easy (and cost effective) operation, and therefore don't offer infinite feature driven possibilities. In the process there are a few things which are left out, and you might feel that some shouldn't have been. For instance an arpeggiator would have added an enormous amount to the EA-1. Touch sensitive pads aren't on offer – the ER-1 gives you a 'one velocity plus

accent' setup like you see on the older drum machines. If you're using these two units in isolation, perhaps a reverb patch would have been handy in the effects section – although a surprisingly effective illusion of space is quite easily achieved with either the delay or chorus/flanger. The ER-1 also could benefit from maybe two extra outputs to assign the kick and snare for separate processing on your console. The EA-1, being duophonic, isn't so hard hit by the output restrictions but the sounds are mono when you separate them, which doesn't do much for your killer flanged lead line.

The enduring feeling you have after a EA-1/ER-1 session is a sense of fun. 'Fun' is a word that for serious minded studio pros might sound a bit disparaging, but it shouldn't. After all, isn't it amazing how the results you get are so much more impressive when you're actually having a good time?



---

### Distributed by

• Musiclink

Phone: +61 (0)3 9429 9299

Fax: +61 (0)3 9427 0740

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

Korg Electribe on WWW: 'www.sputnik7.com/electribe-live'

### Price

• RRP: EA-1 \$1,199; AR-1 \$1,199

A free Electribe demo CD is available. Contact Musiclink.

---

## HEARD ANY GOOD FILMS LATELY?

Get a sound grounding to your career with the Australian Film, Television and Radio School.

Applications are now open for 2000 courses in:

### • SOUND - GRADUATE DIPLOMA

1 year full time

Focusing on location recording for TV, documentary and drama productions with an exploration of sound post production.

Cost \$4000

### • SOUND - MASTER OF ARTS

1 year full time

Focusing on sound post production for film and television drama.

Cost \$4000

Location Sound Recording

1 year full time Intensive practical sound recording.

Cost \$4000

### • SCREEN COMPOSERS

5 months full time

A comprehensive and intensive course designed to give students a wide range of knowledge and skills required to work as a composer in the film and TV industries.

Cost \$2400

Applications close 30 September 1999

Call AFTRS now for info 9805 6444 or check out the website

