

Korg OASYS

Is the OASYS monster workstation the ultimate 'desert island' synth? Brad Watts maroons himself in his studio to find out.

It's not everyday you get your hands on an instrument that sells for more than a home deposit; firstly because it's quite a tidy sum of cash to go spending on a synthesizer, and secondly because nobody really builds such luxurious machines any more. I honestly thought the 'great synth wars' were over – that frenzied period of 20th century history where every electronic instrument company released a monster flagship every few years. Well, it would appear Korg has decided to re-enter the fray with its behemoth OASYS production station. The thing that seems to set everybody aghast about the OASYS is the price. In a time where incredibly complex synthesis and sampling can be easily achieved with a computer and some relatively inexpensive software, 15 grand seems an awful lot of money to be spending on a synthesizer. Allow me to place a little perspective on the OASYS' high ticket price. Looking back to the mid '80s one remembers Kurzweil's K250. At the time this earth-shattering synth boasted a mind boggling 12-note polyphony combined with a 12-track sequencer. In its fully expanded form a K250 would set you back approximately \$44,000. Yes, that's forty-four thousand Australian dollars – easily a 50% deposit on a free-standing house in Sydney at the time – no doubt with an in-ground pool and possibly in one of the more well-to-do suburbs. Still, the K250 was far more affordable than the Fairlight CMI and Synclavier machines – starting at around \$70k and rising well into six-figure territory. If these stratospheric prices were stretching the budget a little then perhaps a Prophet 10 at ten grand or a Roland Jupiter 8 for six would fit the bill – neither of which could sample by the way. I'm sure you're getting the idea. In this day and age the OASYS

is exponentially more advanced than any synthesis unit before it and according to my calculations, way cheaper than half a house in any capital city of Australia. Incidentally, the last Kurzweil K250 I saw was going for less than 1,000 bucks.

The next moan I hear is from the from die-hard synth technologists regarding the OASYS' underlying computer-based architecture. Yes, the OASYS system is in fact a computer running a bespoke operating system and, yes, the OS is based on Linux but this by no means implies you could whip up the equivalent machine with a PC and a stack of software. Sure you could probably get some stunning results. But your DIY 'Oasis' clone wouldn't behave like an instrument as such. The same argument is often raised regarding the Receptor Muse. Yes you could build one but it's simply not the same as having a stand-alone box to run the whole kit-and-caboodle. The OASYS is a completely self-contained instrument with enough features to keep you reading through the phone directory-sized manual for years to come. If you're a serial tinkerer then go ahead and piece together a computer system, but if you're a musician looking for an completely integrated and uber-professional instrument, the OASYS could be your last port of call for years to come.

OASYS Now & Then

If like me you were certain Korg had released OASYS products in the past you'd be absolutely correct. OASYS is actually Korg's long time moniker for 'Open Architecture SYnthesis System'. The project began in 1991 with the concept of an open software architecture to support current and additional synthesis technologies into the future. The original concept proved far too costly, however. Using 20th



century technology, it was looking like Korg would end up with another Fairlight on its hands, so the idea was shelved but the software development end of the project stayed in-house and spawned various offshoot products throughout the '90s. Instruments such as the Triton and Trinity range, the Prophecy and Electribe units, all owe their existence to the OASYS project. The only product to actually carry the name was the OASYS PCI card – still a worthwhile card to have in a spare computer – and they're dirt cheap on eBay.

The modern incarnation of the OASYS project is a machine to behold. At almost 1.5 metres long and weighing in at over 32kg, the weighted 88-note version of the keyboard is quite simply... huge. It's a two-person lift no matter how you go about it. Much of the weight could well be down to the hammer action keyboard. The keys are progressively weighted across four separate zones to mimic more accurately the feel of a piano: low keys are heavier, the high keys lighter to the touch. Not being too adept on a piano-style keyboard I ran the unit past some famous and some not-so-famous players. All agreed the keyboard was up there with the best they'd tickled. If you can live without piano keys there's also a slightly more affordable 76-note synth-action keyboard version of the OASYS that'll save around 6kg in overall weight. Both keyboards support mono aftertouch control information.

Eye Screen

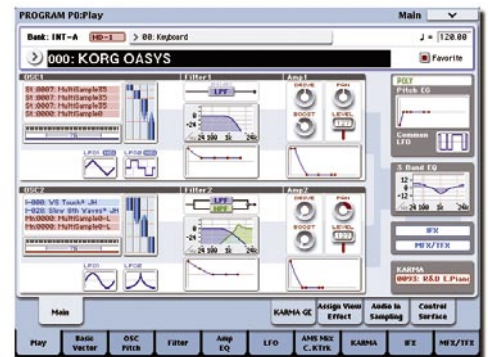
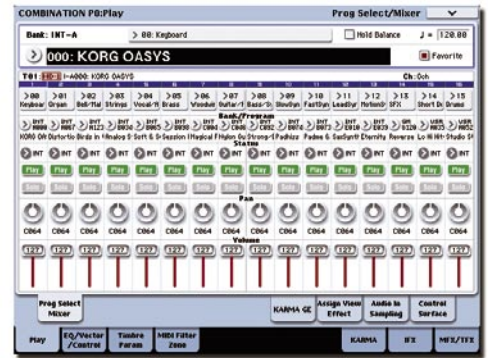
No doubt the most obvious aspect of OASYS is the 10.4-inch touch-sensitive colour LCD display. The centrally located screen relays bucketloads of information and the operating system is both intuitive and a pleasure to use. For a virtual Flash rendition of the operating system as seen via the touch screen go to Korg's website. The screen folds back and forth for viewing angle and looks to be built well enough to withstand the amount of prodding and poking it will inevitably have to endure. Just below the touchscreen are eight velocity sensitive drum pads that can be used for triggering chord voicings and control messages as well as single notes. These pads unfortunately do not transmit aftertouch information as found in many pad-based controllers – a shortfall in my opinion. As for further control options, Korg has endowed the OASYS with more control devices than you can point a stick (or fingers) at. There's the customary modulation and pitchbend joystick appearing alongside a long ribbon controller. There's the blue backlit assignable vector control joystick – nice touch with the back-lighting. Then there's the 'control surface' section comprising nine sliders, 16 switches and eight rotary pots, all of which sport individual LED position metering. These controllers can be used to drive the KARMA section of the OASYS [more on KARMA later], adjust patch and sequence parameters or control external MIDI equipment. By this stage you've inevitably run out of hands and will also need to utilise the three foot-pedal

control inputs. While these can be used for the more traditional controls of damper pedal, sustain and the like, they can also be set to trigger more utilitarian functions such as program and song advance and recording punch-ins.

The OASYS isn't lacking in the I/O department either. In its standard configuration you have access to eight ¼-inch TS (read 'unbalanced') jack outputs as well as the stereo left and right outs. These will provide you with a maximum output of +16dBu. Digital I/O is via an optical S/PDIF port that will function only at 48 or 96k – 24-bit of course. An optional card provides the eight individual outputs as an optical Adat configuration at 48k and a wordclock input. The standard S/PDIF port carries the main stereo and headphone outs. Input for sampling and recording to the OASYS is possible via four discrete analogue inputs and the S/PDIF input. Two of these inputs are ¼-inch jacks with the second pair being combination XLR/TRS inputs each with switchable phantom power. Storage options are varied. The rear panel features USB2.0 ports for connection to any suitably connectible drive (up to two terabytes), and the built-in CD-R/RW device allows burning and reading of samples, audio CDs and OASYS-specific program and sample data.

Synth Combo

The workings under the bonnet of the OASYS are a culmination of Korg's entire synthesis arsenal. The first of which is standard PCM synthesis. The waveforms included in the PCM stable account for 640MB, with many of the waveforms including four-layer velocity switching maps. Multimode true resonant filters are augmented by an analogue-esque drive mode for added oomph. Each voice can utilise three LFOs, a swag of envelope generators and its own personal three-band EQ. The polyphony of this section alone will allow up to 172 notes – dependant upon



The OSYS operating system is a dream to use, especially thanks to the 10-inch touch sensitive LCD monitor that conveys all manner of system and edit-related info.

voice complexity and effects usage. Good old vector synthesis (as found in the Wavestation) gets a revamp with the ability to change swing and duration modulation of wave sequences, and far more accurate tempo synchronisation. Sequences can hold up to 64 steps and are also clockable to bars.

Up to 84 notes of polyphony are derived from the AL-1 virtual analogue section. Here you'll find an analogue beast capable of pulling off up to 504 oscillators. The oscillators offer extremely low aliasing, and, in true Korg style, emulate the analogue experience rather enigmatically. Modulations can be driven via five reasonably quick envelope generators along with the usual LFOs and key-trackers. Each program can also store up to three different 32-step sequences. Tones can be refashioned further with sync, frequency and ring modulation and a new MultiFilter allows cross-fading between any of the 21 filters.

The third synthesis engine to be shoehorned into this hulking chassis is the recently revived CX-3 organ. Modelled after the original CX-3 from 1976, the 2000 model became known for its outstanding tone-wheel organ emulation. Adding up to 172 notes of polyphony to the OASYS, the CX-3 offers dual drawbars along with control over leakage, key click and adjustable percussion levels. Of course there's a complete rotary speaker emulation but Korg has opted to push the organic sound to further levels with the addition of further harmonics and percussion tunings. Drawbars are, of course, of the virtual variety but using drawbar functions on the large LCD display will almost have you believing you're using the real thing – as large as life. For more of a hands-on approach, the nine faders of the control surface section will act as your drawbar controls.

Of course no modern self-respecting workstation would



show its face without being well versed in the art of sampling. The OASYS carries a system first seen in the Triton Studio machines. There's easy-to-use sampling

to be had with myriad time and pitch mangling algorithms as well as the usual cross-fading, looping and sample-rate adjustment. The supplied sampling RAM is a generous 200MB that can be stretched out to a formidable 500MB by forfeiting a particular section of ROM waveform information. Most of your standard formats can be loaded, including AIFF, WAV and Akai format – Akai S1000 and 3000 formats are supported. Exported waveforms can be either WAV or AIFF. Any mode of operation may be re-sampled including any addition of effects.

What's most invigorating about the OASYS ship is the ability to combine all these reproduction methods into a single patch. In Combination mode the vector synthesis functions will allow seamless blends between any of the vast array of synthesis and sample playback methods. Here, up to 16 patches (or 'Timbres' in Korg-speak) can be combined for some incredible performance setups. The system comes loaded with 1152 programmed sounds with room for 1664. As for combinations, 384 arrive preloaded in the machine with room for 1792. That, I'm sure, is plenty of patch locations for even the most eccentric and obsessive of synthesists.

Effects & Good KARMA

When you're requiring effects there's a huge palette on offer. With six times the processing power of the original Triton series workstations, the OASYS can deliver up to 12 insert effects, two master and two overall effects. Over 180 separate algorithms encompass all the effect/processor staples plus microphone, amplifier and speaker modelling setups as well as the well-regarded 'O-Verb' from the original OASYS PCI card. Effects can, of course, be applied to outside sources via any of the six (four analogue, two digital) inputs.

Where would a Korg workstation be without KARMA? The algorithmic phrase generation software takes the concept of the arpeggiator to incredible heights. This second reincarnation of KARMA allows each note to trigger a separate sample of waveform.

Driving KARMA via the control surface section of the OASYS is both fun and inspiring and, what's more, easy to recreate when you actually want to repeat your computer-assisted creations.

Combining all this sonic power is entirely possible with the on-board 16-track sequencer.

Midi resolution is the standard 192ppq with up to 200 songs and 400,000 Midi events able to be stored.

Programming is a doddle, especially due to the huge screen real estate on offer – the closest thing to a computer-based sequencer I've seen in a workstation. In-track sampling lets you bump sampled audio directly into a track and you can loop, copy and repeat parts as easily as any software system. Now, while 16 tracks may seem a little stingy, you can always utilise the further 16 audio tracks – simultaneous recording of up to four tracks at a time is possible. Tracks are recorded to the internal



40GB drive as WAV files in 16-bit/48k format at anything up to 80 minutes in length. Each track is automatable for volume, pan, EQ and effect sends with a song region limit of 5,000 clips. Why Korg didn't go the full monty and provide 24-bit file recording is a mystery. But, suffice it to say, recording at 16-bit via any of the microphone emulations sounds more than adequate.

Interestingly, Korg's upgrade path takes a newish direction. The 'standard' OASYS ships with its PCM synthesis section as its main sound generator and includes two 'Exi' expansion instruments – those being the AL-1 analogue modelling engine and the CX-3 organ engine. Further Exi engines can be added to the machine as Korg develops such systems. What's different is that these expansions are no longer proprietary cards or boards requiring hardware installation. Expansion instruments will arrive for the OASYS as software upgrades, downloadable to the unit's hard drive and CPU via the built-in CD drive. I hope Korg has covered its copy protection backside here as it would seem a simple affair to simply pass the CD around. But then again, at this price point, perhaps they're not too worried. OASYS owners will wait with considerably anticipation as to what Korg comes up with to fill these remaining 'slots'.

Desert Island Synth?

Overall there's nothing you can really say to fault the OASYS machine. The sounds, of course, are completely lush and rich – in true Korg fashion. It's not often that you hear a synth and feel that chill go down your spine as you tickle the first few patches. This thing sounds incredible. At my first demo of the OASYS I was confronted with the synth simply plugged into a set of powered monitors and a sub-bass cabinet. It all looked a little spartan but after a quick play I realised, 'What more could you possibly need?'. This machine can and would look after your entire film and ad scoring needs for quite a few years down the track. I'd go as far to say that the well-heeled who can afford this monster will never be searching for another synth system. Stuck on a desert island? The OASYS may be all you'll require... Well, maybe a power generator might help.



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