

YAMAHA MOTIF XS8

88 notes of heavyweight grunt is what you get from the XS8.

Text: Brad Watts



► Yamaha doesn't seem to play on the same field as most of the other synthesizer manufacturers. In fact, back in Issue 51 I reviewed a keyboard that apparently exemplified where Yamaha's synthesis R&D dollars were being diverted. It was called the Tyros 2, and was definitely more a domestic keyboard on steroids than a fully-fledged professional instrument. According to rumours at the time, Yamaha wasn't particularly impressed with the 'pro' electronic instrument market and this was where we'd be seeing Yamaha's advances in synth sound design.

Well, the truth is somewhat different. It is, in fact, the resolutely 'pro' Motif XS – successor to the Motif ES series (introduced in 2003). The XS series includes two synth action keyboard models: the XS6 and XS7, and the monster of a keyboard I've got on my hands at the moment, the balanced hammer 88-note Motif XS8.

The piano action keyboard of the XS8 feels very realistic, and transmits both velocity and aftertouch. It's a whole hunka workstation, and packs in twice the grunt of previous ES generations.

As you'd expect under the workstation category, the XS series offers everything that could open, shut, disconnect or connect. The XS8 does come with one addition as standard – the IEEE1394 card for connection to mLAN systems (the card is an option for the 61 and 76 note models). As of December 2007 the Motif XS is compatible with the 01X or other mLAN devices on PC Windows operating systems and OSX compatibility is scheduled for mid 2008.

XS CONNECTIONS

Connectivity is comprehensive, with ethernet, USB A & B connections, and the aforementioned mLAN. Speaking of which, just to run a check on how well Yamaha has its mLAN ports running, I installed the driver and editor software on my Mac (OSX 10.5.1), plugged in the Motif XS8 with a 20-foot Firewire cable, turned on the unit and *voilà*, everything worked a treat! No crashes or OSX kernel panics, and the XS editing software communicated perfectly with the Motif. Once hooked up, the XS8 will act as an audio interface to your host computer. Yamaha includes a copy of Cubase A14 for your Mac or PC, so if you've not got the tenacity to use the built-in 130,000-note sequencer you can take the easy way out and compose with Cubase.

TO THE PARAPETS!

The physical size of the XS8 is a tad overwhelming, and it weighs enough to warrant wheels built into the road

case! The vast expanse of surface area surrounding the controls and colour LCD screen is finished in a subdued, sturdy battleship grey – Yamaha designers have never been outlandish in their design ethos. To the left of the display are eight 60mm sliders (unmotorised), and eight centre-detented pots for real-time control of innumerable parameters – everything from filter frequency and resonance through to arpeggiator swing and quantise strength. These can also be used to control virtual instruments and effects within Cubase or your favoured DAW software.

Out the back are main stereo outputs augmented with a second pair of auxiliary outs. Output can also be extracted via the coax S/PDIF. There's provision for two foot-controllers and two assignable sustain foot-switches. The two remaining jacks are analogue inputs to the sampling section. Loadable sound files include AIFF and WAV and programs from Yamaha's A-series samplers. A-series tricks such as the Recycle-esque beat-slicing are present in the XS machines. The two RAM slots are empty when supplied from the factory and actual sample lengths are restricted to 64MB for stereo and 32MB in mono.

Voices comprise up to eight separate elements so you can get some very complex layering. Sound generation is Yamaha's usual AWM2 with 'expanded articulation topology', with the equivalent of 355MB of on-board waveforms to call on. Backing up this capability is a healthy 128-note polyphony. Arpeggiation tricks feature highly in the XS series with over 6,000 different presets and room for 256 user arpeggios. The XS manages to get some extremely complex arpeggiations happening. This is an area where the big synth manufacturers are battling it out right now, and it's down to the individual as to what level of complexity they wish to pursue – to many, arpeggios may be totally peripheral.

Of course, the three big contenders in the 88-note workstation arena are the Korg M3, Roland's Fantom X8 and the Motif XS8. Of the three, the Yamaha is probably the most realistic sounding machine, especially when it comes to pianos, electronic keys and the like. It's also the most integrated when it comes to fitting in with your computer-based recording system. However, I think it lacks some of the fun stuff of Korg and Roland keyboards – things like trigger pads and Korg's incredible Karma arpeggiation and touch screen systems. Inevitably it's horses for courses, but I'm sure jumping into the Yamaha XS pool won't leave you wanting for sounds or features. ■



NEED TO KNOW

Price

XS8: \$6499; XS6: \$4499; XS7: \$5299.

Contact

Yamaha Music Australia
1800 331 130
painfo@gmx.yamaha.com
www.yamahsynth.com

Pros

Total integration with your PC via mLAN.
Great sounds – especially 'real world' sounds.
Oodles of sample RAM and storage options.
Great feeling keyboard.

Cons

Can be complex.
88-note version is particularly heavy.

Summary

The Motif XS is a vast improvement on the ES Motif series with plenty more waveform choices and extended sample RAM, plus it looks as if Yamaha have got their mLAN system functioning very well. If you're after a centrepiece to your composition suite, the XS8 could be the mega machine for you.