

Korg Kronos Music Workstation | £TBC

Korg's new Kronos workstation has been one of the most hyped products in recent times but can it live up to the expectations? **Dan 'JD73' Goldman** digs in

 **ON THE DVD**

WHAT IS IT?

Korg's new flagship workstation based on an expanded Oasys architecture, combining sampled and modelled sounds with sequencing and sampling

CONTACT

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HIGHLIGHTS

- 1 Outstanding pianos, modelled synths and strings onboard
- 2 Plenty of real-time control and colour touch screen
- 3 Karma 2, sequencer and sampler built-in

PRICING

Pricing is still TBC but the Kronos range is expected to start from around £3000

- 61-note £TBC
- 73-note £TBC
- 88-note £TBC



Since Korg defined the workstation concept with the M1 in 1988, they have given us several great workstation lines including the, T-series, O1W, Trinity, Triton, Oasys and M3 and M50. The Oasys launched in 2005 (though a concept previewed in '94) and was until now, the pinnacle of Korg's workstation achievements. The new Kronos is more or less an expanded Oasys, with all its original sound engines onboard, plus some new ones. Though the

Kronos' screen is smaller, there's no CD drive, no ring LEDs round the dials and fewer outputs, there are many welcome additions, expanding on the Oasys' already impressive architecture.

The Kronos comes in three versions – a 61-note synth action keyboard and 73-note and 88-note weighted versions using the RH3 keybed from the SV1. For this review, I'm using the 61-note version, which feels surprisingly nice to play with its squared off piano-like keys and

sufficiently deep key travel for piano playing. It would also be nice if Korg made a Kronos with a semi-weighted waterfall keybed like the Nord Electro 3. Looks-wise it's classy yet understated, with a brushed black metal panel and glossy plastic end caps with white panel labelling.

However, I fear the shiny black end caps will scratch easily and look shabby after a few gigs. Rubberised plastic would have been much more practical. The dials and sliders feel sturdy but they do have a bit of sideward play.

Layout

The panel layout is familiar territory to anyone who's used a Korg workstation before and it's easy to navigate using the screen and the 10 sliders, vector synth joystick, pitch/mod joystick, ribbon, dials and buttons, though the left of the front panel does feel slightly cluttered.

Korg call this area the 'control surface' and most dials or sliders/joysticks can be assigned to control any parameter. The sliders act differently depending on the selected mode and in Combi mode (where you can assign up to 16 programs to parts



Sliders
Assign these sliders to any parameter – use them as organ drawbars with the CX3 organ, or as level controls in a combi/sequence.

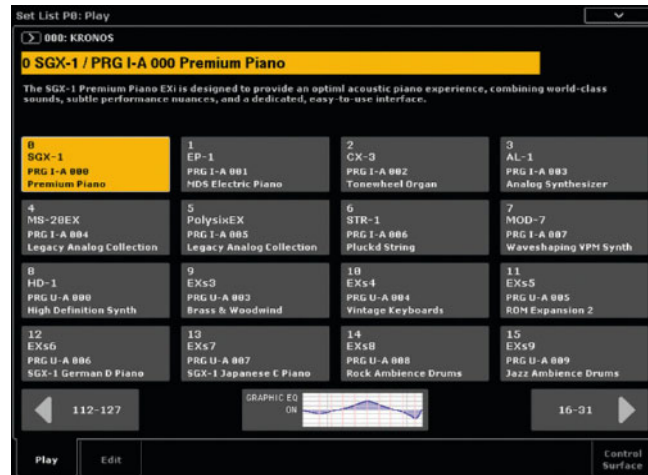
Dials
Can be assigned to virtually any parameter including filtering, EQ, effect sends and more.

Vectro Joystick
Seamlessly blend between different elements within a sound, or assign it to any parameter you wish.

and do splits and layers) the sliders can control the level of parts, or in the CX3 organ mode they become drawbars. The same goes for the dials which can be assigned to control filtering, panning, as effects sends, or for EQ and more, whereas the switches can be part mutes or Karma controls. I do hope Korg can implement an OS update soon, so that when you turn or move any of the controllers, the display immediately reflects this, as currently it's hard to work out how the front panel is actually relating to the sound you are working on, unless you manually navigate to the control surface page.

The colour touchscreen is large enough, though sometimes too much is crammed in and it's a shame it can't be angled. I also wish that all the graphics would auto-zoom when touched and that you could move sliders on the screen with a finger instead of having to use the value slider or wheel, which can get a bit tedious. Also, why no mouse input (like the Roland Fantom G) and external display output? It would be great if the Kronos could display exactly what's on its screen on an external monitor and if items could be

Setlist Mode, SST And Effects



One of the most welcome new features on the Kronos is 'setlist' mode that allows you to arrange Combis, Programs and Songs into set lists for quick recall. 16 sounds are shown on screen at a time (128 total patches and 128 set lists are available) and are selected by simply touching the

orange tab containing the sound you're after. The Smooth Sound Transition function (SST) allows you to select a sound and while holding a key down – you can select your next sound while the previous sound continues. The Kronos has some very versatile effects onboard, with powerful routing and

bussing options. Up to 12 insert effects are available per program, with two master effects. There are 185 types onboard including compressors, envelopes, EQs, choruses, phasers, panners, decimators, delays, reverbs and a vocoder. Pretty much everything you could need.

SPECS

Keyboard:
88- and 73-key: RH3 (Real Weighted Hammer)
61-key: Natural Touch Semi Weighted

Synth Engines:
SGX-1 Piano - 100 voice polyphony
EP-1 Electric Piano - 104 voices polyphony
CX-3 Tone wheel Organ - 140 voice polyphony
HD-1 High Definition Synthesizer - 140 voice polyphony
AL-1 Analog Synthesizer - 80 voice polyphony
EXS5 - 200 voice polyphony
STR-1 Plucked String - 40 voice polyphony
MOD-7 Wave shaping VPM Synthesizer - 52 voice poly
MS-20EX - 40 voice poly
Polysix EX - 180 voice poly

Number of Programs/Combinations/Drum kits:
 1,664 user memory programs
 1,792 user memory combinations
 152 user memory drum kits
 256 GM Level2 preset programs+ 9 GM Level2 drum preset programs
 128 set lists with 128 slots

Continues over ...



Sequencer Transport Controls

Use these to start, stop or locate specific events when using the onboard MIDI/audio sequencer, or to initiate/stop sampling.

selected, edited and moved DAW-style, especially when sequencing. However, there is an upcoming VST/AU plug-in editor, which I hope will help to offset this.

Big news is that the Kronos has a 30GB solid-state drive (SSD) allowing super-fast access to the large samples/libraries onboard. This is a first for a keyboard and makes the flash memory

in the competing Motif XF already seem quite outdated. The caveat here is that the boot time is a very sluggish two minutes and 11 seconds, so pray that the power doesn't go off during a gig or session!

There are nine sound engines onboard. First up is the SGX-1 piano engine, which is the front end used to access all the samples for the German

(Steinway) and Japanese (Yamaha) grands. These pianos use a healthy 4.7GB and 4GB of samples respectively with no looping. There's adjustable damper, pedal noise, note release and lid position, plus player/audience aspect adjustability and 32 different piano models.

You can also setup various tunings, including stretch and your own user scales, which is a real bonus. The pianos sound fantastic – rich, musical and realistic and the level of control on offer allows you to easily get the desired sound. It's also nice to see the piano lid open on screen as you move the lid position parameter!

The Good and Great

What we liked and what we loved about Korg's new Kronos:



> There are nine independent sound engines onboard the Kronos with the possibility of more in the future, making it a great long-term investment. It could potentially replace several keyboards, enabling you to downsize your studio if space is getting tight.



> The onboard Karma 2, along with the Wave Sequencing and patch-based step-sequencer, make evolving soundscapes a doddle to create. Karma 2 is an intelligent MIDI event creator that can be an arpeggiator and an intelligent backing tool.



> The Kronos provides you with everything you need to make finished release quality productions. The sequencer, sampler, onboard sound engines and effects make for a hugely powerful all-in-one production box.

Electric dreams

EP-1 is Korg's new electric piano engine, using samples at its heart, along with MDS (Multi-dimensional Synthesis) to split the samples up into key components. There are models of the Rhodes Mk1, 2 and 5 (my favourite) plus a Dyno-My-Piano version (harder tips) and a Wurlitzer 200. Like the SG1x engine, there is much in the way of adjustability including note attack noise, damper release and hammer tip width, plus control over the harmonics. I love the accurate graphic representations of the original front panels too.

These are the best EP emulations I've heard in a workstation (some of the best period) and they really are uncannily like the real thing. This is coming from a real staunch Rhodes player/enthusiast!

The addition of the great sounding effects from the SV1 (phasers, choruses, Vox wah and compressor to name a few) really adds a lot and throws you right back to the seventies, while the amp and speaker models sound brilliant, even down to some über-realistic amp drive. So, I really



USB Slots

Used for connecting USB hard drives, CD drives or for inputting/outputting audio and MIDI.

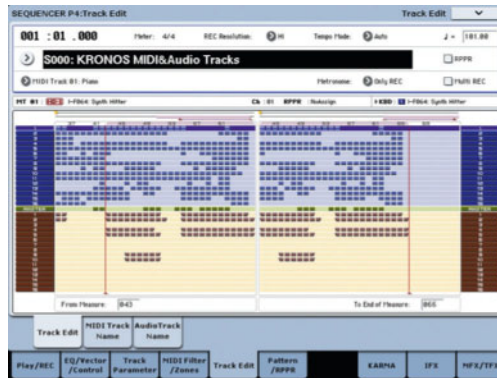
Sequencing And Sampling

The Kronos' sequencer is a 16 MIDI-track/16 audio-track affair, which has lots of great features onboard including real-time and step recording, pattern sequencer, audio editing, WAV/AIFF file import and simultaneous recording of up to four sources at once.

While it's no doubt handy to have and very powerful, I'm not sure how many people will actually use it, particularly as it's not very intuitive to use compared with the rest of the Kronos, and it really crams up the screen real estate. Also, though the Kronos' track edit page looks graphically similar to

a DAW's arrange page, all the MIDI/audio editing is still done from other menus, whereas I just wanted to plug in a mouse, edit and move stuff about! However, I hope the upcoming editor will really help to make using it more intuitive and more DAW-like, though of course you will be still tied to a computer.

As a sampler it's also very powerful. You can take audio files (WAV or AIFF) from a USB stick or hard drive and drop them into the Kronos to use as part of a program, combi or sequence, or you could multi-sample a keyboard using the built in analogue or digital



S/PDIF/USB audio inputs, or alternatively sample directly from a microphone plugged into

the rear mic socket, though unfortunately there is no dedicated XLR mic input.

hope the EP-1 becomes the SV2!

The CX3 engine is Korg's Hammond emulator and once more sounds very convincing. Though the CX3 presets aren't the best, once you get tweaking you can obtain a very authentic Hammond sound.

On-screen drawbars (controlled by the panel sliders) make for an involved

A/B'd my real MS-20 with the Kronos' MS-20EX and the resemblance is uncanny, particularly the raw oscillator sound and the way the filters respond/overdrive, but there is much more scope than the original with the Kronos' expanded patch bay and onboard effects. You can also run two MS-20EX's side by side within a

time I've had the Kronos, I haven't run into any significant polyphony issues and although some note stealing is inevitable with super-complex patches, you really can run a whole lot of stuff.

PolySixEX, like the MS-20EX sounds much like the real thing, with an authentic look and a warm,

thick sound and the chorus, ensemble effects and simple arpeggiator are great. The AL-1 analogue modelling engine is the one to

choose if you don't wish to add the inherent MS-20 or PolySix character to your sound – it has a punchy sound of its own. This engine is hugely versatile and everything you'd want parameter-wise is included from several LFOs and wave types, AMS (alternate modulation sources) drive

The Kronos is one of the best sounding and most fully-featured workstations – period!

and realistic playing experience, whilst you can really tweak the rotary cabinet model to taste, with control over every aspect of the sound.

The modelling

The three analogue modelling synth engines also hit the spot. Firstly I

program and flip them into poly mode too. I managed to get 16 mono MS-20EX's running at once in a Combi with the Kronos' Voice CPU just hitting the 60% usage mark and it's entirely possible to get a 40-note poly MS-20EX running, though you will likely max the CPU! During the

SPECS

Preset PCM: 314MB (ROM 1,505 multi-samples, 1388 drum samples)

Total Internal RAM: 2GB
Wave Sequences: 374 in user memory, 160 or more preloaded

Sampling 16-bit/48kHz stereo/mono sampling. Korg format, Akai S1000/S3000 data, SoundFont 2.0, AIFF and WAV formats

Effects:
Insert Effects: 12
Master Effects: 2
Total Effects: 2
Effect Types: 185

KARMA Modules: 2,048 presets, 1,536 Users (96 come preloaded) plus optional Karma DAW software

Drum Track Patterns: 697 preset/1,000 user

Sequencer/ Hard Disk Recorder
Tracks: 16-track MIDI sequencer + 16-track hard disk recorder + master track.

Outputs: L/R balanced plus 4 individual outs (6 total) 2 channel, 24-bit output over USB, plus S/PDIF.

Inputs: 2 balanced jack inputs. 2 channel, 24-bit input over USB, plus S/PDIF.

Control Inputs: Damper pedal (half damper supported), assignable switch, assignable pedal
MIDI: In, Out, Thru, plus MIDI over USB.

30GB Solid State Drive

Dimensions

88-key: **1,455 x 411 x 145mm**

73-key: **1,243 x 411 x 145mm**

61-key: **1,052 x 362 x 134mm**

Weight:

88-key: **23.0 kg**

73-key: **20.3 kg**

61-key: **12.5 kg**



Audio I/Os

Six balanced analogue outputs, two audio inputs, plus S/PDIF in/out and a mic input for sampling/external processing.

ALTERNATIVES



Yamaha Motif XF 61

£2,231

The Kronos' closest rival and Yamaha's current flagship. Sounds superb with a huge range of high quality acoustic, electric and synth sounds onboard.

yamahasynth.com



Nord Stage 2 SW73

£2,595

Combines very authentic sounding organs, pianos and electric pianos, with a modelling synth and sample import with effects.

nordkeyboards.com



Roland Fantom G6

£2,085

A broad range of high quality sounds onboard. Also offers expansion options, effects, mouse input, sampling and a powerful 128-track MIDI /24-track audio sequencer.

roland.co.uk

controls, filter types (including the usual LPF, HPF BP and multimode) and a step sequencer for adding time evolving effects to the sound. It

modelled pickups, plus the ability to use sampled oscillators too. It's great for making realistic sounding electric or acoustic stringed instruments but

I could go on, but the true scope of the Kronos is beyond what can fit on these pages. I hope Korg support the Kronos with new sound engines,

expansions and OS updates in the future to continue to advance and enhance a brilliant system. There is no doubt that this is the new benchmark

You can import DX7 patches into the MOD-7 engine, so you've got a pimped DX7 at your fingertips

sounds analogue, with solid oscillators and juicy filters with no aliasing. The MOD-7 engine is a very powerful engine, allowing you to patch together sampled PCM waves (preset and user) with VPM (FM) synthesis and it's great for making sound effects or classic FM sounds.

The range of modulation routes available and parameters on offer are simply staggering. Also note that you can import DX7 patches into the MOD-7 engine via SysEx, so essentially you've got a super-pimped DX7 under your fingers! STR-1 uses 16 modelled string types (including acoustic guitar, clavinet and harpsichord) coupling them with

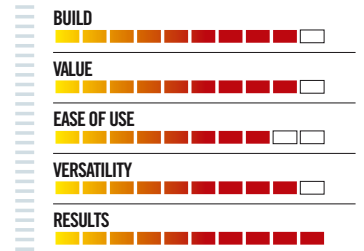
can also go way beyond this when coupled with the Kronos' effects system and modulation routings. Once again, a super powerful sound design tool that also sounds great.

Star board

The final engine onboard is HD-1, which is a two-oscillator system that uses the 1,505 onboard multi-samples and the 1,388 drum samples at its heart. Highlights include some beautifully wide and intimate string samples, lovely organic woodwinds, some very nice drum kits and percussion plus all the high quality bread and butter sounds you'll ever need for any musical situation.

for both sounds and features – it's the new keyboard to beat. Yamaha, Roland and Kurzweil take note! **FM**

FutureMusic VERDICT



Simply put, Korg have made one of the best-sounding and most fully featured keyboards to date.



Touch screen

This large eight-inch colour touchscreen is at the heart of all the Kronos' operations.

Setlist button

Access the new 'Setlist' function here. Perfect for accessing all your favourite sounds on the fly during a gig or in the studio.