

# Roland Fantom G6 | £1600

Now in its fourth generation, Roland's Fantom wants to become the centre of your music-making world, both onstage and in the studio. *Jono Buchanan* gets spooked...



ON THE DVD

#### WHAT IS IT?

Performing live, sequencing onboard MIDI and audio and controlling your studio.

#### CONTACT

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#### HIGHLIGHTS

- 1 16 Part-FX
- 2 Bigger, bolder, brighter screen
- 3 Hardware sliders

The entire workstation concept has undergone some pretty radical developments since its introduction via the Korg M1 back at the end of the '80s. The whole idea of a keyboard with

sequencing functionality, stacks of sounds and effects processing made perfect sense back then and workstations soon became a one-stop solution for studio and live keyboard players everywhere. However, with the

advent of computer sequencing and, more recently, the vast array of audio tracks, plug-in instruments and effects offered by the modern studio computer, many feared that the popularity of workstations would dim,



following in the steps of the hardware sampler market. However, workstations remain alive and kicking and have managed to survive the software revolution. In fact, this is the most competitive era the workstation world has ever known, the benefits of which are that some excellent, all-singing, all-dancing keyboards are available, stacked to the rafters with functions to ensnare your interest. Roland, a major player in the workstation market from the very beginning, return now with the fourth generation of their Fantom workstation – the ‘G’ series.

### A little history

I won't bore you with too much Fantom history but the original model wasn't much of a rival for the workstations from Korg and Yamaha. Undaunted, Roland retreated to the studio to produce the Fantom-S, which included sampling capabilities and was the first model to really put the Fantom series on the map. A few commentators were surprised when the Fantom was overhauled again, a little over a year

### Skip-Back Sampling

This rather glorious feature was present on the Fantom-X as well but it's worthy of a box of its own. With Skipback sampling

activated (via a single button press) the Fantom is constantly 'listening' to a block of audio 40 seconds long. Anything you play, or

which is routed through the Fantom can be instantly transformed into a sample the moment you hear anything you want to keep. Effectively, audio is buffered through, with anything 40 seconds 'old' slipping out of memory. Connect the stereo outputs of your mixing desk or computer directly into the Fantom and you can capture and edit anything you like as a brand new sample. From there, loop, edit, chop, save and even transfer to your computer at will.



later, with the 'X' model doubling polyphony to 128 voices, expanding the onboard Wave ROM and adding a variety of other new tricks. The Fantom-X was popular – so popular in fact that it's three and a half years

since it was updated. That's a long time in this industry and with the release of updated workstations from their rivals, Roland have clearly decided it's time to give the Fantom another overhaul. The 'G' series arrives

### SPECS

- Fantom G6, G7, G8 (with 61, 76 and 88 keys respectively)
- G6 and G7:** velocity and aftertouch keyboards
- G8:** Progressive Hammer Action II Mechanism, Ivory Feel and Channel Aftertouch
- Polyphony:** 128 voices total
- Parts:** 16 parts (internal) + 16 parts (external) + 2 parts (ARX Expansion) + 24 parts (audio)
- Wave Memory:** 256MB
- Waveforms:** 2,230
- Preset Memory:** 1,664 + 256 (GM2)
- Rhythm Sets:** 64 + 9 (GM2)
- Live Sets:** 512
- Studio Sets:** 8
- Effects**
- Patch Multi-Effects:** 16 systems, 76 types
- Multi-Effects:** 2 systems, 78 types
- Chorus:** 1 system, 3 types
- Reverb:** 1 system, 10 types
- Input Effects:** 1 system, 6 types
- Mastering Effects:** 1 system, 3-band compressor
- Continued...



**Pads**  
The sixteen Pads can be assigned to do just about anything, except the washing up

**Expansion**  
The Fantom has capacity for two of Roland's new ARX Expansion cards

**Sampling**  
Access Roland's sampling possibilities here, including flexible Skipback sampling

# The good and great

The new Fantom updates several key functions. Here's three of the best



> For starters, the screen is now much improved. The previous Fantom introduced colour and, at the time, everyone correctly raved. However, pretty soon, the compromised graphics and heavy pixilation took their toll. Now, the increased size and resolution mean more parameters can be displayed and they're easier to read. Add a cheap USB mouse and enjoy full computer-style point and click editing.

> **The provision of 16 comprehensive Part effects to replace the previous Multi-FX algorithms is glorious. Each of the 16 parts can have its very own multi-effects part. Parts effects, in other words. This flexibility matches the most complex DAW set-ups.**



> Here's one to satisfy the clamouring hordes on music tech message boards the world over – the Fantom's eight sliders. The possibilities and real-time performance element of Fantom is upscaled dramatically thanks to these bad boys. Suddenly, mixing really means mixing. They're readily assignable and as they spit out MIDI data, they'll have immediate benefits for anyone making a Fantom the centre of their soft or hardware studio rig too. Suddenly Fantom G is control central.

in 3 forms, which match earlier incarnations – namely the G6 (with 61 keys), G7 (76) and G8 (88), the latter of which features Roland's extremely impressive 'Ivory' keyboard response. At the time of going to press, a rack version of the 'G' series wasn't available, so watch this space to find out if this model is added later.

## Screens and faders

The Fantom has been improved both internally and externally, the most immediate improvement evident before you even switch the machine on. The Fantom-X introduced Roland's colour screen but this has been expanded up to a whopping 8.5" TFT display on the 'G' series and, the moment you do boot up, the benefits are obvious and immediate. This display positively sparkles. The increased resolution means that more information can be displayed clearly at a smaller size, which means that the display bristles with information. Initially, this might be a touch overwhelming, as Roland's desire to keep you updated with as many parameters at once adds up to a packed interface but you soon get used to it. To give you an example, the default screen, displaying parameters in Live Mode, provides the names of all eight active parts, with a graphical display of the key ranges over which they play. You can also see graphical representations of the eight new sliders (of which there's more in a moment), as well as numerical values for these, plus status displays for the four rotary dials, two assignable switches, pitch bend and mod wheels, as well as the function button title displays. Not bad, really! Roland's clever colour-coding and layout allow all of this sufficient room that you're soon navigating like an expert, either via the arrow keys, rotary dial and function keys, or via a



### USB

USB connectivity lets you connect to a computer or to USB storage devices for loading and saving sounds, etc. And plug in a mouse for full computer-style pointing and clicking

USB mouse, which can be connected on the back panel. As I've already mentioned, the other significant physical development is the arrival of a fader bank of eight sliders, which should help quieten the online forum clamouring! Any self-respecting workstation offering multi-layered parts and mixing in the sequencer section needs the immediacy of sliders, so it's with a sigh of relief that I greet these now. They lie below the four assignable dials to the screen's left and they offer a nice smooth action. There's a momentary pause before a slider realises you've given it a nudge before its position in the display adjusts but this wasn't a problem in mix sessions.

### Sounds... expanded

Under the hood, there are plenty of developments too. For starters, the Wave ROM has been expanded to 256MB, which is twice that of its predecessor. This translates to a sound engine boasting 230 individual waveforms and getting on for 2000 internal sounds, including the General MIDI banks. The new onboard samples are taken from the SRX expansion board series but, more importantly,

### Part FX and Patch Remain

Until now, Roland has shared its multi-effects routing so that, while the multi-effects algorithms have sounded great, it hasn't been possible to run enough of these simultaneously, resulting in thinner, weaker sounds when multi-layering or sequencing. Not any more. The new Part-FX are Roland's multi-effects

processors as before but their name should tell you what you need to know – 16 of these are available, independently, at the same time. Suddenly, your guitars can have their amplifier models while your pads have their step flangers and your piano part has its retro, lo-fi vinyl effect. Alongside this, Roland have finally fixed a

two-decade old problem in the form of Patch Remain. This allows a loaded sound to continue making a noise after you select a different Patch. Release and effect tails are now allowed to decay naturally. This is great for performance – line up your sounds and scroll through them and your sounds won't be interrupted.



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(though they should!) as they have this base covered somewhere else, so I can understand why Roland would

also feature brand new waveforms recorded by Roland themselves. The internal sample capacity is unchanged from the Fantom-X, with 32MB of memory as standard, which is expandable up to 544MB if you choose to fill the spare DIMM slot with extra RAM. Initially, I found this limited

standard provision frustrating and thought Roland had been a bit stingy but I can, to an extent, understand the logic. RAM is cheap, so if you do want to dramatically expand, it won't break the bank to do so. There are also lots of potential Fantom users who won't touch the sampling capabilities

keep this basic level on the low side. However, 64MB would have represented a better compromise in my opinion. Further expansion is possible, as the release of the Fantom-G coincides with a new range of Roland Expansion cards. The new ARX boards replace the SRX cards which were

### SPECS

**Sampling**  
16-bit, 44.1kHz sampling (WAV or AIFF format)  
**Max Sampling Time:** 360 seconds (180 stereo) with unexpanded memory 108 mins mono (54 stereo) with memory expanded to 544MB  
**Maximum samples per Project:** 2,000

**Sequencer**  
**Tracks:** MIDI tracks (Internal/External/ARX): 128 maximum  
**Audio tracks:** 24 maximum  
**Tempo:** 5-300bpm  
**Song:** 50 per project  
**Phrase:** 2,000 per project

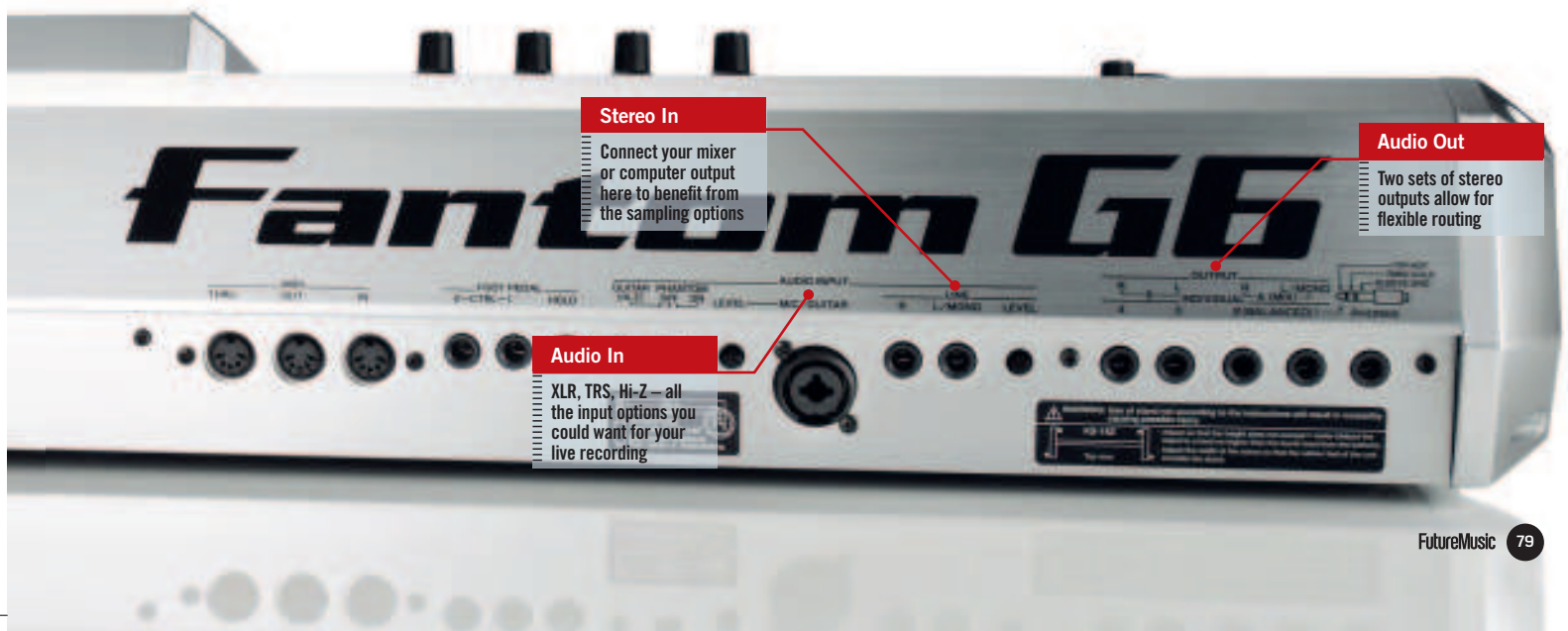
**Display**  
**Graphic Type:** 8.5", TFT Wide VGA (800 x 480) backlit colour LCD screen

**Pads**  
16 x velocity and aftertouch sensitive

**Controllers**  
Pitch Bend/Modulation Lever, Control Knob x 4, Control Slider x 8, Assignable Switch x 2, D Beam Controller

**Connectors**  
1/4" Headphone Jack, A (Mix) output (L, R): 1/4" TRS, B (output) (L, R): 1/4" TRS, Stereo input TRS  
**Mic/Guitar input:** 1/4"/XLR (Phantom Power/Hi-Z), MIDI In/Out/Thru

**Dimensions**  
**G6:** 1,066 x 411 x 142mm  
**G7:** 1,278 x 411 x 142mm  
**G8:** 1,396 x 502 x 183mm  
**Weight**  
**G6:** 14.5 kg  
**G7:** 16.6 kg  
**G8:** 33.6 kg



introduced around the time of the XV range and, while we've only had a demo so far, they certainly look interesting and sound great. Two cards are available at present: Drums and one for Electric Piano. The technology looks much more interactive than with previous cards, using that big screen's

familiarising yourself with its functionality. If you decide you're going to let your computer continue in its sequencing role, you'll be delighted to hear that you can hook your Fantom up to directly interact with your computer, so that you can remotely edit the Fantom-G from your computer, or run it

player' companion, with thousands of sounds, effects and performance tricks available at the touch of just a few buttons, with none of the temperament issues many of us still experience when giggering with computers. In the studio, though, workstations are also extremely useful. Putting demos together with

minimum fuss is great, so there's immediate appeal for songwriters. With the provision of MIDI controller sliders and multiple live sets, there's even a

## What I like so much is that this is an instrument capable of doing a job for a whole range of musicians

### ALTERNATIVES



**Yamaha Motif XS 6**  
£1500

Blimey, what a competitive market. The rivals start here with the Motif offering the same sliders but four more knobs, the same polyphony but less Wave ROM, even more connectivity options but less comprehensive sample specifications.

[yamaha.com](http://yamaha.com)



**Korg M3**  
£1600

For exactly the same wedge, you could get one of these. Twice the onboard sample memory of the Fantom, plus the option to put the sound engine of the Radias inside. However, less effects, less good screen, less sounds and a touch less polyphony.

[korg.com](http://korg.com)

new graphics power to the max. I await both with interest as a fully expanded Fantom would be quite a beast!

### Xtra FX

The Sequencer section has also been given a pretty hefty shot in the arm, as it can now handle 128 MIDI tracks and 24 tracks of audio. This is a big improvement over the 'X' series but, for me, the standout new feature is the development of Part-FX. 16 parts can now have their own multi-effects program, alongside the more basic reverb and chorus units which have long been a Roland staple. This is truly great and, to be honest, raises the Fantom from 'also ran' status to 'first past the post' among its workstation peers in the effects stakes.

Elsewhere the sequencer itself is pretty straightforward to use once you've spent a few minutes

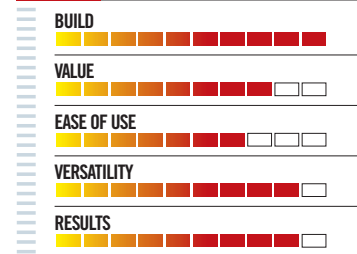
as an AU/VST plug-in within your host sequencer. The USB specification is impressive on the Fantom, with an extra USB slot allowing you to attach a USB key or hard drive for quick saving or loading of samples, songs, patches and performances.

### Conclusion

As I said at the start, three years is a long time in this business and Roland have waited longer still to update the Fantom. All the changes here are welcome, with impressive new features both on and below the hood. There's no question that everything here brings the Fantom up to and, in some cases, way beyond the functionality of its rival workstations currently vying for your attention. What I like so much is that this is an instrument capable of doing a job for a whole range of musicians. Clearly, workstations are the ideal 'live

place for a Fantom in the software studio, as it's easy to customise a live setup to control your soft synths, or even to integrate the Fantom into your computer's sequencer. Workstations aren't for everyone but if any of the above scenarios sound like you, you'd be a fool to ignore this instrument! **FM**

### FutureMusic VERDICT



An awful lot under one roof with useful and intuitive additions. The Fantom of the Pop-era is here...



#### Faders

At last, the Fantom has its own assignable faders!

#### Knobs

Four knobs can be assigned to control whatever you like