

Korg Kaossilator Pro | £350

Korg's mini phrase synthesizer finally grows up and becomes a man. **Greg Scarth** attends its Bar Mitzvah

 ON THE DVD

WHAT IS IT?
Upgraded version of Korg's pocket-sized looper and phrase synthesizer.

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HIGHLIGHTS
1 New external audio features
2 MIDI I/O
3 Built-in effects

When we reviewed Korg's groundbreaking Kaossilator way back in *FM197*, we loved its innovative approach to creating loop-based music and hoped that it might spawn a bigger follow-up. Three years down the line, Korg have perfectly granted our wishes with the introduction of the Kaossilator Pro (KO-Pro), a much more heavily featured version which offers a variety of new features and looks all set to build on the success of the original KO-1. Yuss!

To say that we were looking forward to getting our hands on it is something of an understatement.

Bigger and better

Pulling the Kaossilator Pro from its box, it becomes immediately apparent that this is a far more substantial unit than the original version. The form factor is almost identical to that of Korg's Kaoss Pad KP3, with all-metal construction and a bigger overall footprint giving the Pro a much more weighty, well-built feel than its predecessor. One side

effect here is that the Pro is less portable, requiring DC power from a mains adapter.

Retaining the ability to run on batteries would have been a bonus, but Korg's promotion to Pro for studio use and live performance suggest that it simply isn't intended to be a mobile tool like the original Kaossilator.

The layout of the KO-Pro will be familiar to anyone who's used the KO-1, but a series of key differences reflect the new features on offer. The large X-Y touchpad is backlit, as on the KP3, and the gate arpeggiator has a new dedicated slider and button. A quick glance at the connections reveals an extra pair of RCA sockets and a mic input for capturing external sounds and using the vocoder. As if that wasn't enough, the Pro features MIDI in and out, an SD card slot and a USB socket to link it to your computer. Aces.

X-Y not?

In use, the Kaossilator Pro is pleasingly intuitive despite a number of small changes from the original workflow. The four large buttons below the X-Y pad represent four separate loop locations, allowing complex multi-layered patterns to be built up with ease. During





playback, each of these pads allows parts to be quickly muted, assigned for recording or erased using the function buttons down the right hand side of the unit. The levels of loops can also be adjusted using the new mixer feature, allowing four-part sequences to be tweaked on the fly. A few features from the mini KO have been omitted in the new version, with the lack of an undo function in particular necessitating a slightly different approach to working which may not be obvious to existing Kaossilator users.

All 100 programs from the KO-1 are included and supplemented by 100 new patches replicating everything from vibraphones to MS20 leads. Sliding your finger horizontally on the pad controls the pitch according to your chosen key and scale but most patches also offer a degree of expression control via your finger's position on the vertical axis. Typically, moving your finger higher up the pad will control a variable such as filter cutoff, vibrato or the mix of a delay or reverb effect.

Unfortunately, it's not possible to choose which of these variables you control, hampering the flexibility of most of the programs and effects, nor is

Multi-touch

The Kaossilator Pro's backlit touchpad is larger than that of the KO-1 but still only responds to a single finger. Trying to touch the pad with two fingers results in the Pro getting confused and finding the centre point of the pair... In the era of the JazzMutant Lemur and even Apple's iPhone, the KO-Pro is in danger of being left behind by multi-touch equipped

music controllers. In the same way that the iPhone's multi-touch capacitive screen revolutionised the world of mobile phones, a multi-touch pad on the Kaossilator would instantly open up a whole host of new features. Most obviously, multi-touch could unlock the polyphonic potential of the Kaossilator, allowing you to play

chords live rather than creating them by layering notes over each other. In fact, why not take it a step further and integrate multi-touch swipe gestures as featured on the latest laptops? Imagine the possibilities for a Kaossilator which knew how many fingers you were using and could respond differently for each number...

find that the Pro uses a different system. Inspired by the arp on Korg's Electribe and controlled using the dedicated slider and on/off button, the new gate arp abandons the presets entirely. This system is much more flexible and the arp is easily adjusted with the slider, which can be assigned to gate speed or time. A somewhat inconveniently placed switch round the back of the unit allows you to flip between the two. The final big new feature of the Pro is the ability to record

is particularly fun, with the X-Y pad offering excellent hands-on control of the modulation. Although a KP3 or even mini-KP contains more effect processing power, the KO-Pro's effects certainly add another string to its bow and increase its potential further.

MIDI misery

MIDI compatibility was one of the main features we thought would improve the Kaossilator, so the arrival of MIDI ports on the Pro got us seriously excited.

Unfortunately, there are a couple of major omissions from the KO-Pro's MIDI implementation. Firstly, it doesn't support standard note data. The X-Y

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it possible to control these variables from an external controller. I'd have liked to see greater control of the Pro's synth engine, even if it was just the ability to assign the vertical axis of the pad to different variables. It seems a shame that the Kaossilator hardware itself can create so many usable sounds but your tweaking options are restricted.

Arping on

Owners of the original Kaossilator will be used to its preset-based gate arpeggiator and may be surprised to

and manipulate external audio through the line or microphone inputs. Audio loops are automatically synced to the Kaossilator's tempo, making it easy to timestretch external sounds to match your synthesized parts.

The option to record audio is handy in itself, but the Kaossilator's abilities extend beyond basic looping of external sounds with the inclusion of a bank of fifteen effects programs. These allow you to manipulate external audio using effects such as a filter, delay, pitch shifter, looper or vocoder. The vocoder

coordinates are instead sent and received as CC values, meaning that if you want to play the internal synth instruments using a MIDI controller or DAW you'll need to find a way of converting notes to CC. It's by no means impossible, but it seems an unnecessary hassle compared to just plugging in and playing.

If there were a simpler way for the Pro to be triggered by note data, it would allow greater control of instruments and make it more flexible for live performance. The second flaw

SPECS

200 programs including a bank of 15 effects

Four loop recording banks

Power: 9V DC adaptor

Kaossilator Pro Editor software runs on Windows 7, XP SP3, Vista SP2 or later. Mac version runs on OS X 10.4 or later.

Dimensions:

210 x 226 x 49mm

Weight:

1.3kg

ALTERNATIVES



Korg microSAMPLER
£436

Worth considering if you'd prefer a keyboard interface. Huge sampling capabilities, sequencer and Kaoss-based effects engine.

korg.com



Akai MPC500
£379

A different way of working, but if you want mobile sampling and sequencing with a handful of effects, the baby of Akai's MPC range takes some beating.

akai.com



Korg Kaossilator
£179

The original Kaossilator is still worthy of consideration. No external audio, but the great synth programs and looping capabilities make the KO-1 a bargain.

korg.com

in the MIDI setup stems from the fact that the KO-Pro will match the tempo of an external MIDI signal, but it won't actually *lock* its beats to the external clock, making it unnecessarily difficult to sync the Kaossilator to other devices.

through External Control Mode, but the KO-Pro's synth and looping is disabled in this mode. In terms of further connections, the Pro's SD card slot allows you to save your loops and settings for later recall, which is sure to

series of improvements on the original, introducing elements from the Kaoss Pad in order to come up with something altogether more powerful, useful, full-sounding and serious.

However, there are a number of

flaws that currently stop it being the creative revolution it should be. We can only hope that a firmware update might fix these problems and

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Overall, the Kaossilator Pro's MIDI functionality seems like a missed opportunity. The ability to trigger notes from external controllers and sync with other devices have both been fumbled slightly. It does, however allow you to control other synths with its touchpad

be a welcome addition for anyone using a Pro for live performances.

Conclusion

Although there are a handful of criticisms of the Kaossilator Pro, there's no doubt that it's great fun and offers a

unlock the full potential of the hardware. At an RRP of £350, Korg have effectively put the Pro up against much more flexible, more 'standard' alternatives. But given how much it has to offer Kaossilator Pro deserves to be taken seriously. **FM**

Converting MIDI notes to CC

Despite the presence of MIDI I/O connections, the Kaossilator Pro is not as MIDI-friendly as it might first appear. In order to play the Pro's built-in synth engine using an external controller, you'll need to use software to convert note data to CC values. Luckily this isn't

too difficult to achieve. MIDI utilities such as the excellent freeware MIDI-OX (Windows only, midiox.com), or the wacky but powerful Plogue Bidule (Mac and Windows, plogue.com) allow note messages to be remapped to CC values, making this process

relatively simple. However, most DAWs offer MIDI mapping options which can carry out this task for you. It might not be as easy, but the neatest solution could be to set up a MIDI environment which automatically maps notes to the CC values the KO-Pro expects. Tsk.

FutureMusic VERDICT

BUILD [Progress bar: 100%]

VALUE [Progress bar: 80%]

EASE OF USE [Progress bar: 60%]

VERSATILITY [Progress bar: 70%]

RESULTS [Progress bar: 90%]

A series of improvements on the original Kaossilator Pro and a great new way of making new music

