

# Roland GR-55 Guitar Synth | £699

**Stuart Bruce** grabs his plectrum and checks out what Roland claim to be their best guitar synth to date

## ON THE DVD

### WHAT IS IT?

Highly capable guitar synth from Roland

### CONTACT

Who: Roland UK  
Tel: +44 (0)1792 702701  
Web: roland.co.uk

### HIGHLIGHTS

- 1 Fantastic tracking
- 2 Great synth and virtual guitar sounds
- 3 Excellent Amp emulations. Handles your straight guitar sounds too

### PRICING

without pickup  
**£599**  
GR-3 Pickup  
**£129**  
GR3B Pickup  
**£139**

**W**hen it comes to guitar synthesizers, Roland are without doubt the big name. They have consistently developed and refined their products since the GR-500 in 1977 and now offer the virtual guitar and bass modellers, the GK range of pickups for both guitars and bass and the GR-55 guitar synth itself.

### Fitting the pickup

There are some guitars out there that already have a Roland GK compatible pickup but most of us will have to buy and fit a pickup and controller. These are special pickups with a separate pole piece for each string that allow every note played to be individually digitised and turned into pitch and controller information. I fitted one to my Strat and it was pretty

straightforward. Ultimately both the pickup and controller box should be screwed into place, and there are all the necessary screws and fixing plates provided to make this possible, but Roland very sensibly recommend that

you use the supplied sticky pads to experiment with the best positions before committing to getting the drill out. It took me about 15 minutes to get it attached and working and then all I had to do was connect it using the special cable and I was ready to get to part two of the setup.

This involves giving the GR-55 various bits of info about how the GK pickup is set on the guitar and adjusting levels for each string so you have the correct sensitivity. This is essential and makes a big difference to playability. It only takes 10 minutes, is very well explained in the manual and if you use more than one guitar you can store individual settings for each.

### Getting started

Having gone through that process the next step is to get playing. There's a

## Virtual Guitar Technology

In order to make a virtual guitar sound as realistic as possible it was necessary for Roland to develop ever better ways of tracking and analysing the data from the pickup.

Dynamics, slides, hammer-ons, bends and tapping are just some of the techniques employed by guitarists and what

gives the guitar its individual sound. Having discovered how to analyse these techniques Roland went on to record complex sample sets containing all these nuances and more.

The results can be quite staggering. Fast response times, amazing dynamic control, clear harmonics and hammer-ons. Add to

that the need to then emulate amplifiers and effects and you can see why the Virtual Guitar has been such an innovative step for Roland. They are now reaping the benefits of all that research with devices like the current crop of Virtual Guitar and Bass Processors and now the new GR-55.





built-in tuner which works great and then it's straight to finding a sound. On the guitar controller there is a pair of bank up and down switches, a volume control and a three-way switch that goes between GK, mix and guitar.

The GR-55 has synth, virtual tones and a straight guitar input which can be fed through various modelled amp effects, giving you a very wide range of source tones. Sounds are split into three styles: Solo, Rhythm and Other. Solo and Rhythm are pretty obvious and Other is where the more pure synth sounds lie. You can flick between banks on the guitar controller or from the foot pedals and then each bank contains three patches, which you

select with the footswitches. Each style has 30 banks so that's 270 presets plus a user set with 99 banks. Plenty of space to store things.

### Right on track

Tracking has always been the problem with guitar synths in the past. Either there are big delays, bad pitch recognition, over sensitivity or combinations of them all. Not so with the GR-55 and GK-3. Without adapting my playing style I found pretty much every sound really easy to get to grips with. Thanks to Roland's work with the Virtual Guitar they have really been able to refine how the processing of the raw guitar signal is turned into control

I have dealt with the Virtual sounds elsewhere but it bears repeating that they sound good and can easily provide you with a great alternative to your normal sound, or in addition to it.

The synth sounds are well chosen apart from the odd throwback to days when it seemed really cool to play a sax solo on your guitar. That and the Scat vocal are best left to the odd comedy moment in a rehearsal rather than being heard on a stage again, especially when used in conjunction with 'the solo face'. There is plenty of scope to change things with the envelopes, filters and FX, and as you will hear from the audio examples on the DVD, the pedal can be assigned to

a number of different parameters so there's plenty more expression to get in there. The CTL switch has a different function for each

patch and can be used to do things like switch the synth tones in and out or change a Leslie speed.

As a standalone unit the GR-55 is pretty stunning. Well thought-out, easy to use, excellent tracking and with great sounds. A real all-in-one guitar box. Add to that the possibility of using it as the MIDI master to your synths, physical and virtual, and you have something truly desirable. An excellent creative tool, and I want one. **FM**

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data. The system has an uncanny way of tracking – taps, slides, bends and harmonics are all well understood and followed. With some this is more successful than others, but that is almost exclusively because the sound doesn't lend itself to the technique rather than any inherent problem.

### The sounds

With three possible sound sources in every patch there is scope for plenty of sonic experimentation here. In fact, you really have four as there are two PCM sounds in every patch, each fully editable. The direct guitar sound, that coming from your own guitars pickups, is very good. Lots of different amp simulations, good FX and cabinet variations too. My only disappointment was that there was no external input on the floor box for the normal guitar output so that you could run through your own pedalboard before the amp sims. They are good enough to use in the studio or live so the option would be very useful.

**FutureMusic VERDICT**

**BUILD** [Progress bar: 10/10]

**VALUE** [Progress bar: 8/10]

**EASE OF USE** [Progress bar: 10/10]

**VERSATILITY** [Progress bar: 10/10]

**RESULTS** [Progress bar: 10/10]

**Well thought-out, well built, flexible and creative. A large and excellent step forward in guitar technology.**

### SPECS

- Connections**  
**Input:** GK 13-pin standard connector. Attaches to controller on guitar.  
**Outputs:** Mono Guitar output on 1/4-inch jack  
 Output L (Mono) / Output R on 1/4-inch jacks  
**Headphone out:** 1/4-inch stereo jack  
**Midi:** In and Out on standard midi connectors (5-pin DIN)  
**USB computer connection:** Supports USB 2.0, Hi Speed USB MIDI and USB Audio.  
**USB Memory:** Supports USB 2.0 Flash memory

**Dimensions**  
 405 x 244 x 78mm  
**Weight**  
 3.3kg

### ALTERNATIVES



**Electro-Harmonix Hog**  
**\$450**

Not a direct alternative as this is non-MIDI and a sound processor rather than generator but it certainly takes the guitar out of the realms of the normal.

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



**Moog E1-M**  
**£3,777**

The hex MIDI version of the Moog Guitar. The dream guitar to play your GR-55 with, infinite sustain, special mute modes and a lot more.

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



**You Rock Guitar**  
**\$250**

A MIDI controller that plays like a guitar, has its own synth tones and connects via USB or MIDI. Well worth checking out if you are only looking for a controller.

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

