

Korg monotribe

| £192



It's the highly anticipated follow-up to the superb monotron. **Greg Scarth** gets warm and fuzzy

WHAT IS IT?

Monotron-based analogue groovebox with built-in synth, drum machine and step sequencer.

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HIGHLIGHTS

- 1 100% analogue synth
- 2 Fully analogue bass drum, snare and hi-hat
- 3 Flexible step sequencer

It's no secret that Future Music loved the Korg monotron. The pocket-sized analogue synth was an instant hit on its release last

summer, offering classic MS-20 inspired sounds at an absolute bargain price. At the time, many of us suspected that the Japanese synth giants were testing the waters for bigger and better analogue products – after a three-decade hiatus, it always seemed unlikely that Korg would resume development of analogue technology for

the sole purpose of selling a £50 pocket synth. Nearly a year later, our suspicions were confirmed at the recent Frankfurt Musikmesse with the announcement of the monotribe, a brand new analogue groovebox loosely based on the monotron sound engine.

What is it?

As the name suggests, the monotribe falls somewhere in between the monotron and Korg's Electribe range of groove sequencers. Korg describe it as

an analogue Electribe or a ribbon station, but you could also think of it as a beefed up monotron with a drum section and a built-in sequencer.

The synth section of the monotribe retains all of the monotron's key features, but adds a few excellent new twists to make the sound more versatile. The rhythm section consists of three fully analogue drum sounds – kick, snare and hi-hat – which can also be programmed using the 808-style push-button sequencer.

Pulling the UK's very first monotribe from its packaging, the first thing that's apparent is that this is truly a portable device, easily small and light enough to throw in a rucksack and carry around just in case you get the urge for an impromptu acid jam. An optional DC power adapter can be used but the unit is designed to run from six AA batteries, while the built-in speaker means you can get instant results without any other hardware. Thankfully, separate headphone and line out connectors are also included for higher quality monitoring and studio use. Just like the monotron, the monotribe's headphone output is disappointingly noisy. Thankfully the main line out is much



**Power**

The unit can run from a DC adapter or six AA batteries for total portability. The machine can even be optimised for use with either alkaline or NiMH cells.

Sync

The monotron doesn't offer any MIDI or CV control features, but the sequencer can sync to an external trigger signal from a drum machine, DAW or even other monotrons.

cleaner, making it much more usable for serious studio work.

Monotron Legacy

From the ribbon controller to the synth section, it's obvious that a large chunk of the monotron is derived from the monotron. However, there's a lot more to the monotron's synth engine than you'll find in its little brother. The low-pass filter, based on the legendary MS-10 design, is still present, but the monotron VCO features triangle and square waves in addition to the monotron's sawtooth. A noise source is also included, while the monotron's fiddly continuous pitch range knob is replaced by a rotary detent switch.

As we found with the monotron, a continuous ribbon controller can make it difficult to play with perfect tuning. Switch the monotron's ribbon from the standard 'narrow' mode to the chromatic 'key' setting and your finger position is automatically quantised to the nearest whole note, with the auto-tune feature ensuring that the VCO is perfectly in tune every time. Melodies can now be played with ease. Alternatively, 'wide' mode spreads the full six octaves across the ribbon, allowing dramatic FX and pitch sweeps

Auto-Tune Too?

Tuning is one of the most common problems associated with analogue synth hardware. Many analogue circuits are inherently unstable, drifting out of tune according to the ambient temperature around the circuit board, generated by the electronic components.

In some cases, small inaccuracies can be a source of the unique analogue flavour; ever-so-slightly-detuned oscillators or filters can add a big chunk of analogue character to a sound. But if a synth's

oscillators are so unstable that it can't play in tune, nobody's likely to praise its ultra-analogue sound.

The monotron employs a clever auto-tuning routine, constantly adjusting the VCO in the background to make sure the whole unit stays in tune. The most obvious benefit of the auto-tune feature is that it allows the chromatic ribbon mode to work seamlessly without the need for manual pitch adjustment, but there's also a bigger picture to consider: auto-tuning doesn't just mean that the monotron

can stay in tune with other instruments. Crucially, it means there's no reason two or more of these oscillators couldn't stay in tune with each other... When the monotron was released we weren't sure that Korg could produce oscillators stable enough to play in tune. Now we know that they can, it seems fairly likely that somewhere in Tokyo there's a designer hard at work developing a new Korg multi-oscillator synth. And fingers crossed for a polysynth too. This idea could run and run. Polytron anyone?

basic setup but it in this context works remarkably well.

Modulation station

As with the VCA, there isn't a dedicated envelope generator for the filter, but the monotron's LFO offers a surprisingly capable range of modulation options. Whereas the monotron offered a very

all the way from 1Hz to 5kHz for dramatic audio rate modulation effects. In one-shot mode, only the first half-cycle of the LFO signal is used to modulate the VCF or VCO, creating a basic but effective filter envelope effect.

In fast and one-shot modes, the LFO re-triggers with each new note, meaning that it can effectively sync to the clock tempo with the sequencer running – great news for all the Dubstep heads looking to create perfectly timed wobble basslines. In slow mode, the LFO is a

free-running wave, with small amounts of modulation creating subtly shifting timbres. The only modulation feature I miss from the monotron is the visual LFO rate indicator, omitted this time round in favour of a standard knob.

In flux

The monotron workflow is based around the step sequencer, with drums

A few clever features make the sequencer much more versatile than it might initially seem.

to be achieved with the flick of a finger.

Rather than a fully adjustable envelope generator, the dynamics of the monotron's synth output are controlled using a three-way switch to select from pre-defined VCA envelopes. The 'decay' setting ramps down from full volume, 'gate' remains at full volume as long as the note is held, while 'attack' slowly ramps up from nothing. It's a seriously

basic sawtooth LFO, the monotron offers sawtooth, triangle and square waves which can be routed to VCO pitch, VCF cutoff or both, with an intensity control to determine how much modulation should be applied. The range of the rate control can be adjusted using the mode selector switch, with slow mode offering 0.05-18Hz, while fast mode stretches

SPECS**Analogue synth engine:**

VCO (saw/triangle/square), VCF (12dB/oct resonant low-pass), VCA (three preset envelopes), LFO (0.05 Hz – 5 kHz, saw/triangle/square). Discrete analogue bass drum, snare drum and hi-hat.

Sequencer:

8-step sequencer with half steps for drum parts

Connectors:

3.5mm stereo line input, 6.3mm unbalanced stereo line output, 3.5mm stereo headphone output. 3.5mm sync in and out sockets

Powered by six x AA batteries. Battery life up to 14 hours (alkaline batteries). Or mains via DC adapter

Dimensions:

207 x 145 x 70mm

Weight:

735g

ALTERNATIVES



Korg iMS-20

£9.49

Bizarrely, the closest rival to this retro analogue hardware might be Korg's own piece of cutting-edge 21st century software. The iMS-20 iPad app offers MS-inspired virtual analogue sounds, sequencing and some great drum machine options.

korg.co.uk/ims20



Dave Smith Mopho

£280

The approach couldn't be much more different, but the awesome analogue sound engine makes the Mopho an interesting alternative. Full MIDI control and software editing set it apart from the monotribe's sequencer-based workflow.

davesmithinstruments.com



Korg Monotron

£59

The bargain monotron shouldn't be forgotten just yet. Even better, think of it as a potential addition to the monotribe. Monotribe backing track with monotron lead? That's very cool indeed.

korg.co.uk/monotron

programmed using the step buttons while synth parts are played live in record mode and then automatically looped. On the surface, the sequencer appears to be very basic, but a few clever features make it much more versatile than it might initially seem. On the synth side, Flux mode is the main option, allowing the sequencer to play

individual beats to be skipped altogether, creating odd time signatures or allowing cool effects by re-arranging your groove on the fly. Recorded synth notes can also be deactivated and reactivated during playback in much the same way as drum beats, albeit without the half steps. Holding down the Gate Time button allows the duration of each

time you play a note, but I found it surprisingly effective at creating the illusion of two completely separate synth parts.

Given the versatility of the sequencer, it's a shame that the drum synth section is so limited. The kick drum, snare and hi-hat sounds are all perfectly usable, but there are

absolutely no adjustment options for any of the (admittedly excellent and analogue) three sounds. The sounds can't even be run through the

It just takes things to the next level.
If you liked the monotron then you're going to love the monotribe

back a continuous, gliding synth note. With Flux mode off, one note plays for each step, with the pitch sampled and held throughout.

For drum programming, the sequencer offers half steps in between each of the main eight, edited by holding down each drum part button and offering a total of 16 steps per bar. The Active Step button also allows

note to be adjusted from 1.4% to 100% of the step, with the synth signal (plus external audio input) gated after the filter.

A further neat touch is that synth notes triggered by the ribbon controller always have priority over the sequencer, so you can play back a sequenced loop then jam using the ribbon. The sequenced note is effectively cut each

filter for processing. We're assured that the drums are 100% analogue and we strongly suspect that the circuit bending community will be able to unlock a few settings, but why not let us tweak the drums without having to reach for a soldering iron?

What's not to love?

With the street price starting somewhere around £169 the workflow and sheer fun factor of the monotribe make it worth a look. Like the monotron we predict that many will be sold purely by virtue of being able to filter your own external sounds with that famous MS-10/MS-20 filter. It really does sound very sweet indeed.

Compared to the monotron, the monotribe just takes things to the next level. The synth section is a genuine all-rounder, capable of everything from monstrous bass to subtle string sounds via FX. As simple as the envelope modes and LFO options might be, they create a huge range of sounds. Despite the shortcomings of the drum section, the sequencer and tempo sync feature make the Monotribe genuinely useful live or in the studio. Put simply, if you liked the monotron then you're going to love the monotribe. **FM**

That syncing feeling

Without MIDI or CV pitch control, your only option to integrate the monotribe with your other gear comes via the 3.5mm sync sockets on the rear panel. Monotribes can be daisy-chained together, locking their sequencers in time with each other and allowing multiple synth

parts to play perfectly in time. With only one unit in the country at the time of writing, I wasn't able to test how well the units sync to each other, but I found that the device is also quite happy to accept a trigger signal from a drum machine or DAW. I had no trouble getting the monotribe to

sync perfectly to my Roland TR-707 or Logic using an 8th-note rimshot fed as audio to the Sync In socket. Plugging a cable into the socket immediately bypasses the internal clock, with the tempo knob glowing solid red to show that the sequencer is slaved to the external clock signal.



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| Korg's analogue revival continues. The monotribe sounds great and offers a fantastic workflow. | |