

Access Virus TI Snow | £775



that enabled the TI to connect directly to a DAW to become a software/hardware hybrid – hardware control over a software plug-in. Accordingly, here was a synth that really could become the hub of your studio, complete with audio input should you also choose to make the Virus your audio interface.

The Virus TI has gone on to enjoy huge success but it remains relatively pricey. Here to address that is the latest in the TI family, the rather beautifully named Snow. Taking its design ethos from the TI Polar, it represents a breakthrough price for Access' in-demand technology and was one of the products garnering most attention at NAMM back in January. But was all that excited chatter justified?

Casting an eye over the Snow, the first thing you'll notice is that the design tradition of previous Viruses (Virii?) is gone – this is a much more compact unit. The 'wedge' shape has morphed



ON THE DVD

WHAT IS IT?

The latest hardware Virus with a software brain

CONTACT

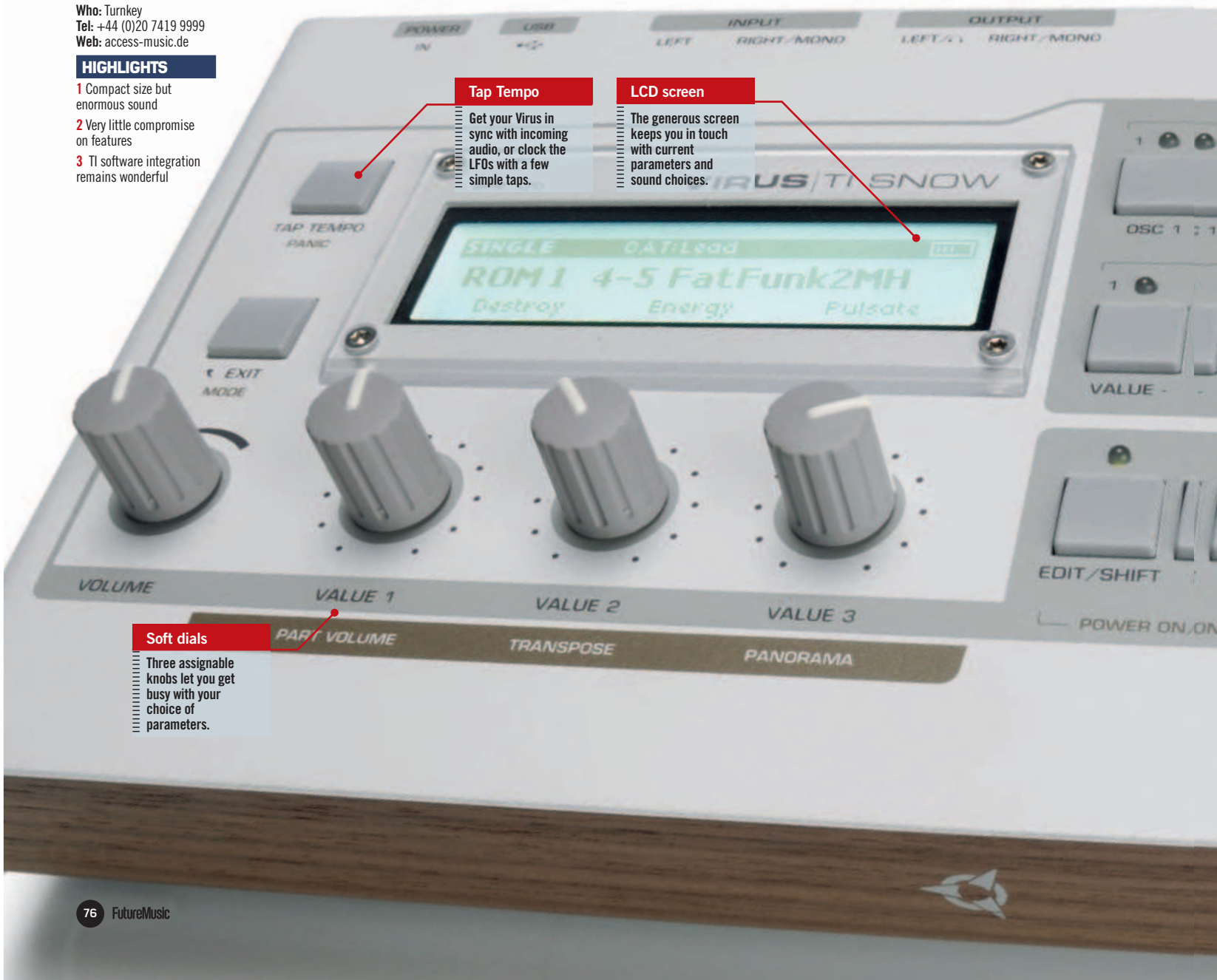
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HIGHLIGHTS

- 1 Compact size but enormous sound
- 2 Very little compromise on features
- 3 TI software integration remains wonderful

When I cast my mind back over the kit I've been lucky enough to use over the past few years, the Virus TI certainly stands out among the favourites. When that box

arrived, I was already a Virus enthusiast, with my trusty 'B' model working overtime on many a production, but the TI was a revelation. Not only was this a more powerful, better-sounding Virus, it also featured a rear-mounted USB port



Tap Tempo

Get your Virus in sync with incoming audio, or clock the LFOs with a few simple taps.

LCD screen

The generous screen keeps you in touch with current parameters and sound choices.

Soft dials

Three assignable knobs let you get busy with your choice of parameters.

into a trapezium and the Snow is only two-thirds (or so) the size of its bigger brothers. In terms of styling, the front edge is a rather classy wooden panel with the Access Logo proudly stamped in the middle. The colour scheme is lifted from the Polar, with a cream panel and brown legending, complete with bright white LEDs.

In control

The most significant compromise to spring from the reduction in size is the number of front-panel knobs, which is dramatically smaller than on the full desktop TI, with just six rotating dials adorning the bottom row of the panel, one of which is master volume. Above these, function and value buttons allow access to the Snow's inner workings, while a generous, bright LCD screen keeps you in touch with parameters, names and values. The back panel is pared down too, with

Atomizer

A brand new feature that comes with the Snow (and which can be downloaded as an OS update for TI and Polar users) is Atomizer, which acts as a real-time loop player and audio modifier. To use it, simply select Atomizer mode, connect an input signal and use Tap Tempo to synchronise. You can then use your keyboard to

loop slices of the input signal, which will replace the audio input for as long as you've got your finger pressed down. Different keys trigger different loop lengths, so you can either select a favourite bar or get all FatBoy Slim and trigger tiny slices. Holding D#1 down at the same time as your chosen loop key

makes it reverse, and there are also keys to gate the signal. It doesn't stop there either, as the pitch wheel and mod wheels can be used for pitch and filter effects respectively and you can route the results through the Snow's internal effects. This opens up a world of musical possibilities.

stereo jack inputs and outputs, MIDI In/ Out and the all-important USB port. Function-wise, very little compromise has been made with the inner workings of the instrument. The Snow retains almost all the full TI sound engine and is able to sonically

punch its weight with its siblings. The main restriction is that the Snow is only four-part multi-timbral, but this isn't too much of a drawback as most Virus users are used to running out of polyphony long before they run out of parts! The Snow's polyphony is more restricted

SPECS

- USB 2.0 port
- Stereo line in (1/4" jacks)
- Stereo line out (1/4" jacks)
- MIDI In/Out
- Three assignable dials
- Separate dials for filter cutoff and resonance
- Master volume dial
- Maximum polyphony 10-50 voices, depending on patch complexity
- System Requirements:
 - PC: Windows XP or Vista
 - Mac: OS X 10.4 or higher
- AU-, RTAS- or VST-compatible host
- Spare USB 2.0 port
- CD drive for software installation, preferably with internet connection for software/firmware updates
- Dimensions: 280 x 150 x 45mm
- Weight: 1.5kg



than that of its siblings, with 50 voices estimated as a maximum. With this in mind, there's a section in the manual that explains how the Virus uses its voice allocation and how it's possible to analyse the selected sound to see whether polyphony is running as economically as possible.

One small 'physical' frustration of note is that the left-hand (mono) output doubles as the headphone port. This seems a bit stingy – what if you need to use both at once? As should be clear already, the compact nature of this module makes it a powerful live instrument but the absence of a dedicated headphone output might make some onstage scenarios a little more tricky. However, you might find that the provision of a rather groovy

Total Integration: A Reminder

Rather than focusing on the 'TI' methodology in the main review, I'll recap it here. 'TI' stands for 'total integration', which is Access' way of saying that the Virus will fit in with your working methods, whatever they might be. First and foremost, the Virus is a standalone hardware synthesizer, packed full of sounds and

effects. However, if you want to integrate the unit into your computer set-up, you can.

Connect it up via USB and, once you've installed the drivers, the instrument is available to you as a software plug-in within an AU-, VST- or RTAS-compatible host, in exactly the same way as a software instrument would

normally be. Further integration is provided, as the audio inputs can be used as a means to send any audio into your computer, turning your Virus into a fully fledged audio interface. If you're a singer, you'll need a mic preamp, but if you send its output to the TI, you can then record its signal directly to your DAW.

Virus Snow gig bag, which you'll find nestling in the box, helps to soften this blow.

The Snow offers lots of sounds – eight banks of 64 in total. These are split, half and half, into RAM and ROM banks, though the lines have blurred here with the release of the latest OS, as both types can now have their memories over-

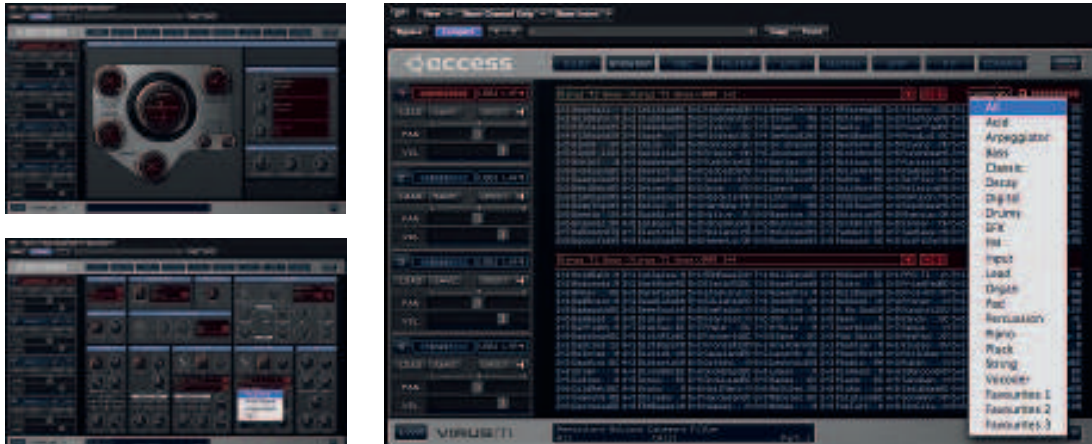
“One small ‘physical’ frustration is that the left mono output doubles as the headphone port – a bit stingy”

LEDs

All of the Snows indicators glow with an icy bright white. Greens and oranges are infinitely less classy we find!

Buttons

The multi-dial approach has gone, but you can still get to the sonic goods via a few button presses.



The Snow can play any Virus sound. Load them into memory in via the browser/librarian

written. Selecting sounds directly from the front panel is painless enough – you simply click the Bank button, select the bank you want, and then choose one of the 64 sounds via the two rows of eight buttons. All this ensures that a sound is never more than a maximum of four button pushes away.

Alternatively, if you're in full TI mode, with the Snow slaved to your computer via the USB port, choosing

sounds is even easier, as a dedicated Browser exists for each of the four parts, allowing you to wade through the list, or narrow your search field to dedicated groups of sounds. Double-clicking launches your selection and then provides access to the software implementation of your chosen sound. If you're working multi-timbrally, simply then move down to the second instrument and start choosing all over

again. Alternatively, if you're sound-selecting on the Snow's front panel, a dedicated Part button ensures you won't get lost.

Sonically, there's something for everyone here, as this issue's DVD audio demonstrates. The Snow is capable of subtle and gentle sounds but don't make it mad – it has a penchant for sheer, unadulterated brutality too! The diversity of the onboard sounds is down to the Virus' multi-pronged approach to synthesis. While there's a rich seam of traditional analogue-style oscillators from which to build, there are also FM generators, granular synths and the opportunity to route live audio into the Snow for sound generation too. If you have an appetite for sound design, this is a wonderful instrument.

The good and great

A few things that really make the Access Virus TI Snow shine

> **Sound, glorious sound:** It looks friendly with its cappuccino exterior, but the Snow's sound is huge. Everything's here from crunchy leads to soaring pads. It might only be four-part multi-timbral, but the weight of sounds in the Snow might convince you that four parts are all you need.

> **Atomizer:** This brand new feature will be a valuable tool for anyone planning to use their Virus as part of their DJ rig or in live use with a band. The ability to chop real-time audio signals into slices means that entirely new performances can be derived from existing material – and then passed through the Snow's internal effects too.

> **The software:** As I spend most of my music-making life in the studio, the TI software and the unit's ability to seamlessly integrate into my computer set-up is the feature I'd come to love the most. And the vast array of sound design options are elegantly and tidily presented.

Tweak-easy

With the pared-down front panel, you might expect that sound editing is compromised by the new design and, to a point, you'd be right. While knobs are provided for filter cutoff and resonance, the rest of the parameter-tweaking is mostly left to the buttons.

The upper row matches the software editor to an extent, in that you can jump directly into the structure section you're intending to tweak, before adjusting values with the row of buttons below. Additionally, three assignable soft dials are provided below the LCD, which you can configure to modify the parameter of your choice. Here then, is a chance to modify effects parameters, frequency modulation amounts, envelope lengths... anything you like, really.

As ever, once you've got used to them, lots can be achieved with the dials, but this is where Access have taken their gamble. If you want more hands-on control, you'll need to fork out for the desktop TI. If you're happy

ALTERNATIVES



Access Virus TI from £1,199

Nothing's quite like the Snow – except for its big brothers. If you need hands-on editing, go for the desktop module; if you need keys, buy the keyboard version; and if you won't compromise on style, opt for the Polar.

access-music.de



Native Instruments Massive

£140

Sounds-wise, here's another synth capable of enormous sounds. It's only available as a plug-in though, so its hands-on qualities are restricted to your mouse or software controller.

native-instruments.com



Alesis A6 Andromeda

£1,500

If it's the virtual analogue nature of the Virus you like, here's the modern equivalent of the real thing. Packed with front-panel knobs for easy editing, the Andromeda sounds great and will also allow the processing of external sounds via its audio inputs.

alesis.com/andromeda

having the sound engine and full software integration, the Snow's for you.

I think the provision of three dials is possibly with live tweakers in mind – there's just about enough to ensure you can significantly modify sounds in real-time with little danger that you'll get lost searching for the right dial at the critical moment. And as the current parameters are displayed onscreen directly above the knob to which they're assigned, working in low-light conditions won't be a problem either.

Feedback

Access should be applauded for listening to their growing number of fans and responding to their comments. Regular, significant updates to the OS have hugely overhauled previous Virus



Place your Virus TI Snow on a shelf and control it all from the DAW plug-in supplied

apparent that the Snow is aimed primarily at those who drooled at the prospect of being able to integrate the

The Snow still isn't exactly cheap but that's because they've not compromised on any of the synth engine's power. Now you can add the Virus sound to your line-up for hundreds of pounds less than ever before. The Virus series just got more seductive than ever and still utterly deadly. **FM**

Access should be applauded for listening to their fans and responding to their comments

models and it's likely this will continue with the Snow. Similarly, a dedicated Help menu is built into the Virus software and can take you straight to the Access site, check for OS updates, or provide you with a set of video tutorials to get you started. Thousands of patches can also be downloaded from a variety of websites, all of which echoes the type of community NI have gathered for Reaktor.

The Snow software was as stable as my much loved Virus TI and Virus Control software in my DAW. The only change was four parts rather than 16. It's great that so little has been cut. It's

stunning Virus sound engine into their DAW setup but who are willing to sacrifice some of the desktop TI's hands-on immediacy.

Access have worked hard to make sure that all the sound-shaping functions are available via a minimum of key-presses but they also know that nothing beats being able to reach out for a dedicated dial and giving it a good tweak. Instead, they've focused on making sure the sound quality and feature set is as comprehensive as possible so that the emphasis is placed on the fantastic software to help you achieve your sonic results.

FutureMusic
VERDICT

BUILD
VALUE
EASE OF USE
VERSATILITY
RESULTS

It's the Virus you've dreamed about. Sleek, sexy and packing that famous sound for a reduced price.

