

Korg microKorg XL | £436

The original microKorg has been given a makeover and sonic overhaul for 2009. **Bruce Aisher** sizes up the new 'XL' and finds out if small is still beautiful

 ON THE DVD

WHAT IS IT?

A portable analogue-modelling MIDI synthesizer and vocoder with built-in microphone

CONTACT

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HIGHLIGHTS

- 1 The synth engine
- 2 Vocoder and microphone combination
- 3 USB computer editing

Seven years is a long time in the world of music technology, and it is testament to the design of the original microKorg that it is still available and very much in demand. According to some sources it is one of the best selling synths of all time. However, Korg have now seen fit to update the microKorg range with the all-new microKorg XL. It may look different from its predecessor, but it is cut very much from the same cloth in terms of its target market and internal

design ethos. The original microKorg (Mk1) was far from a perfect beast, but it found its way into many a studio and live setup because of its portability and convenience. But let's not forget its sonics – without a decent synth engine it wouldn't still be around.

Small is the new large

On opening the box I was surprised to find that new microKorg XL – let's call it the mK XL from now on – has a completely different look to its older sibling. My initial impression was of a

shrunk Fender Rhodes electric piano crossed with a school science project (by way of a 1970's Radio Shack 'Hi-Fi'). Now, this could be very good or very, very bad depending on your taste, but it put a smile on my face and forced a nod of retro-tinged approval. Also in the box was a gooseneck microphone that plugs straight into the front-panel XLR. This, luckily, is a substantial and sturdy metal affair with a decent sized mic at the end of the flexible neck. No more messing with cables and pitiful pieces of plastic as on the toy-like mic of the Mk1 – thank you Korg.

The synth is powered by an (included) 9v AC adaptor or 6xAA batteries, for sound on the move. Korg state a battery life of 4 hours with alkaline batteries, which should get you through most train journeys without a problem. Plugging in the PSU and powering-up brings with it the joy of seeing a backlit LCD display, rather than a basic numerical LED. Below this are four knobs for switching on the Arpeggiator and/or Vocoder, saving your creations and accessing Utility functions. Taking a quick scan around the rest of the front panel



Program Selection

Two large knobs for Program selection by Genre and Category (or 8 banks of 8)

LCD Screen

The backlit LCD screen makes it easier to see what is going on. Use the buttons to enable the Arp and Vocoder or Write Programs

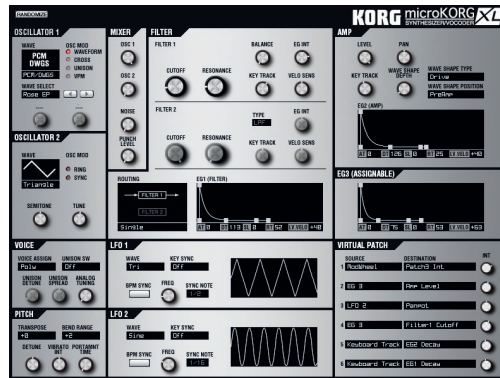
Put the XL down and pick up your mouse

Despite Korg's best efforts, editing a synth with only a few knobs and buttons is always going to be tricky. Luckily, Korg have seen fit to follow the path taken with the original mK and will be making a full computer editor available for download. Unfortunately, it was unfinished as we go to press, but we did manage to get a sneak peak (although very much a 'look but don't touch' affair). It's a much improved design compared with the Mk1 software, clearly

taking its cues from the recent (and excellent) M50 and M3 XPanded editors.

A real plus here is the ability to import original microKorg and MS2000 programs making the XL a real jack of all trades.

Running the mK XL editor as a plug-in allows you to control your keyboard directly from your DAW, but somehow that's taking away all the fun of fiddling with such a touchy-feely bit of kit!



reveals two large Program selection knobs labelled with Genre and Category, two small knobs to the left for Volume and Tempo, and four to the right to take care of editing and performance control. Besides this there are just three toggle switches for Octave Up/Down, Bank Select and Timbre selection – more on this later. Finally, we come to the keyboard, which is a three-octave mini-keyboard. This feels much better than

that on the mK Mk1, and while any reduced size keyboard is a compromise of sorts, this gets the job done. To the left of the keyboard are the usual Pitch Bend and Modulation wheels..

Round the back there is nothing unusual – individual 1/4" outputs for stereo headphones and Left and Right audio, MIDI In and Out and audio Line level input (with a rotary level control). Luckily, this time Korg have included a USB port, which allows connection to a

host computer for MIDI and editing purposes (see the box above).

Small box, big sound

Of course the first thing that you do when sitting in front of a new synth is run through the preset sounds, press random buttons and twist knobs to see what they do. But first, let's stifle our excitement and take a look under the bonnet. The mK XL features a conventional yet highly comprehensive

SPECS

General: 8 voices max (4 when using vocoder).

Keyboard: 37 notes (mini-keyboard, velocity sensitive)

Effects: Master effect x 2 (17 effects) + 2 band EQ per Timbre.

Arpeggiator: Six types: UP, DOWN, ALT1/2, Random, Trigger, Individual step on/off function

Programs: 128 programs (A/B banks x 8 genres x 8 category)

Connectors: Left/Mono and Right Outputs (1/4" phone stereo jack), Audio Input (MIC (XLR) and LINE (1/4" phone jack - unbalanced) MIDI (IN/OUT), USB (Type-B)

Power Supply: DC 9V PSU or 6 x AA batteries.

Included Accessories: AC adapter, Gooseneck Microphone

Dimensions
556 x 231 x 73mm

Weight (without mic or batteries)
2kg



Keyboard

It may be small, but it is velocity sensitive and quite playable despite the mini keys

Quick Edit Knobs

Give you fast access to common parameters as well as a means to program your own sounds

Effects Kaoss theory

The XL scores over its predecessor in many ways, with one of the most notable being the much improved effects provision. The two master effect processors take their inspiration (and DSP code) from KAOSS series. On the original mK the effects were basic modulation and delay-based affairs, with an additional two band EQ.

The XL now has 17 more-powerful algorithms that take the great sounds from the synth engine to new levels of complexity and power (for such a tiny unassuming machine). As well as the usual chorus, flange and phase programs, now includes compression, filtering,

ring modulation, grain shifting, distortion, decimation and a wider selection of delay effects. Most offer a useful range of parameters to tweak and will sync to the current tempo where applicable.

One effect noticeable by its absence is reverb. I understand that decent reverberation algorithms can take up quite a bit of processing power, and a good stereo delay often sounds better on pads, leaving more space in the mix, but it would have been nice to have the choice and power leads love a flattering reverb pad. Despite this obvious gaff the effects in the XL still get a big thumbs-up.



synth architecture, with many bits ripped off from their bigger keyboards.

Each Program consists of up to two Timbres (although most of the preset Programs only use one, as polyphony is halved when layering) which are then passed to the two Master FX sections (see the box above) and on to the main output. The arpeggiator, when enabled, can control one or both Timbres with the chosen pattern.

A Timbre can be thought of as the basic synth building block for most sounds. It features two oscillators (one of which can take the Line or Mic Audio In as its input) plus a Noise source that feed into the Mixer section. Oscillator 1 (OSC1) is fully featured and can choose from a range of basic 'analogue' waveshapes (with Cross and Phase Modulation), a formant generator, noise and PCM/DWGS sources (from acoustic samples and digital synths). OSC2 is a simpler affair, offering only basic wave shapes, but adds Sync and Ring Modulation options to help fatten the sound.

This all then passes to the filter section which consists of two resonant multi-mode filters that can be

configured for Serial or Parallel processing – there is also a split option for shaping OSC1 and 2 separately. The Filters can be swept from a 24dB/octave Low Pass (LPF) through 12dB/octave LPF and High-Pass (HPF)

modes, and on to Band Pass and Thru (no filtering). One particularly welcome feature is that the filters can be driven into self oscillation at high resonance settings. After this comes a Drive/Waveshaping processor for adding grit



Microphone

Centre stage you will find the fantastic new goose-neck vocoder mic. It's made of metal and is pleasingly weighty and robust – a big improvement over the old microKorg's unit. It works a treat with the improved vocoder engine for all kinds of vocal treatment.

MIDI and USB

As well as sporting MIDI In and Out the new Korg adds USB connectivity

or full-on, balls-out hard-edged distortion which is a key in those spikey Nu-Rave sounds the original unit became famous for.

Three ADSR Envelope Generators are available, with first two pre-assigned to Filter and Amp contouring duties. Two LFOs are provided that can be freely assigned using the Virtual Patch matrix alongside any keyboard and MIDI controller sources.

Timbres can be layered and split or accessed separately via MIDI in Multi mode. Unison mode stacks voices together, with detune for extra 'fatness' and warmth at the expense of reduced polyphony, and Analog Tune adds subtle random changes to emulate 'vintage' oscillator drift.

Sounds like... victory?

Immediately it was obvious that the mK XL was great sounding box. Of course, presets only tell part of the story of what a keyboard might be capable of, but the set on board the mK XL show this is a synth that is capable of conjuring up a huge range of analogue-sounding tones as well as some decent 'real' impersonations of pianos (both acoustic and electric), clavs and organs. This is thanks to an expanded architecture with extra oscillator waveforms for sample playback. The synthesized textures span both conventional analogue and more unusual hybrid creations.

Next stop, the vocoder. This was a very pleasant surprise. I never liked the vocoder and microphone combination of the original mK, and rarely got the result I was looking without resorting to an external mic and further processing. Not so the mK XL. This came up trumps first time for me. Playing a simple chord (only four notes max when vocoding I'm afraid) and talking into the mic gave instant pro-quality results. It was responsive, highly playable and sounded great – and this was just the presets!

The Good and Great

Four things we just have to shout about on the new microKorg XL



> The vocoder. And at last we've got an included gooseneck vocoder mic that doesn't look and feel like a toy! But it doesn't just look good, it works a treat as well, making classic (and unusual vocal manipulation) easy. Don't forget that the mic input can also be routed through the vocoder and effects in unusual ways, so don't just stick to the obvious.



> The keyboard. This is tricky one. How do you make a 'serious' and playable mini keyboard? The answer is not very easily... Usually it's a trade-off between key size and the number of octaves possible in a given space. I think Korg have got it about right here, making the XL great fun to play.



> The LCD. OK, the editing system isn't perfect, but at least the backlit LCD improves the situation over the previous microKorg model. Full Program naming is now possible and parameter access is no longer so cryptic. For quick sound selection and tweaking this is perfect.

> The new piano waveforms. The XL now has some very useful acoustic and electric piano samples. The limited polyphony and keyboard might make them seem like an afterthought, but they do make the XL more of an all-rounder.

ALTERNATIVES



Alesis Micron

£275

A nice keyboard with a great 'analogue' sound. Lacks the flexibility of the mK XL in some areas though. Editing can be very tiresome.

alesis.com

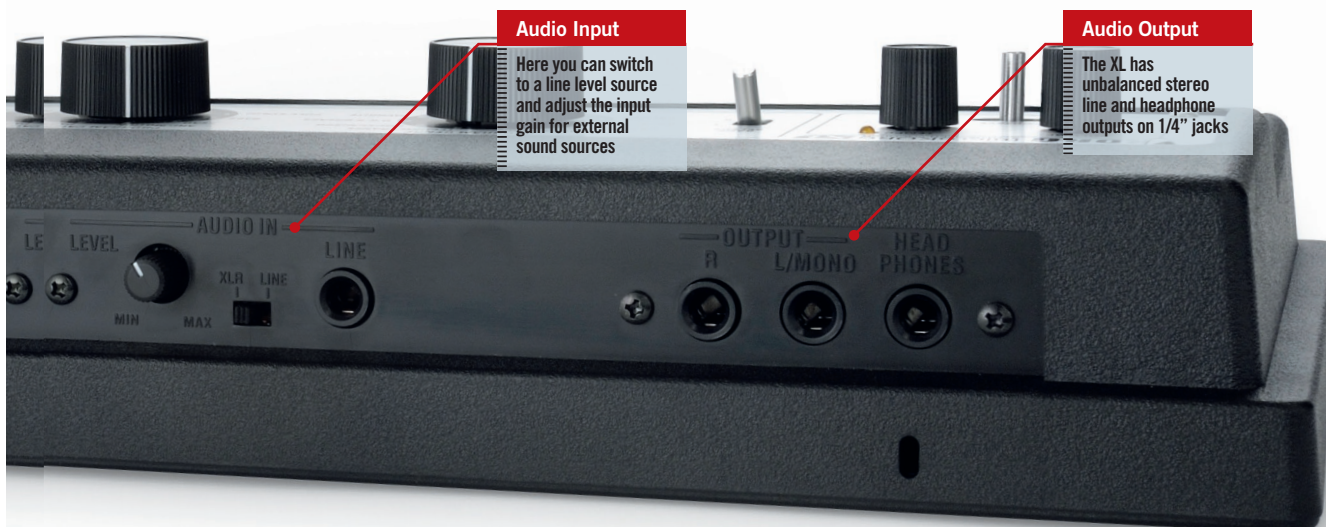


Novation Xio

£200

A streamlined analogue emulation, that also includes a 24-bit audio interface (but no vocoder) at half the price of a microKorg XL.

novationmusic.com



Audio Input

Here you can switch to a line level source and adjust the input gain for external sound sources

Audio Output

The XL has unbalanced stereo line and headphone outputs on 1/4" jacks

I'm not sure whether it is the vocoder processing itself that has been improved (the XL is now a 16-band type) or just the new microphone design, but the fact is that using the Vocoder with most sounds produced something useable and instantly worthy of recording and using in a track.

Also, the knobs should have a clearer indication of their current position (which might be a problem on stage).

Luckily, it is also possible to edit the XL with Korg's USB software editor (discussed a few pages back). The ability to edit sounds on your computer gets around any issues but I feel there

microKorg. In fact, the only sticking point is the price as Korg have taken this opportunity to 'enhance' that too. At over £400 the 'bargain' 'fun' element of the mK has been reduced somewhat. At this price point I would have expected much better polyphony (the XL only has eight notes at best)

The vocoder produced something usable and ready for recording and using in a track at our first attempt

alongside better multi-timbral capabilities, and a reverb effect. Despite these concerns, I would encourage anyone to at least take the XL for a spin. It's

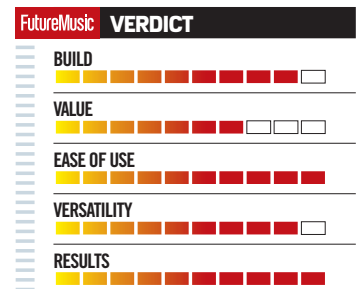
So far so good but delving beyond the presets proved a tricky task despite the more detailed LCD screen of the XL. For anything beyond basic tonal shaping it was necessary to access Full Edit mode. This meant using the three small knobs to move between Pages, select a Parameter and adjust its Value. The LCD does give satisfactory visual feedback, but I feel the whole process would have been much easier if the controls had been of the continuous detented type. Homing in on the right value could be tricky, and I regularly overshot and ended up on the wrong page due to their sensitivity.

has been a missed opportunity here. A few more knobs would have made the process of editing those great sounds on the machine easier, but let's not forget that the new system is certainly an improvement on the old one. We welcome the fact that it is now at least possible to get your hands dirty directly should you need to.

Conclusion

The microKorg XL is great-sounding and highly playable synth. No-one else makes a synth like this besides Korg and the XL is a perfect replacement for the much loved and massively popular

almost impossible not to love. **FM**



A flexible and great sounding synth that's a worthy successor to the world-famous original.

