

Yamaha S70XS | £2,299

Is it a synth? Is it a stage piano? Well, it's both and more! **Dan 'JD73' Goldman** puts Yamaha's latest S-series board through its paces



WHAT IS IT?

Versatile, weighted stage piano/synth, based on the Motif XS sound engine

CONTACT

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HIGHLIGHTS

- 1 Well-built with a playable weighted piano action
- 2 Lots of connectivity, USB for MIDI and computer connection plus mic/instrument input/vocoder
- 3 A huge selection of bread and butter sounds onboard

Originally launched a decade ago, Yamaha's 'S' line was designed to offer top-end sounds and features in a package specifically aimed at stage/solo performers rather than hardcore sound designers. Now, after several incarnations, Yamaha have launched the XS-labeled, S-series keyboards, currently comprising the S70XS (the subject of this review) and the S90XS.

The only difference between the two is the length of keyboard, with the 70 having a 76-note weighted hammer-action keyboard and the 90 having an 88-note board. The action itself is very nice indeed – well balanced and not too heavy, nor does it suffer from any sponginess, plus it's playable for all types of sounds/instruments, including synths and organ stuff too.

Light hearted

I always shudder with the thought of doing my back in when unboxing/carrying weighted boards for review, and though the S70XS is not what could be described as lightweight, it's certainly manageable and I was even able to

carry it myself into my studio. However, bear in mind that once it's in a case for giggering, the S70XS is a two-man job.

Quality is very good throughout, with nice wooden end panels and a military-grade metal case. All the sliders and dials feel great, in line with what you would expect of an instrument at this price point. There's even a vast

table-like expanse top left to rest your laptop on. (Really, does it need to be this big? Wow.)

Interface and layout wise it's a mixed bag, however. There's a lot going on on the front panel (too much, in my opinion, for a stage instrument) and it can be pretty confusing to navigate.

Another downside is the tiny screen. While I applaud Yamaha for trying to make everything accessible without having to rely on the screen this is like something from a synth from five years ago. Good job the included Cubase AI4-based VST editor goes some way to make up for this.

Interfering interface

I still feel that some Yamaha boards suffer from unnecessarily complicated interfaces and unfortunately the S70XS continues this tradition and programming it is frustrating at times, with too much scrolling and button pressing for my liking.

On the upside, there is direct access

Connectivity and Arpeggiator

The S70XS has plenty of onboard connectivity, including two sets of stereo outputs (one set to assignable) a mic input (for plugging in mic'd vocals, guitars and routing them through the chorus/reverb effects and vocoder), USB for MIDI connecting to a DAW (such as Pro Tools/Logic and to the included Cubase AI4 VST editor).

Plus, the S70XS can control your DAW's transport and act as a

control surface. On top of this, the S70XS can record all internal and external audio (connected to its input) direct to its onboard flash memory (which gives up to 18 minutes of audio recording or 192MB) or to a connected USB stick.

MIDI files and WAV/AIFF files can also be played back directly from a USB stick or external USB drive too. The onboard arpeggiator has a staggering 6,779 preset

types and 256 user slots, plus up to four parts, so every type of pattern and style is covered.

Elsewhere, there are also some great performance presets that make use of layered arpeggiator patterns stacked with drums, basses and strings that also react to the chord being played for instant and versatile auto accompaniment backings. Perfect for solo performers!





to most of the main functions using the matrix system/dials and sliders, including filter cutoff, resonance, envelopes, effects/effect levels, levels of parts within a performance/arpeggiator pattern, plus there are direct buttons to bypass each level of effect and EQ (insert, chorus, reverb, master FX and master EQ). There are four main operating modes – 'Voice' which just uses one element/part, 'Performance'

Familiar engine

The sound-engine is based on Yamaha's familiar AWM2 sample-based system, with expanded articulation (taken from Yamaha's flagship Motif XS) which makes for more expressive and realistic sounds, utilising elements such as key on/off noises, sympathetic resonance, key clicks, guitar slides etc.

Sound-wise, there's huge scope and something to suit every style and player.

basses, plus 18 onboard filter types too. Strangely enough, I found the cutoff dial induced stepping when sweeping the cutoff but using the mod wheel for cutoff didn't, so watch out for that!

To conclude, there's a lot on board the S70XS. It looks and feels rock solid, and comes armed with a staggering array of decent sounds that should keep you interested for years. For these reasons it's a major contender. That said

it's let down by its confusing interface that'll take more than a little practice to master.

Be sure to check it out if you're in the market for a great

sounding, versatile and playable stage piano/synth though. I think you'll be particularly impressed by the keyboard, versatile features and the industry-ready quality of the onboard sounds. **FM**

Sound-wise, there's huge scope here and something to suit every style and player

which stacks elements/parts within a sound for splits and layers and allows complex layered rhythmic/auto-accompaniment backings to be made using the four-part arpeggiator (including beats too). 'Multi' mode allows assigning of sounds to MIDI channels for quick selection and/or external sequencer playback and finally, 'Master' mode handles controller functions plus collates all your favourite voices, performances and multi's under one header. This is all a little confusing at first, but again persevere and it'll eventually become second nature.

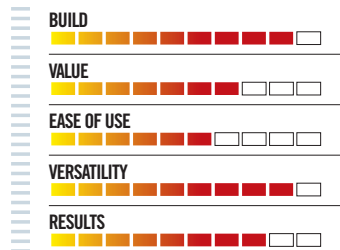
Thankfully, the category search function is a godsend with this many sounds/performances on offer and you can search by type and sub type too to quickly locate the sounds you're after.

Highlights include some very realistic pianos, including authentic reproductions of Yamaha's S6 and C3 grands (with string/sympathetic resonance/half pedaling) loads of decent electric pianos (Rhodes/Wurlitzers) and some great acoustic guitars, drum sounds/kits, pads, strings, brass, and tuned percussion.

The clavs and organs however, lack the authenticity of the acoustic pianos and some of the other pianos and EPs sound a little clinical/lifeless, particularly with the effects bypassed. It's disappointing too that the sliders don't act as organ drawbars and that many presets are swamped in reverb and other effects.

However, there are also some very useable analogue synth leads and

FutureMusic VERDICT



It's not cheap and is let down by its small screen and unintuitive interface but has a lot to offer.

SPECS

Keyboard: 76-note balanced hammer effect keyboard with aftertouch.

Controllers: Pitchbend and mod wheel, assignable control sliders x4, assignable knobs x4

Display: Backlit LCD

Sound Engine: AWM2 with Expanded Articulation and 128-note poly. 456MB Waveform ROM

Presets: 1,024 normal voices + 64 drum kits,

GM: 128 normal voices + 1 drum kits,

User: 128 x 4 Normal Voice + 32 drum kits

Effects: Reverb: 9 types, Chorus: 22 types Insertion: 53 types x 8 blocks

Master Effect: 9 types

Master EQ: Five bands

Part EQ: Three bands

Internal Memory for audio recording: 192MB (up to 18 minutes of audio recording)

Headphones: ¼" jack

Mic input: Combo jack

MIDI: MIDI IN/OUT/THRU

Assignable ¼" Output: L, R USB To Host

Dimensions: 1,350 x 163 x 385mm

Weight: 20kg

ALTERNATIVES



Nord Stage EX

£2,199

Available in 76- and 88-note weighted models, this beast focuses on clavs/pianos/EPs

nordkeyboards.com



Korg SV1-73

£1,499

Some great pianos/EPs/effects onboard, plus vintage keys/synth sounds, all without menu diving

korg.co.uk



Kurzweil PC3X

£1,600

88-note weighted synth/stage piano with great pianos/synth/orchestral sounds/effects and very deep editing possibilities

kurzweilmusic.com

