

Roland AX-Synth | £810

The keytar is back! Roland's AX-Synth is and this time it's even packing its own onboard sounds too.
Dan 'JD73' Goldman straps on and gets down



WHAT IS IT?

Successor to the highly regarded Roland AX-7 keytar, completely redesigned and now with onboard sounds

CONTACT

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HIGHLIGHTS

- 1 Looks great and feels nicely balanced
- 2 Very playable, easy to control and simple to navigate
- 3 Onboard sounds are a real bonus and are generally very useable

Love them or loathe them, keytars are strange beasts. They're not a keyboard, not a guitar but somewhere

between the two... For keyboardists that want to hog the limelight they're the only solution, but is toting a keyboard around your neck ever going to be as cool as rocking a guitar?

The first commercially-produced keytar was the Moog Liberation launched in 1980. This particular model contained an analogue monosynth and finally gave keyboardists the freedom they had yearned for years (apart from the fact it had a huge power lead hanging off it).

Subsequently, many manufacturers saw mileage in keytar products and many have appeared over the years including Yamaha's KX5 and KX1, Lync's LN4, Korg's RK-100 and other more boutique models such as the Zen Riffer. Some players even resorted to putting strap attachments on their standard keyboards to get in on the act.

Keytar hero

Roland first entered the keytar market with the SH-101 in 1983 (the mod grip option turned it from a humble

monosynth into a keytar). Following this, they released the AX1 in 1992 and the AX-7 in 2002 (both successful MIDI controller keytars but with no onboard sounds).

After discontinuing the AX-7 in 2007, second-hand prices began to

rocket – a testament to how popular these products actually are. Face it: Keytars are so bad their good and in recognition of the need for cheese Roland have brought it back bigstyle.

As keytars go, this a gorgeous beast. It looks great in white, with flowing clean lines and if you've got the nerve and desire you WILL stand out on stage. Coupled with neon blue lights on the preset select buttons, it all adds up to a very elegant presence (though I have to say it's slightly let down by the plastic that it's fashioned from).

Playability

Strapping on the AX-Synth for the first time is a truly liberating experience. It feels well balanced and everything falls instantly to hand. On the front of the neck are controls for octave up and down, the modulation bar (which feels great for mod duties and fits the hand perfectly) and the touch controller for

Keytar Connectivity

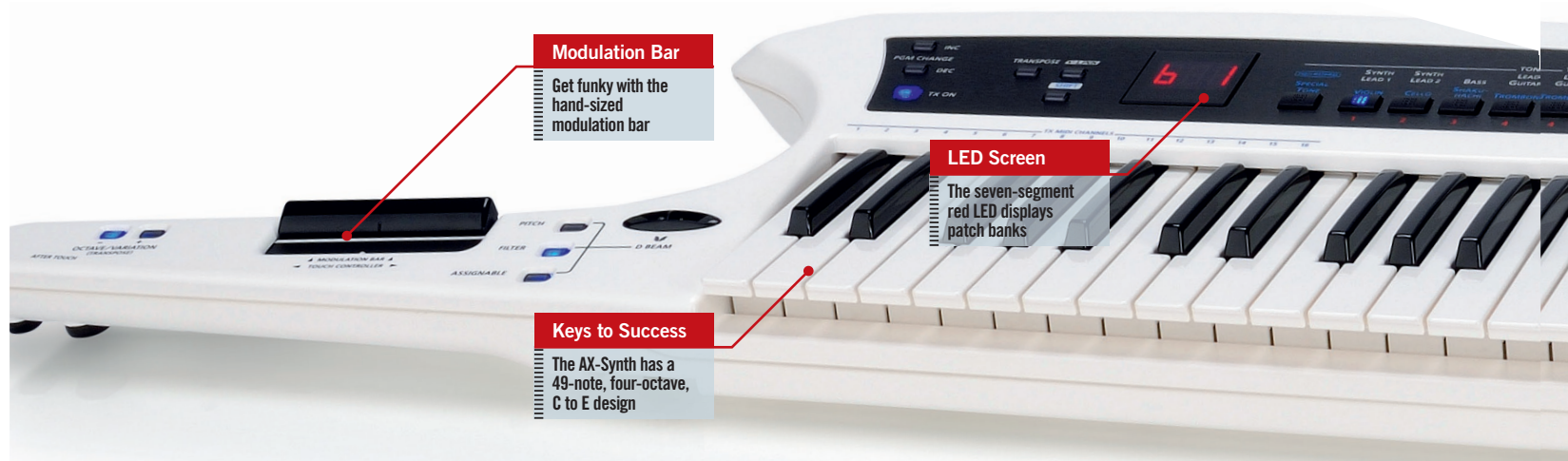
There are plenty of connections on the AX-Synth. Included are a pair of jack audio outs a headphone socket, MIDI In and Out, a foot pedal socket and USB/USB MIDI that enables the AX-Synth to communicate with PCs (and hopefully

Mac's soon). The USB editor will allow editing of the AX's built-in synth sounds via your computer.

Once edited, sounds can then be uploaded back to the AX-Synth. This is great, though it would have been even better if there were

independent controls for envelopes, filter resonance/cutoff and effect control on the front panel itself. It's a bind that you have to connect to a computer even for these basic duties. This aside, you can change the reverb send and patch volume levels using Shift+Tone buttons.

Power can be supplied to the AX-Synth via the supplied wallwart power supply or from eight Ni-MH rechargeable batteries (AA size) or normal AA's. And they've even included two hooks to stop wires being yanked away when on stage.



Modulation Bar

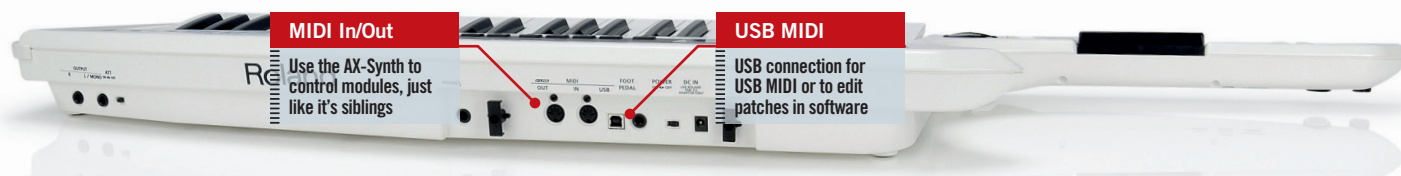
Get funky with the hand-sized modulation bar

LED Screen

The seven-segment red LED displays patch banks

Keys to Success

The AX-Synth has a 49-note, four-octave, C to E design



pitch bending. However, here's my first gripe – the neck is a little thick under the touch controller and it's sometimes hard performing accurate pitch bends. It's also quite a long way to reach round over the top of the mod bar. Not a massive problem, but for those that have smaller hands it might be hard to get to grips with (no pun intended).

There are three further buttons on the back of the neck for switching on portamento, kicking in the 'bender mode' and a hold button. The 'bender mode' is particularly useful on lead guitar type sounds, as it only bends the last note played. Nice.

The hold button is almost like a sustain button – you play the note,

genuine option via a couple of different places to attach the strap. Another of the AX's clever bits of attention to detail.

The front panel of the AX-Synth houses all the internal and external MIDI patch selection buttons, a seven-segment old-school red LED display (same as the AX-7s), transpose buttons and controls for storing 16 of your favourite patches for instant recall (via the A and B favourite buttons). The keyboard also doubles up as a numeric keypad for selecting

external MIDI channels (bottom octave) and patch changing (top octave).

Patch selecting while playing is a doddle and it's great that the up/down patch selectors have been moved from the neck (on the AX-7) to the front panel. It's much easier stepping through the sounds using your right hand, rather than your left. Perhaps it would have worked a bit better if the front panel had been tilted towards the player more, as it's quite hard to see the display panel once you've strapped on.

Probably the most important difference between AX-Synth and its

SPECS

Keyboard: 49 Keys (with velocity)

Sound Generator: Maximum Polyphony 128 voices

Tones: 256 Tones + 8 Special Tones (including SuperNATURAL)

Controllers: D-Beam, Ribbon Touch, Modulation Bar, Volume Knob Controller, Aftertouch Knob Controller, Portamento On/Off, Hold button On/Off, Bender Mode: Normal/Catch+Last

Connectors: Output Jacks: 2 x 1/4 inch phone type (L/MONO, R), Headphones (Stereo 1/4 inch phone type), Foot Pedal, USB connector (USB MIDI), MIDI connector (In/Out), AC Adaptor

Others: Battery 8 x Ni-MH rechargeable Batteries

Display: (3 x 7) segment LED

Accessories: Owner's Manual, Shoulder strap, AC Adaptor (PSB-1U)

Dimensions: 1142 x 266 x 87mm

Weight: 3.9kg

The AX-Synth delivers the goods on every level. It sounds and looks great and puts keytars back on top

Next to the mod bar and touch controller, are three buttons that assign functionality to the D-Beam infrared controller – a now common device on Roland products. These buttons can control either pitch or filter, or can be assigned to other controller duties as required (volume is a useful assignment here). The D-Beam is always handy to have around and it's a great visual controller too.

And the controls extend to the back of the neck too, with several important controls under your left thumb. First up are two rotary controllers – one for volume and one for aftertouch. Unfortunately, this aftertouch control is slightly misleading – it doesn't control aftertouch as we know it as AX-Synth doesn't have an aftertouch keyboard (shame). Basically, it's an extra rotary modulation control and acts differently depending on the sound selected.

press hold and it sustains infinitely until you let go, freeing you up to fiddle with the D-Beam and modulation.

Key design

Keyboard-wise, the AX-Synth has a 49-note four-octave, velocity sensitive C to E design (an improvement on the AX-7's 45-note E to C design). It feels good and is playable at most angles, though I found it a little too stiffly sprung for my liking and the action sometimes got in the way of faster runs. While on the subject of playability, Roland has made two-handed playing a



ALTERNATIVES



\$1,499

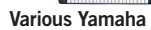
Basically this is a clavinet with two-octave keyboard on but it can be strummed too and sounds very guitar like. Utilises real strings. Mad but it works!

keytarinc.com



The first keytar with built-in sounds. In fact it's an analogue monster based on the Moog Prodigy. Rare and sounds amazing.

ebay.co.uk



Various Yamaha Keytars

Yamaha have made many great keytars over the years. Check out the KX5, KX1, DX100, and SHS10. A DX100 can be grabbed for around £100 if you're lucky so shop around!

ebay.co.uk

there's definitely something for every type of player and style whether it be Funk, Soul, Rock or Acoustic.

There's definitely an emphasis on 'lead' type sounds – with lots of synths, guitars and squalling saxes – and while they won't set the world on fire, they are

and pads, a couple of nice pianos, organs, clavs, choirs and more. The only thing missing here is front panel control for the effects. And don't forget that a powerful USB editor is included for further tailoring the sounds to your particular needs run to something else.

I really like the AX-Synth and it delivers the goods on almost every level. The only question mark hanging over it is the price. At over £800 you have to

The new feature set, coupled with a great design, makes it a complete instrument in its own right

connections. Big hats off to Roland for doing this, though built-in (mini?) speakers would have been a nice bonus.

Onboard sounds

On the whole, the onboard sounds are very playable and very controllable and

generally good quality, designed to cut through a mix. Highlights include the 'Supernatural' violins, cellos and brass (the mod bar is assigned to expression on several of these sounds) and there are some great analogue style basses and leads, huge-sounding poly synths.

ask yourself how much of that money is going on the synth on board, and if you really want it. That said, teamed with the new feature set and great-looking design makes it a much more complete instrument than ever before. It sounds and looks great, and although it's a tad expensive, it puts Roland firmly back at the top of the keytar tree. **FM**

Playing a Keytar

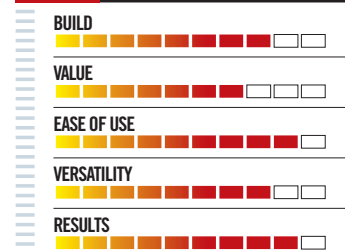
There are a few pointers for playing a keytar. First off, make sure your strap is set so the keytar is at a comfortable height for playing. A good place to aim for is around waist height, which allows you to extend your arms enough to play comfortably. For single-handed playing, ideally you want to wear the keytar on a diagonal,

so that the neck is higher than the keyboard. This allows you to fully extend your right arm so it can reach the highest note on the keyboard while your left hand can comfortably stay on the neck for modulation duties.

For two-handed playing, you'll need to readjust the keytar on the fly, so that it hangs in a more horizontal position, allowing free

movement of both hands. Also, don't forget there is nothing to stop you putting the keytar on a stand and playing it just like a normal keyboard.

Finally, it's worth checking out a few well known keytar players on YouTube – notably, Herbie Hancock, Chick Corea, Jan Hammer or just do a search on keytar players! Good luck!

FutureMusic **VERDICT**

It's great fun to use, it looks fantastic and the onboard sounds are a welcome addition. I want one!

