

ROLI Seaboard Rise | £599

ROLI have boldly reinvented the classic keyboard. *Dan 'JD73' Goldman* checks out their Seaboard Rise

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WHAT IS IT?

Two-octave MIDI controller keyboard featuring silicone, multi-dimensional keywave-board, paired with Equator software sound engine

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HIGHLIGHTS

- 1 It's hard to reinvent the keyboard but ROLI have done it amazingly well!
- 2 The Equator sound engine is versatile and well-designed and sounds very good indeed
- 3 The 'keywave' keys are extremely responsive, very controllable and satisfying to play and the results are great

Since I first saw the Seaboard Grand, as a keyboardist I've been itching to play one. Any company that's brave enough

to mess with the tried and tested keyboard format deserves a prize for bravery in my book and I'm very happy to finally be able to try out the Seaboard Grand's new little brother, the Rise. ROLI and the Seaboard range are the brainchild of Roland Lamb, who heads up a large team of developers, builders and designers in London. Already the Grand has gained many professional keyboard playing fans/users and ROLI have been moving forward, developing new instruments and ideas – there is a real excitement surrounding the brand.

One of the first things that strikes you about ROLI is how slick their packaging/online presence is and a visit to their website gives plenty of insight into the brand and development of the Seabords. There's a hint of Apple in the overall feel/vibe and, like Apple

products, the Grand and the Rise have a simple understated elegance that really draws you in. The Rise comes in a black polystyrene carry case, though it really needs a handle and could do with

being a lot more substantial at this price point! Regardless, the feeling of super-high-quality is undeniable once you get your hands on the Rise itself – it's built into a seriously tough metal housing with some serious weight, though it's still very portable.

Power up

Down the left side are the connections, including a sustain pedal input, external power adaptor input and two USB connectors, though unfortunately there's no standard DIN MIDI connectors for connecting directly to MIDI hardware. The Rise can be powered in three ways – via USB, via the external power connector or by the onboard battery which charges via USB and which really comes into its own when using the onboard Bluetooth MIDI system.

MPE (Multidimensional Polyphonic Expression)

This new breed of multi-dimensional MIDI controllers (eg ROLI's Seaboard products, Roger Linn's LinnStrument, Haken Audio's Continuum and Madrona Labs' Soundplane) are really pushing the boundaries of electronic music creation and expression. With this in mind, many industry professionals from companies including ROLI, Moog, Apple and Roger Linn Design are now working on tweaking/

standardising a new MIDI standard called MPE, which is an enhanced, (and backwards compatible) version of MIDI, directly supporting MPE/Multidimensional MIDI controllers. Fingers crossed, we'll see many more MPE compatible products in the future! While the Rise talks nicely to many DAWs (Logic X, Cubase, Reaper etc) it will be great to see more DAWs natively supporting MPE, meaning

less setting up for us guys that just wanna plug and play quickly! The latest version of Bitwig natively supports ROLI products and LinnStrument too, so it seems we are already heading in an exciting new direction. I can't wait to see more plug-ins and hardware supporting the standard, as once you try a controller or piece of software that uses/supports MPE, it's pretty hard to go back to standard keyboards.

Keywaves

The magic happens here! The keywave keyboard senses five different dimensions of touch including velocity, aftertouch, forward/back finger movement, side to side finger movement and lift off the keys.

Power Switch/ Modes

The main power switch fires up the Rise and also flashes to show you when the onboard battery is running low. It also toggles the main Rise operating modes.

Although you always need your laptop/computer connected to use Rise/Equator, having this wireless option at least makes it feel more like a standalone product. Setting up the Rise is a doddle too – you simply register online using the registration card, create a profile on the MY ROLI section of the website, confirm your email and download the content for Windows PC or Mac. You'll then receive an excellent software manual, the Equator software and a ROLI Dashboard application which allows set-up of the Rise from your computer's desktop.

On the left of the Rise's front panel are a combined mode/power switch and the performance controls which are all backlit white. The switches/sliders are all coated in the same soft black silicone rubber as the 'keywaves'



Connections

There's a sustain pedal input, two USB ports and an external power input. Plus it can also connect via Bluetooth.

faders with light strips to show level, which can be assigned to any MIDI CC duties in MIDI mode, or in Expression mode the three sliders are directly connected to three of the Rise's 'dimensions' – Glide, Slide and Press. Above these is a switch for changing presets, which can work as a program change switch over MIDI. It's worth discussing these 'dimensions' as they are key to the Rise's uniqueness.

First up is Strike. This is simply MIDI velocity. Next up is Press(ure). This is the pressure applied to the keyboard after the initial strike (ie

Finally, the fifth dimension is Lift which is the lifting of your fingers off the keywave surface. You can see how the Rise has many more sound-shaping options available directly from its key surface compared to a real keyboard and the beauty is your fingers never have to leave the keys to achieve this wide range of sonic variation.

Making waves

Now onto the heart of the Rise, the 'keywave' keyboard. This unique and beautifully designed keyboard features 25 notes (two octaves) and it's made

of the same non-toxic, high-quality silicone rubber as the buttons and as found on the Seaboard Grand. You're probably wondering how it

feels and the best way I can describe it is it feels like playing a keyboard made of Haribo jelly sweets! It's soft yet resistant, smooth yet rubbery and it begs to be massaged! The black keys have white stripes down their centres so you can make them out more easily, while the white keys are a little narrower than on a standard piano keyboard. While the length of the black and white keys initially appears the same (at around 6.5cm each), the black keys

SPECS

25-note (2-octave) 'keywave' keyboard
2 touch ribbons, 5 dimensions of touch, 3 touch faders, Octave Switch, Power/Mode Switch, Preset/Program Change Switch
Connections: Continuous pedal input (1/4" jack), USB B port (MIDI out and power), USB A port (for charging peripherals), 9–12V 2A DC port

Internal battery
Full MIDI compatibility over USB and Bluetooth

System requirements:
PC: Windows 7 or higher
Mac: OS X 10.8 or higher
Both: Intel Core i5 2.5GHz or faster recommended, 4GB RAM minimum/8GB RAM recommended, 2GB available disk space for Equator installation

Included software/accessories: Equator, the world's first purpose-built, multi-dimensional software synthesizer, ROLI Dashboard for tweaking settings, Bespoke storage case, USB cable

Dimensions
505 x 210 x 22.86mm
Weight
2.8kg

It feels like playing a keyboard made of Haribo jelly sweets! It's soft yet resistant, smooth yet rubbery...

(keyboard) and are smooth yet grippy. The power switch also changes colour to denote the selected operating mode (Expression, MIDI or Bluetooth). To the left of this is an octave switch and directly above is an assignable XY touchpad (much like the touchpad on a Moog voyager) for controlling pretty much any sound-shaping parameter in Equator (or MIDI CCs for other connected DAW software/hardware MIDI instruments). Above this are three touch

aftertouch) which can send channel or poly MIDI messages so that you can affect all, or each note in a chord individually – being able to bend, modulate or filter one or more notes within a chord is a huge feature. The third dimension is Glide which is left to right finger movement for vibrato and glissando. The fourth dimension is Slide, which is the vertical movement of your fingers up/down the keys and it's great for adding filtering/tonal changes.



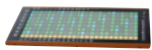
Hardware

Though the Rise isn't ROLI's flagship range, the hardware still feels superb. From the metal case to the beautiful silicone rubber backlit switches and faders, it all feels premium quality.

Touch Ribbons

Above and below the keywave area on the keyboard are two long areas of space which are basically ribbon controllers for pitch bending notes upwards and downwards.

ALTERNATIVES



Roger Linn Design LinnStrument

£1,010

Roger Linn's innovative and wearable LinnStrument offers several touch dimensions like the Rise but, instead of employing a keyboard, it uses 200 multi-touch square pads for notes and MIDI CCs.

www.rogerlinndesign.com



Haken Continuum (half-size model)

\$3,390

The Continuum (like LinnStrument and the ROLI Seabords) features a continuous touch surface with several touch dimensions for controlling MIDI instruments and it also has its own sound engine onboard.

www.hakenaudio.com



ROLI Seaboard Grand Studio

£1,599

37-note version of the Seaboard Grand, featuring 3D touch (though no Y-axis like the Rise). Equator runs natively in the hardware and there's two pedal inputs plus balanced audio outputs.

www.rol.com

actually extend down all the way to the front edge of the white keys in a narrow ridge so you can slide uninterrupted from a white key to a black key. This makes a lot of practical sense and it threw me a little at first but you soon get used to it. Also note that the strips of space above and below the keys can

(plus all the assignable left panel control) let me achieve sound-shaping that simply can't be achieved with a standard keyboard. It works reliably/predictably for all sound types and, while the transition from a normal keyboard does take some getting used to, the learning curve is still pleasingly

like a standard piano/synth keyboard you'll be missing the point, but go in with an open mind knowing you have to adapt your technique/muscle memory slightly and you'll be super-impressed!

The future's here...

At £599 for a two-octave controller, the

Rise isn't cheap but then it's unique and the software is solid and sounds fantastic. For anyone looking for a new way to control several

Using the five dimensions of touch, you can shape sounds in ways not possible using a standard keyboard

be used for pitch slides and glissandos, which is great – they're effectively two full-length ribbon controllers.

I thoroughly enjoyed using the Rise – it's addictive to play and having five dimensions of touch available simultaneously via single/multiple keys

shallow. The biggest thing to adapt to is the aforementioned white keys being narrower than the average finger (due to the black keys extending down so far) – you thus have to play very accurately and in a more claw-like fashion. Also note that if you approach the Rise just

dimensions of touch/sound simultaneously via a keyboard-style interface (media composers especially), the Rise is an inspiring and exciting option that brings to life/adds realism to any sound – even basic Logic/DAW plug-in synths became way more interesting when using real fingered vibrato and slides/glides. Importantly, it feels like the future of the keyboard has finally arrived and I'm excited to see where this leads. I'd love to see longer Rise keyboards (preferably with Equator running onboard), but perhaps ROLI can also license the 'keywave' technology, as all synths would benefit hugely from it. **FM**

Equator

The Equator software is fully-optimised for the Rise's five dimensions of touch and can be used standalone or as a DAW-hosted plug-in. Unlike the Grand, the Rise always needs to be connected to your computer via USB or Bluetooth and there's also no way to run Equator within the Rise hardware itself. There's a handy browser for navigating/organising sounds and simply flicking through the excellent presets will keep you nicely occupied!

Equator sounds superb and is massively powerful, comprising two layerable polyphonic sample-based



oscillators, each with their own filter (with samples including acoustic piano, Rhodes, strings, marimba, acoustic guitars, choirs and harps). There's also a dual-noise oscillator with dedicated filter, two separate global filters with 13 filter types each, a mixer, five envelopes, two

LFOs, three VA oscillators with 49 waves each, an FM section and a global EQ and five global effects including bitcrushing, delay, reverb, distortion and chorus. Plus, there's a powerful modulation matrix section with over 40 sources and over 100 destinations.

FutureMusic VERDICT

BUILD [Progress bar: 10/10]

VALUE [Progress bar: 8/10]

EASE OF USE [Progress bar: 7/10]

VERSATILITY [Progress bar: 9/10]

RESULTS [Progress bar: 10/10]

A giant leap forward for keyboard-kind, the Rise is an innovative product which oozes quality.



Touch Faders

These three backlit faders offer up additional expressive control over three key sound-shaping parameters in Expression mode, while in MIDI mode they can be assigned to any MIDI CC numbers.