

ROLAND AC-90 ACOUSTIC CHORUS £589
ACOUSTIC AMPS

PHOTOGRAPHY BY PHILIP SOWELS



Roland AC-90 Acoustic Chorus £589

An all-new 90-watt dual channel lightweight acoustic amp that comes loaded with features and onboard effects. Does AER have a serious rival? *by Steve Harvey*

Japanese electronics and effects giant Roland has an enviable reputation for high quality products that don't assault the wallet. Recent marketing campaigns have informed us that the company has sold its 10 millionth BOSS compact effect pedal – a phenomenal achievement by anyone's standards. But it would be a mistake to think that effects pedals are Roland's only guitar-based success story. The Cube series of electric guitar amps has also proved very popular. However, this new offering, the AC-90 Acoustic Chorus amplifier, seeks to cater for gigging acoustic players as well as home strummers and enthusiasts.

With its smart and business-like appearance you'd be forgiven for thinking that the AC-90 is a small PA system. It's certainly refreshing to see an acoustic amp stylishly finished in black rather than the often-preferred brown. The overall build quality here seems very good. The amp feels

strong and sturdy and, although there are no metal corner protectors fitted, it looks as if it'll survive hard times served in the boot of your car.

One of the key appeals of this amp is its weight – or the lack of it. Roland has obviously given the issue of portability a lot of thought and it's your back that'll be thanking them. Weighing in at just under 12 kilos, this amp is very much 'pick-up and go'. In fact, as if to underline the point, the AC-90 comes – like the also very portable AER amps – with a padded carrying case, which sports a shoulder strap no less.

Sound projection comes via two eight-inch neodymium woofers and two tweeters. Removing the front grille reveals that the speakers have been set facing slightly away from each other, helping with overall sound dispersion. Additionally a retractable tilt-back stand is fitted to the base of the unit. If the stand isn't sufficient in getting the projection required, however, the

AC-90 has a speaker stand adaptor which allows the user to place the amp on the top of an adjustable speaker stand in a similar way to that in which a PA speaker would be fitted.

The AC-90 is a twin channel (45W + 45W) stereo amp. The guitar channel is capable of handling both piezo and magnetic pickups, whereas the mic/line channel will run either a

The Rivals

The AER series of acoustic amps are very popular with acoustic performers. The **AER Compact 60** (£749) offers 60 watts through two eight-inch speakers and is something of a staple of acoustic amplification. If wattage-for-pounds is what you're after, the twin-channel **Hartke AC150** (£399) is very competitive and offers a whopping 150 watts plus five-band EQ and 100 preset 24-bit digital effects, though perhaps it's not quite as portable as the Roland. If transparent amplification is more important, the **Shertler David** (£569) amp offers 85 watts, two channels, spring reverb and incredible clarity. Later this year we'll see the return of Trace Acoustic...



Pick-up-and-go: the top mounted strap highlights this lightweight amp's portability



microphone (with 48V phantom power if needed) or a second acoustic guitar if it's fitted with a magnetic pickup. This makes for some interesting options. Option one offers the more standard facility of singing through the second channel while playing through channel one. Option two caters for two guitars so long as one of them has a magnetic pickup. Alternatively, if your acoustic is fitted with both an undersaddle piezo and a magnetic pickup (or an onboard mic), option three offers the opportunity to plug one guitar into both channels and mix the outputs.

Additional features include right and left XLR stereo outputs, which could be used for example with a mixer, and a mono line-out which most likely would be employed as a feed for a digital recorder. Aux in options are R and L jack and RCA phono inputs (which can be used concurrently). The phono inputs offer the facility of plugging in a CD player. A balanced DI output doubles up as a tuner out and there's also a dedicated sub woofer output for those that'd like to add a powered sub to the set-up. A mute switch is also included.

The chorus, reverb/delay, mute and anti-feedback features can be turned on/off via footswitches, but you'll need one-to-two instrument cables if you want to control all four at the same time.

Sounds

Unwanted feedback can be a constant problem for acoustic players, but the AC-90 includes an anti-feedback feature. In use, there are two options; you can either dial up the specific problem frequency or set the control to auto. This can also be used to keep low and mid-range hum down to a

minimum. In test, we find the auto setting is more than capable and only when the volume is raised into the final quarter does it begin to lose control.

Each of the two channels has its own three-band EQ and volume control. The EQ performs very well and each band does exactly what you'd want from it. As a general rule, having started with the settings at 12 o'clock, we find that just rolling the mids off a little in the first instance achieves a lovely warm tone with the various sized acoustics we're using.

The chorus effect has three options – space, rich and wide – which all have interesting variations on the level and type of chorus applied. The chorus effects are a strength of the AC-90 with the spectrum ranging from a very rich, thick wash through to a light, subtle dusting. Roland makes no secret of the fact that the AC-90's onboard chorus effects have been derived from the Jazz Chorus.

Stereo reverb and delay are dialled in as necessary using the single control as per the Cube series of amps. Here though is one of our few complaints with this amp in that it's not possible to add both reverb and delay – you have to choose between the two. Additionally the reverb/delay function controls both channels, so the amp is somewhat limited here because you're not able to apply reverb to the vocals, while adding delay to the guitar. Rather, the chosen setting applies to both channels equally. However, the actual effects themselves are good and perform well.

This amp is a lot of fun. The controls are easy to use and dialling up a warm tone is quickly achievable. There's a lot of punch and clarity to the AC-90's output, and even when provoked, it

doesn't sound harsh or brash. Some slight signal clipping occurs when playing a dreadnought with the effects pushed hard, but otherwise the amp performs commendably. Bearing in mind its diminutive size, it handles bass and high volumes very well. We are also impressed with the AC-90's ability to amplify sound transparently. The issue of transparency when amplifying acoustic guitars is such a tricky one to master, but we feel that the Roland scores well here.

Verdict

Coming in at just under £600, the AC-90 is not cheap. But with the build quality, functionality and tone on offer, it's well worth the investment. If the AC-90 is out of your price range, it's worth checking out its semi-skimmed younger sibling, the AC-60: you'll find the same features but with 60 watts instead of 90.

The nuances of playing an acoustic guitar make the task of finding a capable and affordable amp a difficult one, but the AC-90 rises to the challenge. **G**

The bottom line

We like: The portability, tone and transparency; onboard chorus effects; wide variety and functionality of the various input and outputs

We dislike: The delay and reverb effects as they are not controllable independently and do not have separate controls for either channel

Guitarist says: A very tidy, lightweight package with a great tone offering good effects and portability.

Roland AC-90

PRICE: £589

ORIGIN: China

TYPE: Dual-channel stereo acoustic combo

OUTPUT: 90 watts (45 + 45) RMS

DIMENSIONS: 326 (h) x 464 (w) 303mm (d)

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 11.7/25.7

CABINET: Not specified

LOUDSPEAKERS: Two 10-inch woofer, two 3 x 2-inch tweeters

CHANNELS: Two

CONTROLS: Guitar channel – pickup switch (piezo/magnetic), shape switch, volume knob, equaliser knobs (bass, middle, treble), chorus switch. Mic channel – phantom switch, select switch (mic/line), volume knob, equaliser knobs (bass, middle, treble), chorus switch, chorus knob, reverb/delay knob. Anti-feedback frequency knob

FOOTSWITCH: None.

CONNECTORS: Guitar channel input jack, mic/line input jacks (XLR/jack) aux in (RCA/jack) DI/tuner out, line outs (XLR/jack), sub woofer out, phones, footswitch

ADDITIONAL FEATURES: Onboard FX include stereo multi-band chorus, delay and reverb (inc wide mode)

OPTIONS: BOSS FS-5L (£39), FS-5U (£39) and FS-6 (£46) footswitches, PCS-31 connection cable (£14)

RANGE OPTIONS: The smaller AC-60 costs £369

Roland UK 01792 702701

www.roland.co.uk

Test results

Build quality	★★★★★
Feature	★★★★☆
Sound	★★★★☆
Value for money	★★★★☆

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★