



## Modal Electronics Argon 8 £579

Modal always make interesting synths and the Argon 8 carries on that tradition. **Dan 'JD73' Goldman** tries their latest creation...

**CONTACT** WHO: Modal Electronics **WEB:** [modalelectronics.com](http://modalelectronics.com) **KEY FEATURES** 37-note Fatar keyboard with velocity and aftertouch, seven keyboard modes, solid metal enclosure/chassis, four-way assignable joystick, eight-voice polyphonic wavetable engine with eight osc modulation types and 32 modifiers, sequencer and arpeggiator, three independent stereo effects engines, 2-pole morphing multimode resonant filter **DIMENSIONS** 555 x 300 x 100mm



## THE PROS & CONS



Very solidly built and nicely compact – which makes it great for gigging

Fairly priced considering the features/sonic power available onboard

Sounds unique and can cover a lot of varied sonic ground



While it's compact, this means a lot of secondary parameters for each control

The effects can suck life out of the sounds if you're not careful

No 4-pole filter

Argon 8 has 120 wavetables onboard to use as oscillators. There are 24 banks and five morphing wavetsets and the wavetables span virtual analogue, waves from Modal's own 002, retro wavetables, formant and maths-generated tables, and more. There are four of these oscillators per-voice (two pairs of two) and eight voices (giving 32 oscillator in total: a decent amount of power). Then there are eight types of oscillator modulation including Phase Mod, Ring Mod, Amp Mod, Sync+Ring Mod, Hard Sync, Window Sync, Phase Inverter and Phase Shaper. Not only this, you also have 32 waveform modifiers, which allow you to fold and mangle the wavetables/oscillators even further (these include Mirror, Cubic, Half Rectified, three resample modes and more). Rest assured, there's vast processing power available here and lots of ways to harness that power too. Deep is one word to sum things up, and the resulting sonics are as wide-ranging as you'd expect!

## Build and design

This amount of power is always going to be a tough thing to mate with an intuitive interface, but Modal have done a decent job of it in the main, through using as much direct control as they can fit into the small amount of available space, in conjunction with using shift functionality (which is listed under each button and knob where applicable). There are some frustrations, like having to press the patch button before you can select a sound with the cursor/select knob and also selecting the top and bottom lines in the display can be a little tiresome and haphazard with a clickable knob, but after a small amount of time it does become second nature and you overlook these minor points. For those who want to go deeper, there is also a nicely-designed Modal app (in suitably matching industrial grey) that lets you access everything within the Argon 8 engine on your computer or tablet over USB.

Looking further into the overall aesthetics and design, the Argon certainly looks and feels great, with unique design language. There are lots of nicely curved surfaces and the whole machine is made from steel and aluminium, thus it's very weighty, built for the road and nicely portable. The knobs and switches all

**M**odal Electronics are a Bristol-based synth design company who already have a solid range of

well-respected synths, ranging from their smaller four-voice virtual analogue Skulpt, through the monophonic wavetable-based Craft, to their flagships – the 002 hybrid poly and 008 analogue poly. Having the lower-end and higher-end markets covered with these models,

there was an obvious gap in their product line which needed filling with something a little cheaper (but still with bags of power and with a high-quality build and sound in mind). Filling that gap is their latest synth, the digital, polyphonic Argon 8.

So what's the Argon 8 all about then? Well in a word: wavetables! To quickly summarise this form of synthesis: imagine a single cycle waveform that instead of being just a single saw or square, is instead a lookup table of several waveforms together, often sampled from many

different sources (so a single wavetable oscillator may contain several different waves in itself). These sampled waveforms are placed into the lookup wavetable and can then be modulated smoothly or abruptly in various ways using LFOs, envelopes or any other modifiers found onboard. Whilst you can achieve 'normal'-sounding static waveforms by keeping the wavetable position static, modulating the position and other aspects, or using modifiers across the tables, can result in amazing evolving textures.

## THE ALTERNATIVES



### Korg Wavestate

£699

The Wavestate takes Korg's wave-sequencing concept to new levels. 37-note compact form factor much like the Argon 8. Classic wave-sequencing, modelled filters, great effects and sound shaping!

[korg.com](http://korg.com)



### Studiologic

### Sledge 2.0

£799

Criminally overlooked, the eight-voice virtual analogue Sledge is now available in all-black. Onboard is a great Waldorf synth engine with plenty of power/versatility, lovely effects and user sample upload options too.

[studiologic-music.com](http://studiologic-music.com)



### ASM Hydrasynth Desktop

£799

The Hydrasynth is a truly innovative eight-voice synth with poly aftertouch, five LFOs, five envelopes and three wave-morphing oscillators per-voice. All killer.

[ashunsoundmachines.com](http://ashunsoundmachines.com)

feel very positive, though the pots have plastic and not metal shafts, which obviously has enabled Modal to keep costs in check. It also appears that the review model has a slightly different look to others I've seen and it has a darker front panel, lacks the bamboo-style (or similar!) ends and also has a smaller volume knob. I hear this was a production mistake; Modal are now shipping bigger volume knobs out to customers with smaller knobs (ahem). Perhaps Modal have changed the design slightly as production has progressed.

The 37-note (three-octave) Fatar TP9 keybed also feels great and has aftertouch (which is often missing on smaller keybeds) so it's really great to see it included here for adding hands-free modulation to sounds (along with the pedal control). I like that Modal have kept the Argon compact but it'd be great to have a four- or five-octave version with expanded controls, bi-timbrality and

fewer shift functions. One for the future, possibly?

## Space at the (wave)table?

Programming sounds is largely intuitive and fun and there's a small but clear OLED which updates you with what's going on at all times (though it misses a moving oscilloscope display as found on Korg's '-Logue' instruments which would have been great here, particularly with the evolving wavetables, as the shapes look ace!) To edit sounds, simply hit a button or turn a knob; the knob you are turning will enter the area of editing

corresponding to that knob (ie filter cutoff takes you to the filter part of the OS). You can also easily scroll through the main pages of the operating system and access all the deeper parameters using the knobs each side of the display (which are clickable continuous encoders), though some cursor buttons and arrows would have felt a bit more direct and sometimes you find yourself having to do a lot of knob turning, only for the parameters to change slowly. Well, until I found you can click and turn to scroll faster...

As mentioned before, due to the compact nature of the synth, there

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One of those synths that feels like you could explore it for many years

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## SEQUENCER AND ARPEGGIATOR

No modern synth should be without a decent sequencer and arpeggiator. The Argon 8 gives you both with a solid amount of control. Firstly, the real-time polyphonic sequencer can hold up to 512 notes over 16 steps and also has four animation (modulation) lanes into which you can record parameter tweaks to keep things engaging. You can also just record modulation/knob tweak data in to use the sequencer as a mod source for evolving sounds. Sequences can be independent or linked to a particular patch as needed (like the MatrixBrute). There's also a couple of cool features, including Sequence Loop (where you highlight a particular area within a sequence to loop), or Sequence Hold, basically an

instant beat repeat effect. Sequence steps are handily shown by the lights across the panel. Finally, the 32-step arpeggiator is fully programmable and transposable with plenty of direction modes, time divisions and swing. Both the arp and sequencer sync to MIDI and the arp can accept external MIDI input too. See also the Modal app (Windows/Mac/iOS/Android/VST/AU) for editing sequence info if you prefer.



are some compromises in terms of interface – for example a shared set of envelope controls between filter, amp and mod EG – but this works fine in practice.

Also I did find the envelope times generally a little short and would like a longer available attack in particular. Importantly though, all the main sections you want tactile control over are easily accessible and these sections include effects, envelopes, filter, mod routes and of course I need to highlight the Argon's joystick too, which is a very high-quality metal four-axis affair used for controlling modulation (setup in the mod matrix and via the buttons under the joystick) or for simply doing smooth and expressive pitchbending. A joystick is a great choice for a synth like this that excels at evolving soundscapes.



**Argon-ought you buy it?**

Talking of sonics, this little beast sounds ace! It can sound surprisingly smooth (and quite mellow), or, in contrast, nicely textured (especially when employing the onboard distortion and many filter types). Or it can sound complex, gnarly, upfront, distant, wide or narrow and more besides. It's definitely one of those synths that feels like you could explore it for many years but still be discovering new nooks and crannies and that's a mark of a great synth in my book!

There's a plethora of options to stimulate or destroy the high res wavetable oscillators and you can really obsess about details in the sound (if so inclined) and take a meticulous approach to programming. Alternatively you can just use it like a standard synth for bread-and-butter pads, basses polysounds and leads. It's definitely versatile but does have a learning curve due to the complexity and shared controls. However, there are a good number of shortcuts that can really help too (detailed in the included documentation). One other small criticism is that the effects onboard (reverb, phaser, flanger, rotary, delay reverb and more) can zap a little of the power of the synth away at times. When you turn the dry wet mix, sounds appear to lose a bit of punch/upfrontness, so you have to go carefully with the wet/dry balance control to make sure things stay on point (the reverb could be a little



**KEYBED:** 37-note, three-octave Fatar TP9 keyed with velocity and aftertouch. Feels great and keeps the synth compact yet playable

**SCREEN:** Use the clear OLED screen and clickable encoders to view/edit parameters and see graphic displays of the waves being mangled

**I/O:** Analogue clock sync, MIDI DIN in/out, stereo audio outs, phones, sustain/expression inputs, 3.5mm stereo input (with effects routing)

**FILTER/OSCS:** Onboard are 120 wavetables with up to 32 oscillators with eight voices. Filter is a 2-pole multimode with morphing

denser too). Having said this, the effects themselves still sound very decent (and are modulatable too) and when used sparingly, they complement the synth's core tone well. Also, I'm happy to report, there were no crashes.

Finally, the mod matrix is nicely comprehensive too and it's very easy to assign a source to a destination. There are eight assignable modulation slots, four additional fixed modulation routings for common assignments, 11 modulation sources and 52

modulation destinations – enough to keep you busy for a good while then! I'd also better not forget the two LFOs, nor the deep, programmable arpeggiator and polyphonic sequencer. You can hopefully see that whilst this machine may be small, its capabilities are very impressive. If you do get to try an Argon 8 out before you buy (advisable with any new synth purchase) then be sure to take your time over it, as there is a lot to explore and it certainly put a smile on my face! **FM**

**FM VERDICT**

**9.0**

**A very versatile sound engine, which covers lots of territory – from warm analogue to cold industrial. Another great British synth!**