

Roland FA-08 Synthesizer | £1,299

Roland's latest workstation places an emphasis on performance and fast workflow. **Dan 'JD73' Goldman** puts the FA series through its paces

INCLUDES AUDIO

WHAT IS IT?

New streamlined workstation featuring sounds from Roland's Integra 7 Module, along with sequencing and sampling

CONTACT

Who: Roland UK
Tel: +44 (0)1792 702701
Web: www.roland.co.uk

HIGHLIGHTS

- 1 Keenly priced and nicely portable
- 2 Deep workstation features with intuitive interface
- 3 Sounds from the Integra 7 onboard, plus plenty of expandability

PRICING

Roland FA-08
£1,299
Roland FA-06
£829

Every week keyboard nerds discuss the supposed upcoming demise of the workstation concept but you

only have to look at how many workstations are currently in production to ascertain that the genre is still healthy. The FA name first appeared in 2002 with the Fantom FA-76 workstation and now it's back but with all traces of the Fantom word erased. We hear that legal issues over ownership required its removal. Yes, even mis-spelled with an 'F'...

Som meet the new FA series, a set of boards that comprise the 06 and 08 models, which share the exact same functionality but with 61-note synth action and 88-note weighted keybed options respectively.

The FA-08 (which I'm focusing on for this review) is still nicely portable for an 88-note weighted board and the whole package weighs in at just 36lbs which is manageable for one person, though this is without a flightcase. It boots from cold in just eight seconds

and the overall look is clean and utilitarian (if a little '90s looking) with a mixture of tough textured plastic for the body and shiny black perspex for the control surfaces. The buttons/cursors have a solid feel, whilst the onboard dials (used for parameter tweaking) feel good but slightly less rugged and exhibit a little wobble. Ergonomically, the front panel is simple and flows well but, with no touchscreen, there's a heavy reliance on the jog wheel and cursors for most editing tasks. However, the Shift button is a godsend on the FA as it shortcuts you to key editing parameters without having to scroll through loads of pages. Thankfully, the wheel and cursors are within easy reach of the keyboard, so you can have both hands on deck and turn the jog wheel by reaching out with one finger, though it would have been nice to have the 'sound modify' dials within closer reach too.

Screen test

The colour screen lies at the heart of the FA-08 and it certainly has the wow

factor initially, though, as it has to convey a lot of information in certain modes (especially when editing sequences), it sometimes feels a little cramped and some of the smaller fonts can be hard to read. It's still way better than the screen on the Jupiter-50 and the Yamaha MOXF but the Korg Krome's larger full-colour touchscreen is still the best in class.

As noted earlier, the FA-08 has an 88-note weighted keybed. The keys are a comfy size and are nicely textured, though it takes a bit of time to get used to this particular 'Ivory G' action, as it demands a good bit of initial pressure to get the keys moving. In addition, the key return is sluggish and spongy which impacts when trying to play fast riffs/parts on organ, clav or synth leads, so you'll likely need to adapt your technique a little, though changing the velocity curve to 'light' helps.

My advice is, if you mainly play synth type parts, then grab the 06 instead, though some pianists love heavier actions and the 08 might be ideal. Unfortunately, there's no aftertouch on either FA model except via control pedal, (which kind of defeats the object!) and I think the £457 price difference between the 06 and 08 is a little steep, though of course the street price will be less.

Programming sounds on the FA is pretty intuitive and, though the interface/edit screens are simpler than on the new Jupiter's and Integra, it doesn't feel like too much has been lost. In many ways, the FA-08's more direct interface trumps its more expensive siblings and, especially, the new 'sound modifying' dials and 6x4 parameter matrix (which can access up to 24 different parameters on the fly)



D-Beam

Use the D-Beam to control expression, filtering and solo synth sounds by waving your hands in the air over the D-Beam. It may look bizarre but it's handy nonetheless!

Colour Screen

The colour screen is central to all operations. It looks great and is easy to read in the main. Use the Shift button to move quickly between main edit pages.

Keyboard

A weighted keybed is essential for getting the best out of piano and electric piano sounds. This one does an okay job but it feels a little spongy and has no aftertouch.

**USB**

Record instruments into your DAW here. It's a MIDI controller too with templates for all major DAWs.

Connections

Connect line/instrument sources here. Record them into the sampler or process them.

speed things up considerably. Importantly, all the dials operate smoothly with good resolution (unlike the stepped controls on the MOXF) so smooth parameter changes are possible. Within the four rows of dials, three of the rows are hardwired to factory set parameters (filter controls, envelopes, FX, EQ etc) and one row can be assigned to user chosen parameters (including DAW control). Under the screen there are ten dual-category instrument select buttons and you can set up favourites (10 banks x 9) for quick recall during live shows or when recording. Further to this, splits and dual layer sounds are only a button press away.

Seriously deep

The basic sound structure is the same as the Integra 7, so you'll find Tones (which are like Voices on Yamahas and

Sequencer, Patterns and Arp

The 16-track sequencer is fully featured, flexible and fairly easy to learn, though the screen does get pretty busy at times. It's also set up so that you can start recording whenever inspiration strikes which is great. MPC style loop recording, DAW style sequencing and step recording are all available.

Deep editing facilities include auto-quantise, shuffle and controller/program change editing and each part/track can also be exported as MIDI data or WAV audio too, which is a real bonus (only at 16-bit quality though). The onboard arpeggiator is also decent, with 128 styles, ten

modes, many variations per style and shuffle/accents. Plus the Pattern sequencer is great for making loops and beats and has real-time intro, verse, chorus and fill functions. Note that the metronome can also be sent to the Sub output as a click track, which is great for live work.

to 16 Tones can be layered within a Studio Set for huge stacked sounds. Each Tone can have its own multi-effect and arpeggiator, plus each Studio Set of Tones has access to separate compression, chorus, reverb and EQ (per part), all controllable from the

is exempt from voice stealing. Still, there's plenty of power here to make massive orchestral, acoustic or synth layers – the FA is a seriously deep synth.

To further extend the FA's sound palette, you can also download sounds for free from Roland's Axial website.

There are two virtual SRX slots available onboard into which you can load newly downloaded SRX sounds and all the sounds reside on an SD card (up to

32GB in size, 4GB card included as standard) so sounds can be swapped in and out easily and dragged and dropped from your computer via USB. Whilst we are talking about computers, the DAW Control button enables you to quickly map the front panel dials, transport controls and sample pads to your DAW of choice using the built-in DAW templates (all major DAWs are included). There's currently no editor available but the FA is very easy to edit as a self-contained unit, though it would be nice to be able to edit the sequencer from your computer in particular.

Sonically, the FA sounds very similar to the Integra 7, which is no surprise as the FA is essentially an Integra 7 but with fewer sounds onboard (around 2,000 on the FA vs 6,000 on the I7), fewer virtual expansion slots, no 'motional surround' and fewer outputs. The Supernatural acoustic pianos and electric pianos are classy (and it's great that you can tweak string/key off resonance, hammer noise and more) plus the electric basses, strings,

SPECS

Keyboard
88 keys (Ivory Feel-G
Keyboard with Escapement)

Sound generator
Maximum Polyphony:
128 notes
Tones: Over 2,000 Tones
Tone types: SN-A, SN-S,
PCM, SN DRUMS,
PCM DRUMS
Over 500 User Tones for
edits/imports
60 preset Studio Sets
16 parts per Studio Set
Approx 500 User Studio Sets
Each SN-S Tone has up to
3 oscillators
Each PCM Tone has up to
4 Partials
Wave Expansion Slots x2
(virtual)

Sequencer
16 tracks including one pad
track for samples
Original SMF export/import
supported
WAV export
Loop recording, step
recording, real-time
recording

Sampler
16 multi function pads (no
velocity)

Format 16-bit 44.1kHz with
WAV/AIFF/MP3 import
Maximum polyphony: 8
notes

Number of samples: 16
pads x 4 banks (per song)

Effects
Multi-effects: 16 systems,
68 types (Vocoder can be
used only on part 1)
Part EQ: 16 systems
Drum Part COMP+EQ: 6
systems
Chorus: 3 types
Reverb: 6 types

Master Compressor (This
can be changed to Insert FX
[78 types])

Master EQ total effects
(TFX): 29 types
Mic Input Reverb: 8 types

Connections
SD Card (SDHC supported)

Headphone jack: Stereo
1/4-inch

Output jacks (L/MONO, R):
1/4-inch TRS phone type

Sub output jack: Stereo
1/4-inch

Line input: Stereo Minijack
Guitar/Mic input: 1/4-inch
jack

Foot Pedal Jacks (CTRL 1,
CTRL 2, HOLD)

MIDI Connectors (IN, OUT)
USB for update

USB computer

Dimensions

1415 x 340 x 142mm

Weight

16.5kg

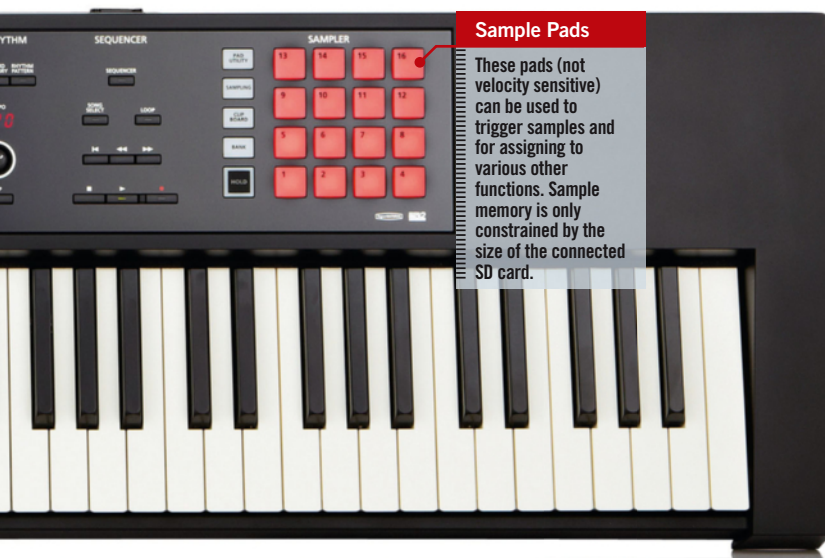
The FA sounds very similar to the Integra 7 – it is essentially an Integra 7 but with fewer sounds onboard

Programs on Korgs) and Studio Sets (which are like Mixing Mode/Performance Mode/Multis on Yamahas and Combis on Korgs). A Tone can be based on Supernatural Synth, Supernatural Drum, Supernatural Acoustic or PCM waves (partials) and up

sound modifying dials. As with the Integra 7, the only slight downside is that polyphony is limited to 128 notes, so if you go crazy layering several multi-partial Tones expect a little voice stealing, though you can use 'voice reserve' to ensure that your main sound

Sample Pads

These pads (not velocity sensitive) can be used to trigger samples and for assigning to various other functions. Sample memory is only constrained by the size of the connected SD card.



ALTERNATIVES



Korg Krome 88

£1.249

Like the FA, Korg's Krome features a sequencer, effects and SD card storage, though there's no sampler. It features sounds from the flagship Kronos and the best screen in its class.

www.korg.com



Yamaha MOXF8

£1.299

The MOXF8 houses sounds from Yamaha's flagship Motif XF. A huge number of great sounds and effects onboard, plus a powerful sequencer, arpeggiator and sample flash card option.

www.uk.yamaha.com



Kurzweil PC3K8

£1,929

This superb Kurzweil workstation features VAST and VA sounds. It's pricier than its rivals but the sequencer is more powerful, it has aftertouch, plus there are 16 arpeggiators and 500 effects!

www.kurzweil.com

woodwinds and acoustic guitars are up there with the I7 and Jupiter-50/80 (ie excellent)! The Supernatural synth engine is very powerful and punchy and, though it lacks all the modelled filter types from the new Jupiter's, with just a

XV-5080 and TR-808/909). The only small letdown is that the tonewheel organ model still lacks a dedicated chorus/vibrato unit and, although the drawbars appear on screen, it's criminal that they don't map to the sound

its power and portability and that it features Roland's flagship Integra 7 sounds. The fact that it doubles as a USB Audio/MIDI interface with sequencer and sampler is a huge bonus, plus it's priced very reasonably too. I'm

also glad that Roland are using an SD card for sound storage as you'll never run out of space for sounds/samples (just buy a new card) and the

sound expansions via the website ensure it will stay sonically relevant far into the future.

The biggest letdown is that you can't use sounds that you've sampled as partials/oscillators in your Tones (the MOXF can do this) but this aside, the FA series covers most bases admirably. Above all, it's deep enough to keep even hardcore programmers occupied, yet it remains intuitive and sounds great. **FM**

The fact it doubles as a USB Audio/MIDI interface with sequencer and sampler is a huge bonus

little programming you can dial in most classic/contemporary sounds with little effort, including searing analogue leads, 'supersaw' trance patches, huge basses, warm and inviting polysynth comp sounds, sound FX and more. Let's not forget that there's a whole Supernatural/PCM drum section too and the synth PCM wave section contains a 'best of' selection from Roland's classic boxes/boards of yesteryear (such as the D-50,

modifying dials, which would really bring the organ sounds to life. I hope this can be rectified in an update, as it's not much fun scrolling through and tweaking drawbars with buttons and the jog wheel!

A real contender

Regardless, my money is on the FA-06 becoming the most popular FA model, especially when you consider

Effects and Sampler

Effects-wise there's a multi-effects unit with 68 types per part, EQ per part and each Studio Set has a reverb, chorus, EQ and compressor unit. There are also eight reverbs available on the audio inputs (plus a vocoder) and 29 Total FX that can be applied over

The effects are very high quality indeed and little has been left out. The SP-404SX based sampler has 16 pads x 4 banks (without velocity). It can resample internally plus pad audio can be sequenced, eight pads

can play simultaneously and pads can be assigned to numeric entry, track mute and more, which is handy! As the maximum sample size is only restricted by the SD card's size, the sampler is perfect for triggering bv's, percussion and backing tracks for gigs.

FutureMusic **VERDICT**

BUILD



VALUE



EASE OF USE



VERSATILITY



RESULTS



The FA is a versatile workstation that's a serious and keener-priced alternative to the Krome and MOXF.



Sound Modifying Dials

This 6x4 matrix gives hands-on control of key parameters making live tweaking easy. Controls for effects, EQ, compression and filters/envelopes are all here plus user assignable parameters too.