Hypersynth Xenophone Monophonic Synth £795

Bruce Aisher gets tweaking to see if the Xenophone can compete for your hard-earned cash

CONTACT **WHO:** Hypersynth **WEB:** www.Hypersynth.com **KEY FEATURES** Classic + Variable Shape Waveforms, 2 Subs + 3 X-Rings, True Analogue Ring modulator:, Versatile Noise Generator, VCF with Screaming Resonance, Fast and Variable Contour Envelopes, Analogue Distortion and Digital FX, Arp and Sequencer. Weight: 1.3kg, Dimensions: 32.8 x 16.7 x 5cm

THE PROS & CONS

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Flexible architecture, with powerful oscillator and filter sections plus good modulation options for a wide range of tones

Comes with software editor that can run standalone or as a plug-in

100% analogue signal path

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USB connectivity is fiddly to set up

Front panel layout is not always clear

Internal audio mixer is easily overloaded

A lthough best known for their synth editing software, for a while Hypersynth made a hardware SID-chip synth system. Ultimately, they pursued the software emulation route with their SIDizer VST plug-in, but they're now back in the hardware game with the Xenophone, a monophonic, multi-oscillator desktop synth. There are some nods to the SID, but this is an altogether more advanced beast.

The synth comes in the form of a somewhat plain looking, rectangular box laden with LEDs, interspersed with knobs, and hosting a basic LCD screen. Angled wooden end-cheeks do improve the aesthetics somewhat, and help provide a better view of the controls and screen.

The unit is powered by an external 12V DC PSU. On the back panel you will also find a USB port, MIDI In/Out, stereo line-level outputs, mono audio input and headphone socket plus volume control. CV/Gate interfacing is supported by a multi-use TRS jack socket. This is used for input or output of analogue control signals, but not both at the same time. You must select in software which way the interfacing goes (plus the right cable). Although it appears similar to a conventional unbalanced insert cable, the manual does not make this clear. In fact, overall I feel that the various manuals and notes could have been consolidated as there is a certain lack of coherence. This was also evident when attempting to configure the USB port, which is far from plug-and-play. To be frank, the set-up of various drivers and multiple pieces of software to get it working is a real pain, and perhaps reveals the 'boutique' origins of the synth more than it should given the price point.

The most important thing here though is the sound engine, and the Xenophone does not disappoint. There are three independent oscillators available. The first two are broadly similar and equally flexible. Each offers conventional saw, square and triangle waves alongside versions that morph between wave shapes via the Shape control (also available as a modulation destination) plus square wave sub oscillators with ring mod capacities. Oscillator 3 is much simpler and offers a square wave or three different noise types – including the famous C64 pitched noise. There is also a whole host of phase, sync, glide and detune options available here including the import 'Analog Drift'.

The internal mixer combines the output of all the various audio sources (including external audio) before further processing, though it is easy to overload things here. The clipping isn't that favourable in sonic terms, so caution is required.

Next we have the filter section, which again is very flexible – there are six (self-oscillating) filter types with three different slopes – one of the standout features of the synth in my book. Three six-stage envelopes are directed to Amp, Filter and general modulation duties. It's good to see a choice of curve types here, as this can make quite a difference when emulating older synths or creating drum sounds.

LFOs 1 and 2 have different rate and wave selections, but by default route to the same six modulation destinations. LFO 3 has a different set of targets. However, the 8-slot mod matrix allows for more complex routings across a wide range of sources and destinations.

OSCILLATORS There's lots of choice in the oscillator section, with up to six simultaneous wave elements feeding into the mixer section. Sub oscillators and ring mod sources and combined waveshapes increase the flexibility.

VCF Rather than take the approach of providing one signature filter type, the Xenophone features low-pass, high-pass, band-pass, notch and serial low/high configurations in a range of slopes.

FX Xenophone includes a simple digital effects section for adding reverb and delay. This runs in parallel to the analogue signal path, so that only the effected signal enters the digital domain.

MOD MATRIX Eight slots for configuring more complex modulation, such as using the output of one slot to modulate the depth of another, that in turn modulates one of nearly 50 synth parameters. Easy to use and flexible.

Onboard arpeggiation and sequencing is a nice addition, though a simple LCD screen makes complicated sequence programming tedious (see below for a solution).

My initial feelings about the Xenophone were mixed. The uninspiring aesthetics are of little consequence in the grand scheme of things, and the presets, although not bad, didn't particularly inspire. It is only when you start building a sound from scratch that you start to get a measure of the synth. The oscillators are fat and flexible, and filtering is varied and strong. Modulation capabilities are also excellent. The front panel layout could be rationalised and the division between functional sections could be clearer. A wider case would help here, allowing the Amp and Filter envelopes to have their own controls. When the four soft knobs below the screen are used, it is confusing as to which parameter they point to, and when dedicated knobs or buttons are required. Some rationalisation here could also help, though the use of encoders (rather than pots) is a good choice in this context.

The built-in digital effects are okay, but lack much in the way of editing or interesting and unusual manipulation capabilities, plus take up valuable panel space. The distortion effect would perhaps have been best served with a single knob.

In many ways the Xenophone is trying to be too many things. Despite this, sonically, at its core, it is strong and the voice architecture is very flexible. Analogue drum hits, basses, brassy swells, leads and FX are all easily within its grasp – and if this was a four-voice then I would be well and truly sold. However, as a mono, with paraphonic potential, it is still certainly one to try. **FM**

XEditor

Hypersynth have also developed a (free) editor for the Xenosynth. Currently only available for Windows (a Mac version is on the way) the editor runs in both standalone and plug-in modes. Running it as a plug-in has some obvious advantages, such as being able to sync the synth to the host project tempo.

Overall the editor is comprehensive and makes editing the mod matrix and sequencer more friendly. In fact, I would say that it is almost essential if you wish to make full use of the sequencer and preserve your sanity. The main downside is the current lack of support for receiving individual parameter updates from the synth, though this is promised in a future update.

FM VERDICT

8.0

The Xenophone is not cheap but it is powerful. Definitely a 'try before you buy', but you might be pleasantly surprised.