



FutureMusic



# Modal Cobalt 8 £579

Another Modal release has arrived in the form of the virtual analogue Cobalt 8. Dan 'JD73' Goldman digs in!

**CONTACT** WHO: Modal Electronics **WEB:** [modalelectronics.com](http://modalelectronics.com) **KEY FEATURES** Fatar 37-note full-size keyboard. Channel aftertouch. MPE support. Modal app. Extended VA engine with 34 algorithms per oscillator group, morphable 4-pole filter, 3 FX units, assignable Joystick, eight mod slots, step/real-time sequencer, multi-mode arpeggiator. **DIMENSIONS:** 555 x 300 x 100 mm **WEIGHT:** 5.60 kg





**THE PROS & CONS**



Sounds on the money. Can be polychained with other Cobalts for up to 16 voices. Plenty of voice modes

**Very solid build quality throughout. Largely intuitive**

Audio input for running external audio into the effects



**The effects, while complementary, don't really have any magic to them**

Sometimes it feels like there are a few too many button presses to access some functionality

**Filter knob is a fair distance away from the keyboard!**

I very much enjoyed reviewing the first of Modal's new synth products – the Wavetable-focused Argon 8 – especially in these crazy times, it's great to see another UK synth company go from strength to strength and launch another range; this time the very blue Cobalt series!

Modal's latest synth features a 37-key compact model (known simply as the Cobalt 8), a 5-octave 'X' version for the players out there, and a module/desktop version, the Cobalt M. In my review of the Argon 8, I said

how nice it'd be to have a 4- or 5-octave version. Lo and behold, not long after, the X and M versions arrived – so it's great to see the whole range of sizes and form-factors available at launch here too. For this review, Modal sent us the standard 37-key version, but there is nothing standard about this 37-key keyboard. It's a premium Fatar keyed with full-size keys and aftertouch (not normally found on smaller keyboards) and it's very satisfying to play.

To save on extra design cost (I assume) and to unify the product



ranges, Modal have sensibly chosen to use the exact same high quality (and nicely weighty) metal cases and interface/layout for each product in the Cobalt series, but beyond the interfaces, the Argon and Cobalt are nicely different machines. I'll note again here that the switchgear and knobs all feel high quality, the OLED screen displays all info to do with your sounds clearly and generally, the interface is easy enough to use. In terms of expression, though, there are no separate mod and pitch wheels; we have the same lovely joystick as found on the Argon-8, which helps once again to keep the form-factor compact. I'm a big fan of joysticks, though one disadvantage is you can't leave mod on (as with a mod wheel), while moving pitch independently – potentially frustrating.

In sound engine terms, the Cobalt is an eight-voice synth based on what modal call 'extended virtual analogue' synthesis. While the Cobalt can make killer 'bread and butter' sounds (fat basses, searing leads, warm pads etc), it can go into altogether more unusual territories when selecting from the 34 algorithms (found in osc groups 1 and 2; each containing 34 algorithms per-oscillator group). You'll

find types such as metal square, ring mod tri, fractal saw and VA (bit) crushed, just to give you an idea of the more off-kilter shapes available. The real beauty here is when you then go to use the A1/B1 and A2/B2 knobs, which each govern unique functions for the selected algorithm. So, for example, parameters like weight, sub, width and spread appear via these controls to twist and expand on the basic waves. Of course, these can be modulated too and once you direct an LFO or other mod source in their direction, the algorithms start to animate and morph, giving all sorts of moving and almost wave sequenced-like textures. You can really get in among the cracks to extract altogether other-worldly, sci-tronic vibes! The flexibility of these oscillators/algorithms/engines is very forward-thinking in implementation with a good range of direct controls available. Finally, (like the Argon 8) you can freely mix between the two available osc algorithms using the mix control (modulatable via the joystick or mod routes) and there's a very useful drift control which adds more analogue vibe to the stable VA oscs.

Morphing is again central not only to the algorithms onboard but also the

THE ALTERNATIVES



**Korg Minilogue XD** £535

The XD continues building on the success of the original Minilogue, adding a digital multi-engine (which can import third party oscs and effects), plus a powerful Prologue-level effects/filter and joystick.

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



**Modal Argon 8** £459

The Cobalt's cousin has an entirely different morphing wavetable engine onboard. Features the same effects and interface and an analogue-style morphable filter.

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



**Roland JD-Xi** £415

It may have mini-keys but the Xi packs in two fully-featured supernatural synth engines, a real monophonic analogue synth and a powerful drum machine/sequencer with effects.

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



**SCREEN:** Gives you a clear window into the Cobalt's engine. The Page encoder makes scrolling through each main engine area a breeze.

**KEYS:** The Fatar 37-note keyboard (and knobs in general) feels great for playing chords and lead lines. Also features aftertouch and MPE support.

**ENVELOPE SECTION:** Looks simple but in addition to the three ADSR modes (mod, filter, amp) there are response modes for various styles.

**I/O:** A good range: headphones, full-size jack outs, expression pedal input, sync in/out, audio in (mini-jack), MIDI in/out (DIN) and USB.

filter section. Each of the four main VA filter types actually has different filter types/responses contained within, accessed via the morph control (found in the centrally-placed filter section). For example, if you take the fat-sounding resonant low-pass filter and turn or modulate the filter morph parameter, the filter

will smoothly evolve from 4-pole to band-pass to 1-pole. Or, if you choose the balanced high pass, you morph from 4-pole high pass, through notch to 1-pole high pass. These versatile arrangements are what really underpin the flexibility of the Cobalt 8. Modulation-wise, things are also comprehensive. You have three

audio-rate capable LFOs, three envs (mod, filter, amp, accessed by a single set of ADSR controls) and eight mod-matrix slots with 12 modulation sources and 55 modulation destinations (plus four fixed common sources). All nicely quick to set up.

Sonically, I thoroughly enjoyed the Cobalt 8, perhaps even more so than the Argon 8; its vibe is especially suited to moody, dark textures – perfect for sci-fi scores, deep drum and bass, dark electronica and pensive, evolving textures. The onboard effects are modulatable and versatile, the overall tone is solid. A lovable and unique machine! **FM**

**SEQUENCER, ARP, EFFECTS**

Like its cousin the Argon, the Cobalt 8 features the same real-time polyphonic sequencer which holds up to 512 notes over 16 steps (four bars) and also four animation (modulation) lanes into which you record parameter tweaks. You can record modulation/knob tweak data into the sequencer and sequences can be independent or linked to patches. Again, you'll find Sequence Loop (where you can highlight a particular area in a sequence to loop), or Sequence Hold (basically an instant 'beat repeat' effect). The 32-step monophonic arp is also fully programmable/transposable with several modes, time divisions and swing too. Finally, there are three effect slots onboard with 11 modulatable effect types available including reverb, delays, lofi, et al.

**FM VERDICT**

**9.0**

Another brilliantly unique-sounding Modal machine! Very flexible for its price and a powerful editor plus MPE give it futuristic appeal