



Roland Fantom 8 £3,519

Roland's flagship workstation range is back after an 11-year hiatus. **Dan JD73 Goldman** explores what's new, inside and out

CONTACT WHO: Roland **WEB:** roland.com **KEY FEATURES** 88-note wooden/hybrid keyed with aftertouch. ZEN-Core engine. 256 voice polyphony. PCM, VA, V-Piano engine. 7" colour touchscreen. Mod/Bender, 2x wheels, assignable switches. Extensive connectivity (MIDI, CV, USB). Arpeggiator, chord memory, Motional Pad. 16-track clip based sequencer with TR-Rec, sampling, rhythm track. **DIMENSIONS:** 1432 x 439 x 153mm **WEIGHT:** 27.7kg



THE PROS & CONS



Well-built; clear, snappy touchscreen

Powerful step LFOs, multimode analogue filter/drive, great sequencing, sampling and effects

Streams multiple audio channels over USB, CV/gate outs



Expensive

No dedicated tonewheel organ/EP engines

Not enough 'bread and butter' scenes. No full 'linear' audio track recording or user multisampling (currently). Piano-roll editing is quite basic (currently)

No rack version; bulky at 27kg



The last Roland workstation I reviewed was the Fantom 'light', aka the FA series, back in 2014. Based largely on the well-respected SuperNatural tech found in the Integra-7 module, the FA packed a lot of power into a lighter enclosure but with plenty of functionality and 'bread and butter' sounds to get most jobs done to a high standard. Many have been longing for a new flagship Fantom and the old models still have

their fans; they command a decent price second hand.

For workstation fans, the new Fantom is returning strongly in terms of specs: a brand new, more direct interface, new sound engines and lots of connectivity/integration to bring things up-to-date. The new Fantom 'platform' uses Roland's latest Zen-Core tech (basically a powerful new unified engine that contains PCM, V-Piano modelling and VA waves, in this instance), with processing headroom for future engine upgrades and additions too

(there's no longer any mention of SuperNatural as the Zen-Core moniker centralises everything).

Talking of streamlining, the way the Fantom operates now revolves around 'Scenes'. A Scene is much like the old Live Set (256 are available, more would be nice!) and is basically a container or snapshot of everything on the front panel. One Scene can be made up of up to 16 Zones (each Zone contains controller and MIDI info, plus key ranges for controlling the native engines and external MIDI gear). Each Zone then contains a Tone (a Tone can contain up to four partials/oscillators). Each partial (oscillator) within a Tone can contain a completely different sound engine, including the modelled V-Piano engine, PCM (samples), VA modelling (up to nine wave types including Juno, SuperSaw, PCM-Sync or Noise). So there's a *lot* on offer.

PCM banks A and B contain 963 and 257 samples respectively, giving a total of 1,220 raw partial waves to build on across the four partials available within a Tone. To bring things further up-to-date, you'll also find new Tones from the AX-Edge keytar, alongside classics from the Integra-7 and XV-5080, though there

are none of the lovely Supernatural Acoustic Tones onboard (yet).

The Fantom 8 has a high-quality, great-feeling wooden PHA-50 keyed (like the RD-2000) but with aftertouch. All the new Fantoms feel and look the part and are built solidly throughout, with a metal front panel and under-key lip, plastic for the rear, sides and controllers panel and what appears to be a particle board base. Switches feel positive, knobs and dials are smooth and high resolution, panel lighting is great for navigating and viewing stored values of knobs and the new large colour touchscreen is the snappiest I've used in a workstation. In fact, Roland have made the most intuitive workstation UI/UX design I've laid hands on to date; you can get at everything directly from the front panel yet even when you dig deep, the Fantom never gets overwhelming (as the Yamaha Montage/Kronos can at times), plus all the lettering onscreen is of a size that can actually be read comfortably!

Regarding hands-on control, there's the standard issue Roland mod/bender, several assignable switches, two wheels (like the JD-XA) plus eight faders with LED level and LED ring dials for each of the 16

THE ALTERNATIVES



Korg Kronos 88

around £2,700

Korg's flagship workstation is still holding its own! Nine engines including FM, EP, Piano, Tonewheel organ, Korg classic synth models and more.

korg.com



Yamaha Montage 8

around £2,799

Yamaha's current flagship has their tried and tested AWM2 sample-based engine, coupled to Yamaha's latest FM engine, FMX. It sounds great, has tight DAW integration with Cubase and user sampling/import, though no deep sequencer onboard.

yamahasynth.com



Nord Stage 3 88

around £2,899

Though it doesn't include a sequencer, Nord's simple, direct and performance-driven interface is the favourite of many musicians. User sample import, upgradable library, powerful synth and drawbar organ, plus great effects, complete the package.

nordkeyboards.com



SCREEN AND INTERFACE: The 7" full colour touchscreen is nicely responsive and editing is a breeze with all the hands-on controls

CONSTRUCTION: Sturdy construction all-round, with minimal use of plastic except for the controllers panel and red surround/end cheeks

PRODUCTION HUB: If you want to move away from the computer for writing, the Fantom is a great bet, with its extensive connectivity

FANTOM PLATFORM: The new Zen-Core engine unifies the best of Roland's sounds and appears to be a pretty open platform

Zones (8 x 2 banks), plus one fader for USB audio streaming level from your DAW. There are six high-resolution clickable knobs for editing under the screen (linked to six key performance parameters). Then you also get direct oscillator, filter, envelope and effect controls right on the front panel which take you directly to the main areas of a sound you'd most likely want to edit on the fly. Roland have done a great job keeping things simple but effective, especially considering the power under the hood.

In addition, there are 16 TR8-style step buttons for step-sequencing, which also take you

directly to 16 instrument categories (to speed up editing and performing) and a rhythm track which allows you to chain drum patterns/sync them to the sequencer and then easily switch between each section/pattern onscreen. Finally, you have 16 pads (four banks) and these can be used for triggering notes, samples, audio, MIDI (internal/external), sequences and more besides.

The new Fantom has a wide, warm, precise sound (with a tilt to the brighter/high-mid character) but with a punchy low end. With all the engines, deep-step LFOs and comprehensive modulation facilities, control matrix, Structures, VA filters

and dual-IFX per-Zone (plus chorus and reverb), it feels engaging. The stereo multimode analogue filter/drive (a workstation first) adds welcome character and the V-synth-style Motional Pad (on screen) morphs seamlessly between four sounds.

Downsides? Well, the Fantom would benefit from a dedicated V-Electric Piano engine with the same detailed control and full polyphony/note tuning as the excellent V-Piano engine, plus it also misses a dedicated VK-tonewheel organ engine (and those Zone faders are crying to be auto-mapped drawbars)! Full ACB engines (like the System 8/Cloud) would also be a welcome inclusion, along with linear audio tracks/user multisampling ...and currently Scene saving wasn't saving all my tweaks. However, these are early days for the new Fantom platform; Roland have laid the solid groundwork, which I'm sure will be expanded and improved soon. A solid return indeed! **FM**

SEQUENCER, SAMPLING AND CONNECTIVITY

The Fantom's sequencer is clip-based (Ableton inspired!) with 16 tracks. Clips can be MIDI or samples/ audio and sampling external audio or resampling is a doddle. You can import WAVs or MP3s to the pads or clips easily and chain your clips into groups or songs. There's a good selection of editable drum kits or patterns onboard and you have TR8-style step recording or real-time input too, with recorded info displayed via a piano-roll editor. Connectivity is great: balanced outputs, four sub outs, a 24-bit/48kHz, six input/32 output, USB audio interface onboard, CV/analogue filter outs, DAW control/integration onscreen and from the panel, four inputs for pedals and footswitches, two mic/line inputs and USB for flash-drive storage.

FM VERDICT

8.8

A versatile powerhouse with bags of connectivity. We're looking forward to seeing how the Fantom 'platform' expands in the future