

# Waldorf Blofeld Keys | £699

Hot on the heels of Waldorf's successful Blofeld module comes its equally evil keyboard brother. **Dan 'JD73' Goldman** wrestles with the latest musical villain in town



## WHAT IS IT?

Keyboard version of the already well-loved Blofeld.

## CONTACT

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## HIGHLIGHTS

- 1 Great feeling keyboard with aftertouch and new performance controls
- 2 60MB of onboard sample memory for uploading your own sounds
- 3 Almost infinite sound shaping possibilities

A year has barely passed since I had the pleasure of reviewing Waldorf's Blofeld module, (FM197) their first new product since the company was resurrected in 2004. So, it's great to see Waldorf going from strength to strength with a string of new products lined up for release, including the Stromberg hardware synth, Zarenbourg Electric Piano and the brand new, just-announced Largo Software Synth that uses the Blofeld engine at its heart.

The Blofeld Keyboard is a very welcome addition to the range. As much as I love modules for taking up

little space, there's something special about having a synth with a keyboard. It's great not to have MIDI cables hanging around for a start and I just prefer having everything integrated into one box for ease of transportation and quick setup.

## Lookin' good

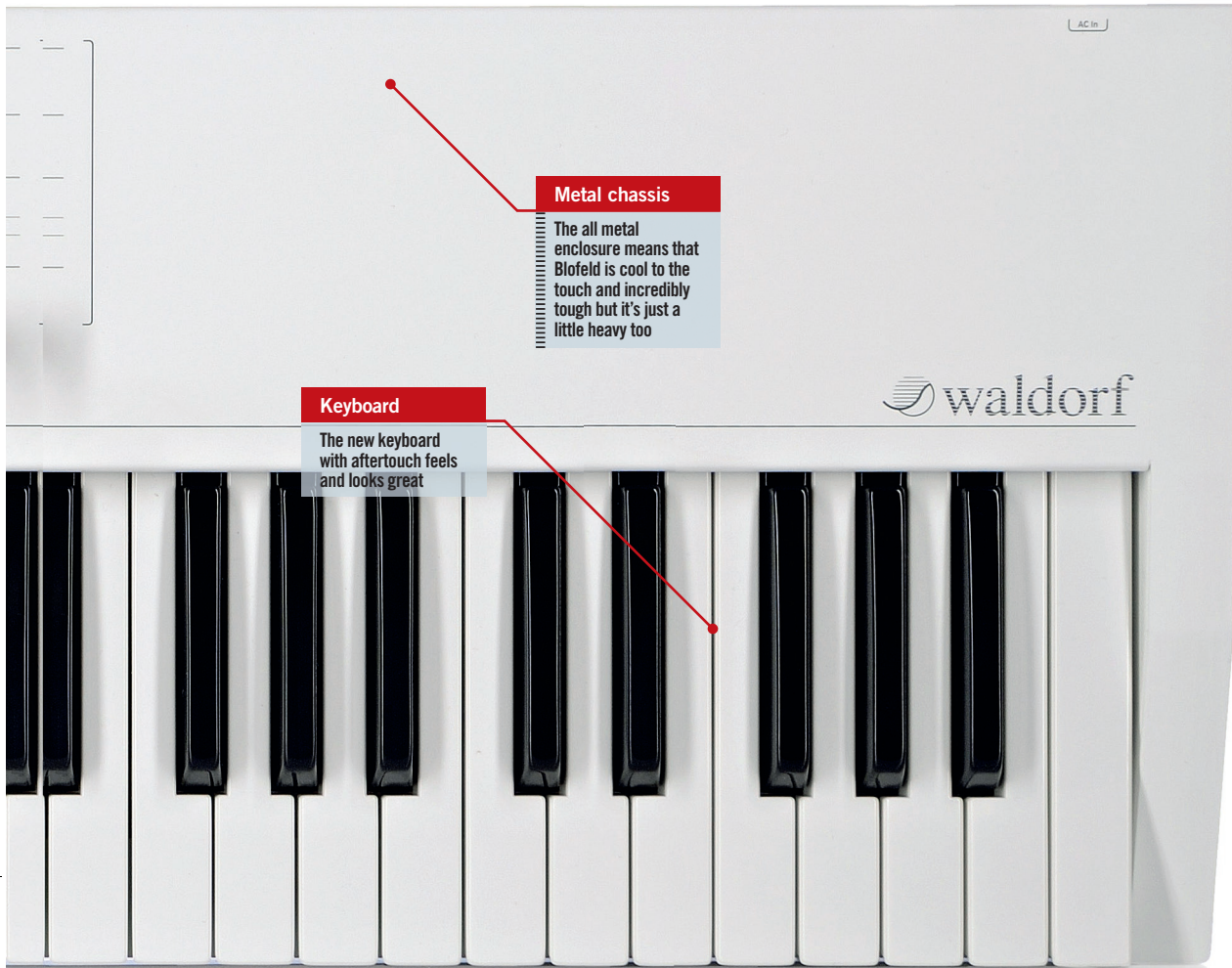
Looks-wise, the Blofeld Keyboard is stunning, looking like a perfectly stretched out Blofeld module. It's the same colour, is built out of the same tough metal, has the same high-quality-throughout design ethos and feels every bit as solid as its module brother. In fact, the display, dials and

layout are pretty much identical, except for the new additional performance controls.

These new controls include pitch and mod wheels that feel great, with nicely raised ridges that are great for accurate modding and bending (much easier to control than the indented type found on most boards). There's also a protruding lip on the edge of the keyboard case that is great for holding onto while you are using the new wheels.

Also included are octave up and down switches (which I wished were included on the Blofeld module originally) and a button labeled 'free'



**Metal chassis**

The all metal enclosure means that Blofeld is cool to the touch and incredibly tough but it's just a little heavy too

**Keyboard**

The new keyboard with aftertouch feels and looks great

which according to the manual was added 'just for fun!'. In reality, it's a potentially useful extra control that can be assigned to many functions (currently including output mute, sustain, sustain toggle, and a variety of other controller/MIDI assignments).

The keyboard itself is a 49-note four-octave affair (with aftertouch), which is a good compromise for a small and transportable synth, while the new octave controls extend its range further. Too many synths I review don't have aftertouch and I reckon it should be standard fare by now, so it's great to see it included here at this price point. It's a godsend for controlling pretty much any parameter you can think of, without even having to take your hands off the keyboard! Talking of hands free, there's also a sustain pedal socket too.

**Key to success**

I'm happy to report the keybed/board feels great. It's semi-weighted and I'd describe it as precise, quiet, fast to play and cushioned, yet positive feeling on the down-stroke, with a

**The Blofeld's Multi Mode and FX**

For the sequence heads out there, the Blofeld KB has a comprehensive 16-part multi-timbral mode, now with 128 user slots. Within multi-mode there is a 16-track mixer

with volume and pan and menus for MIDI channel status, transpose and detuning, and velocity and key ranges for incoming data. The Blofeld can function as a controller

too as the dials and wheels can send/receive MIDI data.

The effects engine provides great sounding bread and butter effects including – chorus, flange, phase, overdrive, triple FX, delay, and reverb. These can be set up to sound subtle or larger than life but always add to the sound, creating atmosphere while keeping the integrity of the dry sound intact.



not-too-springy bounce back on the up-stroke! It's definitely not one of those horribly plasticky and cheap feeling keyboards that all too often feel like you are hitting bare metal on the down-stroke of the keys and give your repetitive strain injury. So, full marks for this keyboard!

Now onto the weight. The Blofeld KB is reassuringly heavy and weighs

in at 8kg (17lbs approx), mainly due to the solid metal enclosure and thankfully an onboard power supply (no wall-wart – other manufacturers please take note). It's light enough to throw in the back of your car for gigs but well-built enough to reassure its going to last a while, though maybe the paint might start chipping off through heavy gigging. Only time will

**HARDWARE SPEC****General Controls**

Seven endless metal dials, volume dial, pitch and mod wheels, assignable button and octave up/down switch

**Keyboard**

49-note semi-weighted with aftertouch

**Display**

Graphic Display 128 x 64 pixels with white background LED

**Sound generation**

More than 1,000 user writeable sound locations, 16-part multi-timbral, three oscillators per voice with saw, sine, triangle, variable pulse and FM between oscillators, all Q oscillator models, all microwave II/XT/XTk wavetables, 60MB flash sample memory with 40 slots, two drive stages per voice with selectable drive curves. Three fast LFOs per voice, four fast envelopes per voice, powerful freely-programmable arpeggiator with detailed graphical interface

**Filter**

Two independent multi-mode filters per voice, filter FM, 11 filter types including comb, notch low-pass, high-pass, band-pass, PPG Wave and more

**Connections**

Stereo Output, Headphone Output, MIDI In, USB Connector for MIDI In/Out, Sustain pedal connector

**Compatible platforms**

**PC:** Windows ME minimum, Windows XP or newer recommended

**Mac:** OS X 10.2 minimum, Mac OS X 10.3 or newer recommended

**Modulation/Modifiers**

Modulation Matrix with 16 Slots, freely programmable

Four Modifiers for transforming Modulation Sources with various Algorithms

Three fast LFOs syncable to MIDI Clock, Note Retrigger with adjustable Start Phase and fade in

**Effects**

Ring Modulator for Osc 1 / 2, Noise Generator with Noise Colour, Chorus, Flanger, Phaser, Overdrive, Triple FX (S&H, Ring Modulation, Chorus), Delay (only available on global Effect slot), Clocked Delay (only available on global Effect slot), Reverb (only available on global Effect)

**Dimensions**

**736 x 282 x 105mm**

**Weight**

**8 kg**



tell. What else is new then, in terms of hardware? Well, there's now a MIDI Out thankfully (which is woefully missing from the Blofeld module), so at last, you can control other MIDI gear easily.

### Heart of the Blofeld

The only real hardware-related gripe I have is that the headphone socket is mounted slap bang in the centre of

the back panel which means you often find the wire trailing over the front-panel and keyboard. I wish all keyboard manufacturers would take note and make front-panel headphone sockets standard. Even the first DX7 got that one right. Also an audio input would have been nice.

In terms of the basic operating system, the Blofeld KB shares all of its features, with its module

counterpart (for further info see my Blofeld review *FM197*).

In its most basic form, the Blofeld uses a digital 25-voice sound creation engine to provide a wealth of oscillator types and a staggering array of sound-shaping possibilities, (which can be overwhelming at first for even the most seasoned of programmers). However, the parameter matrix system of editing works well and with a little practice, you soon find yourself flying around. The endless rotary metal dials feel great in use and the display gives lots of detailed and easily readable visual feedback, with zoomed pop-ups for more detailed functions.

The overall sonic character could best be described as warm and analogue-like meets industrial, but as it covers so many staples and bases of sound design, it's hard to pin down. I can reassure you it's very high quality throughout and has super deep and punchy lows, piercing highs, versatile filters and is great for bass, leads, pads, sound FX, atmospheres and much more.

### Synth heaven

Pretty much every parameter a synth programmer could want is somewhere under the hood including osc sync, unison modes with variable polyphony, four envelopes per voice (with seven different trigger modes), three oscillators per voice, a noise generator (with variable colour) several LFO's, a very powerful filter including LP, Notch, BP, Comb and PPG LP modes, several modifiers that affect and twist up modulation sources and 15 or so pages of modulators where you can route anything to anything.

If this isn't enough, there are two drive stages per voice, for really mashing up and distorting or just to give a subtle edge to sounds. The

## The Good and Great

Here's the top three things we loved about the Waldorf Blofeld Keys



> Having the Blofeld sound engine in keyboard form means setting up at gigs or in the studio couldn't be easier. No more MIDI leads to deal with and no more wall-wart power supplies now that the power supply is built in.

> If you're stuck for inspiration, the arpeggiator is great for sparking off ideas for tunes, with its comprehensive modes, detailed graphical display and patterns. You'll be shouting 'Check out my new track!' within seconds.



> User sample upload means you can truly personalise your sounds. Upload your favourite drum sounds, vocal grabs, effects or samples from your studio kit to take to your live gigs. You could even put some loops in there and trigger them from an external sequencer or the onboard arpeggiator.





distortion can sound nasty or creamy as desired.

Those that love Waldorf's Microwave and Q models will love the fact that it incorporates their wavetables into its vast palette, along with good solid sounding virtual analogue waves which include the usual sawtooth, sine, triangle and

provide 41 of their own to kick things off. Some of these are very useable, some not so much but the acoustic guitar, marimbas and strings are worthy of note.

Regardless, you can load your own samples into those slots over USB anyway (see the *Using Samples with the Blofeld* box for more info).

## Conclusion

So what to make of the new Blofeld Keyboard? Well, I like it even more than the module version. There's a great and vast array of sounds already on board, and the perfect-sized keyboard feels great to play.

While using a matrix system is always slightly less intuitive than the

ideal one-knob-per-function, the Blofeld is still great fun to use. Nine times out of 10 it rewards tweaking with sonic gold.

Experimenting is

just as impressive as dialling through the sounds on board.

There is truly little to fault about this keyboard and I would love to buy one myself (if my credit hadn't been crunched). As far as Waldorf go, they have excelled themselves once again – improving what was already a great product and making it greater still. The added sample memory and keyboard really place this with the big boys. It seems that once in a while, the Villain is deservedly victorious! **FM**

“Pretty much every parameter a synth programmer could ever want is somewhere under the hood”

variable pulse, along with separate PWM and FM sources for each oscillator. The upper wavetables from the legendary PPG wave are included too. It still amazes me just how much Waldorf have managed to cram into the Blofeld engine.

One of the key features of the Blofeld Keyboard is the inclusion of 60MB of on-board sample memory (it's an option for the original Blofeld now too). There are 41 slots for sampled waves on board and Waldorf

Finally, it seems that manufacturers such as Waldorf (and Clavia with their Wave) are grasping the fact that users want to integrate and mix their own samples with onboard modulators, processing and FX. This is a very welcome extension to the already versatile Blofeld sound palette and makes it very close to an ideal all-in-one performance keyboard, though maybe just a few more hands-on controls would have been a nice performance bonus.

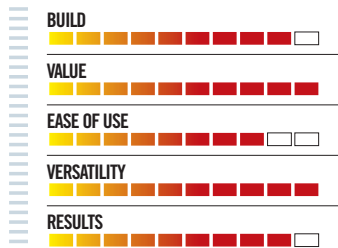
## Using Samples with the Blofeld

A USB software utility is included (for both Mac and PC) for editing and archiving your Blofeld sounds. And special mention to a superb multi-language manual here too, that really lays out what the 'feld is capable of and exactly how to go about it. The

utility's main event however is for uploading your digitised sound content to the Blofeld KB's 60MB of built-in flash memory. Samples can be either in WAV or AIFF format and at any sample rate, with resolutions from 8-bit to 32-bit float accepted.

Stereo or mono samples can be loaded into the Blofeld quickly and easily although presently any stereo samples are automatically converted to mono. Sample patches can consist of up to 128 single samples that can be either looped or single triggered (one-shot mode).

## FutureMusic VERDICT



With the new keyboard and on-board memory, the Blofeld is a thoroughly complete instrument

## ALTERNATIVES



### Waldorf Blofeld Module

£299

If you don't need the keyboard and have less to spend, this is the next best thing. Very portable and easy on the wallet too!

[waldorfmusic.de](http://waldorfmusic.de)



### Clavia Nord Wave

£1,369

Probably the closest competitor to the Blofeld KB. Organic sounding and similarly spec'd with wavetables, simple FX, EQ and amp simulator and user sample upload/virtual analogue synthesis.

[clavia.se](http://clavia.se)



### Access Virus TI

£1,620

Beast of a synth featuring VA, wavetable and hypersaw oscillators, Minimoog-type filter, 129 effects and appears as a plug-in in your DAW.

[access-music.de](http://access-music.de)