MAIN

**FutureMusic**

**Platinum** Award

# Spectrasonics Keyscape
## £285

From Stylus to Omnisphere, Spectrasonics' plug-in instruments are widely respected. **Dan 'JD73' Goldman** tries their latest

**CONTACT** **WHO:** Spectrasonics **WEB:** www.spectrasonics.net **KEY FEATURES** 64-bit virtual instrument plug-in. 36 unique classic/hybrid instruments, meticulously sampled/mapped with 32-level velocity-switching/round-robin behaviour. Over 450 patches with unique controls/behaviour for each instrument including bespoke FX and amps. Currently DAW-hosted with upcoming standalone version (TBC). Omnisphere 2 integration adds further functionality

## THE PROS & CONS

**+**

The realism and playability are the best I've experienced in a plug-in/virtual instrument collection

**The attention to detail/general quality is extremely high**

Various hybrid combinations and great FX/amp models

**–**

**Currently some classics are missing (including Clavinet D6, Rhodes Dyno, Sparkletop, MK2 and MKV, Hammond B3 and a standard upright piano model)**

The duo-instrument combinations are largely preset. An ADSR and transient designer function would be great

**No hardware version**

## PROCESSING

Each instrument has unique effect/tone combinations under the Effects/Tone tabs. Pull up the LA or Classic Rhodes and you'll get bespoke bass/mid/treble controls with boost, de-noising, and tone shift. Then you'll find authentic models of eight classic amps plus FX including studio and spring reverbs, echo, several choruses/phasers, vibrato, Univibe and a tape effect, all with the same super-realistic vibe and high-quality tone as the instrument samples. Similarly, the C7 piano has reverb, compression and tape emulation, while the clavs include several classic wahs and amp models.



C onsidering the current love of all things vintage and analogue, it's genuinely surprising that as yet there's no definitive 'industry standard' go-to sample library for super high-quality acoustic, electro-mechanical, vintage digital and hybrid keyboards. For the more discerning players and listeners out there, perhaps it's fair to say that nobody has truly nailed the likes of Rhodes, Clavinet, Wurli and acoustic

pianos to the extent where you could put them next to the real things in a blind test and the listeners/players be hard-pushed to know which is real or not. There will always tend to be giveaways which could include obvious velocity switching, sloppy release tails, a plastic-ness to the sound or the sounds not reacting to the extreme subtleties of touch when played. As a Rhodes technician myself, while there are undoubtedly great libraries and sample-based hardware instruments out there, up to now, I've not found anything that has

that 'wow-factor' and detailed super-realism that would give me a convincing enough alternative to my real Rhodes or clav when touring or playing sessions. Spectrasonics' products have always had that wow-factor for many, concentrating not only on super-realistic samples/ models but also providing intuitive interfaces that encourage creativity and exploration. Let's see if Keyscape can match the high standards set by their other products…

Coming in at a reasonable £285 (inc VAT) as a boxed set (on credit card style USB keys or as a download for the same price), Keyscape is a multi-format plug-in that will run in any 64-bit DAW host. The installation file is sizeable at 77GB (the uncompressed size is nearer 200GB) with Spectrasonics employing their own lossless compression to reduce overall file size. There's also a 'Lite' 30GB download option on install if you are short on space, plus a 'thinning' option to take the strain off older computers. On my late 2012

2.3GHz quad-core i7 Mac Mini, (running El Capitan with 16GB RAM), a single instance of Keyscape ran in Logic X very reliably. However, once you get lots of tracks happening (drums, bass, vox etc) on your arrange page, you'll definitely want to bounce audio from Keyscape to disk to save on CPU drain (also have as much RAM and as fast a computer/drive as possible). Notably, Keyscape uses Spectrasonics' proprietary STEAM Engine (also used for Omnisphere and Trillian) which allows Spectrasonics great technical flexibility when building their sample sets (and super-fast/smooth streaming of samples), while also allowing further flexibility for upgrading and adding new features/instruments to Keyscape going forwards. This will hopefully ensure that it remains reliable and fully compatible with any new operating system that arrives (and thus, it's a solid investment).

So what makes Keyscape stand out amongst the competition? Well firstly, the clue is in the tagline

### Neo-Soul Keys 5X EP $199.99

This has some nicely authentic models of the Rhodes Stage and Suitcase, plus the Wurli EP. Great tone and realistic FX.
**www.gospel musicians.com**

### Modartt Pianoteq 5 £188

A very tweakable modelling acoustic piano engine, to which you can add instrument packs including acoustic and electric pianos, Clavinets, vibes, marimbas, steel pans and celeste. Closest to Keyscape.
**www.pianoteq.com**

### NI Scarbee Vintage Keys (For Kontakt) £129

This collection of four sampled vintage keyboard instruments includes a Rhodes, Wurli, Clavinet and Pianet with mechanical/electrical noise and authentic FX.
**www.native-instruments.com**

'Collector Keyboards'. Spectrasonics have gone to great lengths over ten years to find the finest examples of each of the main instrument categories. They've worked with some of the best technicians in the world (including Ken Rich/Ken Rich Sounds, Chris Carroll/Vintage Vibe and LA piano tech Jim Wilson) to ensure all the instruments are in tip-top condition and sounding/playing their absolute best.

Secondly, there are up to 32 velocity layers per-key/per-instrument, so the finest nuances of touch are possible with what I can attest to be seamless transitions between samples. You can also select and tweak the velocity curve to suit your playing style and several different controller templates are included. Even when played from a basic synth-action keyboard, Keyscape reacted just as I wanted across a wide range of velocities – a testament to the smoothness of the streaming and the STEAM engine. Finally, a

'round-robin' system means that each key press results in a different sample being used for even more authenticity; these subtle features make a huge difference to the all-round playability and general authenticity and give Keyscape a serious edge over similar products (software and hardware).

As space is limited here, I will concentrate on acoustic piano, Rhodes, Wurlitzer and Clavinet, as these will likely be the most-used samples. There are three basic

Rhodes models available: Classic (Stage), Classic (Suitcase/Speaker) and LA Custom, with over 30 variation presets between the models (eg LA Custom Chorus, Classic Late '70s, Classic Suitcase Spacey).

As an avid Rhodes player, my first test was to pull up the LA Custom – an instrument of the ilk that made its way onto many classic records back in the day and that was sought after by prominent artists. My first reaction was 'wow this is crazily good!' In fact, it's the first time I've had my Rhodes

## As a Rhodes/EP emulator this is certainly the best I've ever heard or played, without question
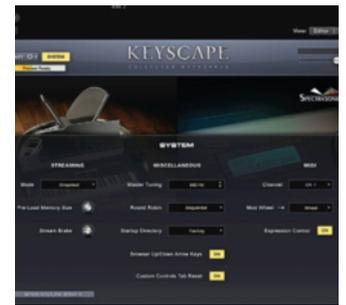
### KEYSCAPE IN USE

So who will use Keyscape? Well, for anyone looking for the most authentic EP samples around it's an essential purchase. Without wanting to knock other libraries, this one just screams authentic tone and playability. The detailed sounds seriously inspire and draw you in like a real instrument. In the studio it's very versatile/intuitive and for anyone who doesn't own a real EP (or collection of real electro-mechanical or digital vintage EPs!) this is the next best thing. In a track or solo it is pretty hard to distinguish Keyscape from the real thing, plus to buy all these amazingly maintained instruments would a) cost the earth/be impossible and b) require a huge amount of floor space/upkeep. Stylistically, the preset sounds and combinations are versatile and will suit anything from Hip-Hop, Jazz/Funk/Soul, House and Ambient styles, through to dramatic/quirky film scores and Classical/Baroque/orchestral music. On stage and for touring Keyscape is also a great lightweight/more reliable alternative to the real deals (especially considering the upcoming standalone version, TBC); add a powerful computer host and a decent weighted controller and you're sorted!

Suitcase 73 from 1972 plugged in next to a sample set and been genuinely blown away at how well the samples stood up. Spectrasonics have really nailed the important character, tone and vibe; sure it's never going to be the same as the real thing, (and I wouldn't expect that – similarly a sample set of a piano can never be exactly the same as the real deal), but as a Rhodes/EP emulator this is certainly the best I've ever heard or played, without question. The tone controls work authentically and when switching models, a further custom set of controls appears, specific to that particular instrument. You'll find release noise, mechanical noise, pedal noise, amp controls, FX and an authentic auto-pan feature just like the real thing; the all-round attention to detail is really something! The Classic Stage and Suitcase samples are similarly great/authentic with a darker (but just as realistic) tone and feel. In addition, there's also a very authentic Rhodes 'Piano Bass' sample and as a bonus, the new Vintage Vibe Electric Piano (basically a super-tweaked-out lightweight Fender Rhodes/tine piano) is also included and it sounds great!

Next, I moved onto the LA Custom C7 Grand sample which has 21 variations (bright/classical/studio/pop etc). It's extremely playable, very authentic and musical (even in an intimate/upfront/solo setting) and the various custom controls allow customisation/personalisation of the sound. Again, there's pedal noise, release noise and tweakable velocity response. Connecting a pedal can also be done easily via your MIDI controller; in fact it's very simple to assign any controller to control any onscreen parameter too – simply right click and move the control. You can also store your custom patches once tweaked to your liking – it's all very intuitive. For my taste, I found that the default release setting needed a little tweak towards the longer side in order to sound more natural (and on the Rhodes' too) but using the T (Transition) button, you get more control over release length; otherwise you can stick with the default super-tight setting for key-off. I observed some characterful overtones in the upper octaves on this sample at higher velocities, though I'm presuming these are peculiarities attributed to this specific sampled piano and that they're meant to be









Clavinet-Pianet DUO

SPECTRASONICS

MAIN | WAH | AMP | SETTINGS | INFO

WAH-WAH / ENVELOPE FILTER

TAPE

OFF
CRY BABY
JUICY 1
JUICY 2
JUICY 3
JUICY 4
PHASER
THROAT

Pedal | Sensitivity | Shape | Sweep Depth | Sweep Rate | Gain | Compression

**BROWSER** Here you select from the ten instrument categories including acoustic pianos, belltone keyboards, Clavinet, electric pianos, hybrid pianos, keybass, mini pianos, plucked keyboards, vintage digital keys and wind keyboards.

**SETTINGS TAB** Here you can set the voice count in order to reduce CPU tax, hit the 'thinning' button (again to reduce CPU load), choose a velocity curve for your brand of controller (and edit it), choose from one of 65 custom scales/tunings, and more.

**SYSTEM PAGE** Select if samples are continuously streamed or loaded into your computer's RAM, the percentage of samples pre-loaded into memory, plus tweak the 'round-robin' behaviour, master tuning and MIDI channel/wheel settings.

there. Regardless, it's a beautiful piano sample and I'd have no hesitation using it instead of the real deal on stage or in the studio.

The classic Wurlitzer EP models available (140B and 200A) sound superb and again, these are the most playable and natural-sounding Wurlis that I've heard in a sample set. You'll find variations including Retro Phaser, Amp Wide Tremolo, Amp Distortion and more. I'd have no hesitation using any of these samples in critical roles on stage or in the studio and that's a testament to how meticulously these samples have been crafted across the board and how well the instruments were set up before sampling.

Last but not least, there are several classic Hohner models onboard including three Pianets (M, N and T) plus the legendary Clavinet C and the later E7/Pianet Duo model. These all include authentic pickup setting options and options for

making the tuning looser, plus damping/muting and release noise. In addition, the clavs are joined by Vintage Vibes' own take on the clav (the Vibanet) which sounds great and is unique to Keyscape. Let's not forget there's also a huge bag of other great and more obscure keyboards including celestes, Dulcitone, mini/toy pianos, clavichords, electric harpsichords, a wind organ, plus hybrid 'Duo' models (including Rhodes with tack piano, modified upright with acoustic grand and the famous Yamaha CP70 electric grand). These all sound fantastic and are indispensable additions. Plus, there are several excellent vintage digital EP samples, including Roland's MKS-20, MK-80 and JD-800.

To sum up, if you want super-authentic Piano, Rhodes, Wurli, Clavinet and other unique keyboard/collector instruments with authentic performance controls, bespoke/authentic modelled FX and first-class

playability/musicality, Keyscape is a must-purchase and the best there is right now. If you can't own the real things, then Keyscape is the next best thing and you'll not be disappointed. And one last thing – I sincerely hope Spectrasonics make this as a standalone instrument in its own bespoke hardware; that would be one serious machine! Top drawer! **FM**

**FM** VERDICT

# 9.4

A unique and brilliant-sounding product, it sets a new standard in terms of realism and playability. The closest yet to the real deals.