Roland X Series Review (X6/X7/X8)

Contributed by WebMaster
Sunday, 11 November 2007
Last Updated Wednesday, 21 November 2007

Roland X6 Hands On Review (Sample Review From Tweakheadz)

You can Visit the Authors Website here: http://www.tweakheadz.com/

{mosgoogle center}

Keyboard Workstations have been around a while. While definitions will vary, I define a true workstation as a keyboard that is designed to do a full piece of instrumental music. So that will include 1) a large set of preset sounds covering many different types of music, 2) a sequencer, and 3) a sampler. The original Fantom (The FA-76) did not have sampling. The "S" in the Fantom S stood for sampling version.

View the Fantom X-88 (larger pic)

 There are only a few bona fide workstations on the mass market and they are often referred to as the "big 4". Yep, Korg M3 (and the Tritons), Motif , Fantom and the Kurzweil. All four have their own ancestry that dates back to the days when MIDI sampling was king. The Motif dates back through the EX7, EX5; the M3 goes back to the Trinity and to the prototype Oasys). The Kurzweil K2600, perhaps the longest lived line travels back to the late 80s with the K2000. The Fantom goes back to the XP80, which did not have sampling. So Roland is a relative newcomer to the workstation scene.

The Fantom S (larger Pic)

The Fantom X and S versions are similar. The newer X version has a full color display while the S version is monochrome. The color display is definitely nicer to look at, but the Fantom S's 320x240 pixels, four-shade LCD is not bad at all. The 88 key versions are huge and heavy. My Fantom S-88 is giving me good exercise at 68 lbs. On both the S and X there's 4 real time controller knobs that do triple duty, a D Beam controller, and a joystick controller that does both pitch and mod wheel duties.

The cool thing is the onboard drum pads, 16 total, along with hold and roll buttons for getting a DJ thing going. I find the pads to be a little stiff. You have to hit them with some force, but they do seem durable. Not quite as good-feeling as pads on my MPD16 (which are larger), but these will do. You can assign the pads to a different midi channel so it is possible to record both drums and keys at the same time.

The pads give the Fantom song creation possibilities like the MPC series of samplers has. You can assign your own samples to the pads or assign drum kits or other instruments.   The Sampler The Fantom's "Skip Back Sampling" is an incredible tool. Its perfect for recording a phrase or resampling whatever is going on in your Fantom and assigning to the pads. It's newness is the Fantom's strength and perhaps its weakness. It's what it does not have that is important--SCSI! The Fantom has a new USB sample transfer scheme which is revolutionary and simplifying the chore of getting sounds into the box of ivories. This makes the sampling process incredibly easy. Gone are the hard drives and dedicated CD rom devices. Instead, the Fantom S uses Smart Media cards up to 128 megs as storage and as the medium of transferring samples to the computer. You connect by USB and open the card's directory on your PC or Mac. There you can drop in samples or copy them to your computer's hard drive. The newer Fantom X allows you to use PC cards and Compact Flash cards for even greater storage. But all is not perfect. One thing the older SCSI workstations and even Roland's own XV5080 sound module did is they imported Akai and other formats of sample CD roms. The Fantom can't

do this, and while it can import any sample you want in .WAV or .AIF format, it cannot load the presets that tie the samples together as multisample instruments. Yep, you have to program the instruments from scratch if you want to do that. What you can do easily is assign samples to the 16 dynamic pads or to the keyboard. This means that this is probably not the sampler you want if you are building sampled pianos. It's more for the rip and ready type sampling of phrases, hits, beats and stabs that are popular these days. The feature called "skip back sampling" is well designed for this. Just get a few interesting sounds going either by playing by hand or in the sequencer or connected to the audio inputs and press the cool-looking illuminated blue button. Your sample is recorded and a screen asks you whether you want to assign it to a pad or the keyboard. Its playable instantly. And it sounds really true. It's this feature that makes the Fantom unique.

 The Synth and its SoundsHere is where the Fantom truly shines, in the synthesis department. The Fantom S comes with a 64 meg rom. The Fantom S 61 has 640 factory patches in 5 banks plus a 256 patch GM2 bank and a 256 User Bank. You can have another 256 patch bank on the Card too. So we are way over 1000 patch locations without any SRX cards loaded. The Fantom X has a 128 MB Rom, and 3 additional banks of 128 presets.   Remember loading and saving banks by sysex? While you can still do this if you want, the USB transfer also works with files that contain synth banks. While the Fantom can only access one specially named bank from the card, you can swap that as often as you like or keep several banks on there an rename the one you want to use. The synthesis engine allows for 4 stereo voices per patch. Each voice has a left and right side and yes you can mix and match the left side of a cello with the right side of a viola for example. Nice. The patch structure follows the same basic flow as all Roland sample-playback synths, very straightforward. The filters are quite good sounding and velocity and controller settings are just where I like them. The Fantom comes with a patch editor and librarian software, but with the excellent graphics on the keyboard's screen, you might prefer doing it there.Fantom synths typically have 3 modes. Patch, Performance and Sequencer (multitimbral). Unlike the Triton and the Motif XS, which have a robust "Combi" "Performance" mode respectively that can do several gigs worth of stage ready sounds, the Fantom is relatively weak here with only 64 Performances/128 slots. Its strange that this is the case as the Fantom has a much better endowed to do these real time performances thanks to the flexible pads.   You can of course make your own performance presets. They will sound awesome and will be easy to use. Sound wise, the Fantom is strong. Using the Mastering effects you can tailor the output to your liking with EQ and multiband Compression. The onboard samples are excellent, and the best part about it is you can add more easily with SRX boards.

The SRX cards

The cards give you even more program capacity. Each expansion board is 64 megs and each has a different number of waveforms, patches, performances and kits. For example, the Supreme Dance Card adds 312 presets and 34 drum kits while others, like Symphonique Strings, only add 128 patches but have longer higher quality waveforms. By the time I max the Fantom out we'll be around 2000 or so which is a huge palette of sounds. And, they are well-organized, thanks to the thoughtfully laid out librarian functions. It's so good that I may end up turning off program changes on my computer sequencer and selecting patches from the Fantom itself. Many of the SRX cards are a compilation of the presents and samples off the previous JV-80 cards. For example, SRX-09 "World Collection" includes waves from SR-JV80-05/14/17/18. The Complete Orchestra has all waveforms from SR-JV80-02/13/16 and select waves from SR-JV80-07. Others like Symphoniqe strings and Big Brass are newer.

So which SRX cards to get? Hey, its going to depend. My choices: The Complete Orchestra is great. Especially if you are wanting a modern pop orchestra sound. Has tons of hits as well as solos and ensembles.   Symphonique Strings is wonderful--but only if you are writing string sections. You get a string ensemble in many different articulations--its all ensemble strings!

The World Collection is pretty amazing. More presets than the others. Supreme Dance rounds out my 4 slots. Has some interesting brass hits and stuff you can drop on a track, some cool kits and nasty analog synth emulations, all hyped up as one would expect. If you are into the SRX thing, note that the Fantom XR (rack) has 6 slots compared to 4 on the Fantom X.The SequencerThe Fantom also has its own sequencer, which while it's not going to rival Cubase or Logic it will get the job done. Roland designed a tasteful GUI that combines a rudimentary arrange screen, piano roll editor, event list editor and 16 channel mixer which hooks directly into the effects editors and patch library. Its very nice how these play together. Recording is easy. Find a patch, press sequencer, then the big red record button. Cursor down to the next track, set to channel 2, press the reset button, then record again. There's a good metronome and it will quantize as notes are being input if you want. You can also do loop (cycle) recording with adjustable punch in/out points and can filter out aftertouch data. Things get a little harder as the song gets more complex simply because you can only see 16 measures on the arrangement screen, which will scroll with the song position line.   The PadsThe thing that distinguishes the Fantoms from the Motif and Triton/M3 is the interface and the pads. The pads have many functions. They are amazingly flexible and well implemented. You can put single samples on them, whole drum patterns on them, individual drum hits, or my favorite, you can put full 16 channel sequences on each pad. Or you can mix it all up, have a bunch of sampled phrases, some drum hits, some sequences, some drum patterns. Then when you are ready play the whole song on the pads as your record the whole shot in Song mode. The pads work well both in Song and Pattern modes. Both modes are 16 way multi timbral. You can overdub patterns with drums, basslines, strings, whatever you want. You can place patterns in Songs. Whatever you place on the pads is available in both modes You can use the dynamic pads much like a drum machine. It comes with preset patterns and you can roll your own. You can drop in patterns into the

sequencer tracks or place a set of patterns on the pads or record them and change patterns in real time. You can also record in real time of course, then edit in the piano roll editor to get it perfected. Those with drum machine skills will like this; and those with sequencer mapping skills will also like the approach here. The Fantom works well in all the sequencers I've tried. Getting all those patchnames in the sequencer is always a trick, but thanks to the dedicated Fantom site at www.fantomized.info you can find patch scripts for Sonar, Logic and Cubase and Nuendo.

 Wrapping it upThe choice of a workstation is a tough choice. I went with the Fantom mainly because I wanted a huge arsenal of Roland sounds to replace my faithful JV1010 I have used for years. The Roland has a distinct sound that is warm and pleasing compared to the slightly cleaner sound of the Motif and the lush, fuller sound of the Tritons. In terms of compositions, where one might have 20-30 instruments going the Roland does the job with patches that are "just right". The onboard sample pads and USB connection are great features experienced users will love. While the sampler indeed does have limitations, this has to be balanced by the fact that most people use software samplers for importing from CD Rom. The Fantom's sampler is not going to replace Kontakt or Gigasampler, but it will let you easily grab a chunk of audio and mess with it. The Fantom X is a beautiful machine, and its beauty is far more than just looks.
 {mosgoogle}