

Access Virus TI Polar Review

Contributed by WebMaster
Saturday, 17 November 2007
Last Updated Monday, 03 December 2007

Access Virus TI Polar hands on Review

by Marinos Michael

This is a hands-on review of the hotly anticipated Virus TI from Access Music. Here in Cyprus is very hard to acquire this Virus synths since there is not an official Importer for Access Music. I had to order one from Germany and pay for international shipping + 19% VAT + Import taxes 20% (for musical instruments). To tell you the truth it was worth it!!!! Forgive the automobile metaphor, but . . . the TI is like a concept car brought to reality. Sexy, innovative, and inspiring, the Virus TI (the TI is short for “total integration”) is a next-generation synthesizer that marries the Sonics and physical advantages of a well-appointed virtual analog with the amenities of a software instrument. While other Synthesizers allow you edit their internals remotely via dedicated software interfaces (Yamaha’s Motif and Roland’s Fantom-series come to mind), the TI actually performs just like a VST or AudioUnit plug-in synth inside a compatible host like CUBASE SX etc.

And get this: The TI can be used as a control surface as well as a MIDI and audio interface, so it could easily serve as the “hub” of your studio. Unfortunately, at operating system 1.0.5 (as of this writing), there are major bugs that cripple the TI in key areas. On the flip side, there’s still plenty to love about this German import.

{mosgoogle}Introduction

There are three models in the Virus TI line — a 61-note keyboard, a 37-note keyboard,

and a tabletop unit, which can be rackmounted. (Early units reportedly had misaligned screw holes, but Access indicates that those available as you read this have new front panels that do align properly.)

I have bought two versions of this synth, the 37-note “Polar” model, so named for its frost-white future-retro styling (This version of the VIRUS TI is the direct Descendant of the VIRUS INDIGO 1 and INDIGO 2) and the VIRUS TI Rack which can be rack mounted once you remove the wooden side panels and switch the rear Inputs/outputs to another position. Synth for both synthesizers the software and firmware is exactly the same I will review just one of the two. In the following paragraphs I will concentrate on the Virus TI Polar Synth.

Structurally, the Polar is a well-built instrument with surprising weight. Knobs feel solid, buttons firm, and the keys and keybed are noticeably improved from earlier versions. Being a former owner of the Virus Indigo (predecessor to the Polar), I immediately felt the difference in the keyboard action. There’s a certain satisfaction when digging into the keybed to engage after touch, and the keys themselves have a nice bounce without feeling inexpensive.

Virus Control is a plug-in interface that snaps into a host just like any other VST or AU soft synth. Behind the scenes, the TI is "taken over" by the control software; local control is automatically turned off, and whatever preset was loaded before launching Virus Control gets replaced by an initialized patch. Once the plug-in is loaded, you're free to browse and edit patches, as well as reorganize RAM banks or create your own user banks and save these to disk. It's possible to record parameter automation via the plug-in interface (either by using a mouse or some other hardware control), which opens up other doors for hands-on knob tweaking. For example, the Virus keyboard itself has no dedicated Shape knob for modulating an oscillator's waveshape, but by mapping a "dumb" MIDI controller or selecting the Shape parameter from the list of options available with a dedicated control surface (such as a Mackie control), you're able to record all kinds of automation resulting in a more animated sound.

Access isn't trying to reinvent the wheel with the TI series. Rather, they're building on the basis of their original Virus line — in fact, a number of "best of" presets from past Viruses are included in the TI. Thanks to a new dual-DSP engine, though, the TI offers many more factory patches (512 RAM, 2,048 ROM), more than double the polyphony (80 voices under "normal" conditions), and up to 129 simultaneous effects. As of this writing there are banks from 4 favorites RAM banks from A-D and 20 ROM banks from A-T

All models feature six outputs and two inputs (all balanced 1/4"), as well as S/PDIF in and out, and a USB port for computer connection. In keeping with the TI's "hardware meets computer software" design, the TI has a sleep mode instead of an off switch. Press the + and - transposition buttons simultaneously to go to sleep. When sleeping, the TI is still powered up, just not active. Personally, I'd rather have a switch. There's just something disconcerting about relying on a combination of button presses to sleep/wake up the synth.

The Virus TI is absolutely happy to live as a stand-alone hardware synth, but thanks to a piece of software called Virus-Control, it's possible to bring nearly every aspect of the TI into the virtual studio world as well. Basically, Virus Control is a VST and AU compatible synth — but as a substitute of using the host computer's DSP, sounds and effects are generated using the TI's DSP. Both hardware and software are amalgamated with one another almost flawlessly. For example, if you fiddle with the filter cutoff knob on the TI's front panel, the software immediately reflects your actions.

Even cooler, you can choose to monitor the Virus through the host's audio engine, which means you can process the TI's sounds using all of your plug-ins and never have to patch an analog cable from the Virus to your audio hardware. Think about that: Audio bounces, parameter automation, EQing — everything you'd normally do with a soft synth, you can do with the TI — but the synth itself doesn't tax your CPU, and the signal path stays within your host's mixer. If you're thinking this redefines the term 'streamlined workflow,' you're right on the mark.

Audio can only be routed from the Virus into a host, however, not the other way. You won't be able to bus, say, a guitar track from Logic to the Virus effects engine unless you physically patch an output from your audio interface into the TI's inputs.

Access claims the TI has sample-accurate timing, and this is true for playback of MIDI data, but not in the case of playing in real time. There's considerable latency between triggering a key and actually hearing sound, even with very low sample buffer settings (256). Access says this is due to the need for the audio to travel in both directions in the TI, rather than in only one direction with a traditional plug-in/interface setup.

One workaround I discovered is to monitor through the TI's analog outputs when recording parts into the sequencer. This way you avoid the latency of streaming the TI's audio through the host software. After you've recorded a part, simply switch over to USB monitoring and add whatever plug-in effects you'd like.

Engine Details and Improvements upon the older models

From the B model on, the Virus has always featured three oscillators (plus sub and noise), with the ability to frequency-modulate osc 2 with osc 1's waveform.

In other words, fairly standard subtractive-style synthesis, albeit with an incredible array of modulation options and oscillator waveforms.

Two new oscillator modes — Hypersaw and Table — have made their way into the TI. Table adds 72 wavetables to the existing 64 'classic' osc waveforms. These are descriptively named (e.g., E-Chime, Waterphone, Clusters, Robot Wars), giving you a rough idea of each wavetable's sonic characteristics. It's possible to sweep through the wavetables using an LFO tied to the table's index parameter, which produces familiar PPG Wave-like textures.

The Table osc model is impressively exploited in the factory presets. There's no shortage of metallic, clangorous pads, leads, and sound effects. You can hear some examples online at www.keyboardmag.com and at Access's own website (<http://www.access-music.de>). It's also possible to approximate wave sequence-type sounds by tying

a S&H LFO to an oscillator's wave select parameter.

In Hypersaw mode, each oscillator can employ up to nine sawtooth waveforms to produce monstrous tones. On top of this, you can still engage Unison mode to thicken things even more. Want fat bass and sky-wide pads? Look no further. And there's no need to worry about polyphony issues — CPU-wise, one Hypersaw voice is roughly equivalent to one voice in Classic osc mode.

Using the Virus TI in Actual Projects

Well i have to admit that i am a big fan of the Virus Family of Synths, Since the 1st generation i owned and played all of them, (A, B, C and TI). So, a bigger, badder Virus with a software editor/synth engine, a programmable arpeggiator, and loads more sounds? Yeah, I dug it. In fact, I used it on several short music Demo Songs and Remixes of popular Greek Songs

Complex modulation schemes are easy to set up using Virus Control. Here, the Mod Matrix page reveals six source "slots" with three destinations each. Positive and negative amounts can be set by dragging the horizontal faders right or left of center, respectively. Also shown, the LFO page is loaded with modulation options. A host of assignable destinations are available in addition to the fixed destinations for each LFO. The expanded menu gives you some idea of the sonic shaping potential of this synth

This is one of those synthesizers that you just plug it in and play for hours, getting inspiration from the countless good sounds out of the box. Of course the sound sculpting is easy and you can achieve countless of combinations. It will really boost your creativity and productivity.

As a stand-alone synthesizer (i.e., not interfacing with a computer at all), the TI worked flawlessly. Some of the problems I have encountered when I first bought it were eliminated by the latest drivers. The best of which is the BETA 2.5 which was released a few weeks ago even adds more features and fixes most of the bugs.

At the risk of turning my "In Use" section into a list of bugs, here are just some of the problems I ran into:

Random audio crackling and popping(which can still occur on some patches even with the latest drivers), a sudden loss

of audio output through Virus Control, the fix for which was to reinstall my audio hardware's drivers (this happened at least five times), patches copied from the preset banks to the user bank being corrupted somehow (the LFO settings were wrong), and patch randomization causing horrible digital clipping on the left output channel. Headaches? You bet. I should also mention that Remote mode, which lets you use the TI as a control surface is functioning pretty well with the latest drivers, but still it needs calibration which can be a pain to achieve.

I am sure that Access will continue to improve this synth adding new features and fixing any bugs reported by its user base. Something worth to mention is that with almost each patch Access Provides us with extra patches!!

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Conclusions

I have to congratulate Access for captivating on the job of blending the divide between hardware and software synths in the way they have with the Virus TI. No other synth I've worked with offers the kind of resistance-free operation that makes the TI more of a creative partner than just another tool in my studio arsenal. Sure, there are still kinks to be worked out, and even features to implement. I'm optimistic that Access will provide timely updates, but only time will tell.

So is it worth plunking down a couple grand? If you're looking for an analog modeling synth with a staggering amount of programmability and character, I'd say absolutely. The Virus TI is a sinful little creature that's sure to bring smiles to even the most hard-boiled synth players.

The Virus TI Polar. Arctic White and Icy White! Cool factor 100%

The Virus TI-DESKTOP. Rack-mountable model

The Virus-TI Full Keyboard Version.

PRODUCT SUMMARY

ACCESS MUSIC

Virus TI Family of Synths

analog modeling/wavetable synthesizer

Price Range: \$1,995-\$2,800

PROS: Awesome sounds. Vast Patch Storage. Hardware or software control. Very intuitive user interface. . Doubles as external effects processor and audio interface, Improved LCD display in comparison to the older Viruses and the competition (Nord Lead)

CONS: you need to plug the USB direct to the PC or a powered USB hub, hard-to-read in the dark some of the labels. in some patches you can hear some Clicks and Hisses.

MANUFACTURER

Access Music

www.access-music.de

VIRUS TI SPECIFICATIONS

Sound Engine

analog modeling, wavetable synthesis

Maximum Polyphony

(80) notes, stereo

Multitimbral Parts

(16) in Multi or Sequencer mode

Memory Locations

(16) flash ROM banks × (128) Singles; (4) RAM banks × (128) Singles; (16) Multis

Analog Audio Inputs

(2) unbalanced ¼" TS, -10 dBV

Analog Audio Outputs

(6) balanced ¼" TRS, +4 dBu; (1) ¼" stereo headphone

Digital Audio I/O

coaxial S/PDIF; 16/24-bit, maximum 48 kHz

Data I/O

(1) USB 1.1, (1) MIDI In, (1) MIDI Out, (1) MIDI Thru

Control Inputs

(2) assignable ¼" TS pedal inputs (Keyboard and Polar only)

A/D/A Conversion

16/24-bit; maximum 48 kHz A/D, 192 kHz D/A

Keyboard

Desktop: none; Keyboard: 61-note semiweighted; Polar: 37-note semiweighted; Velocity, Channel Aftertouch

Oscillators

Oscillators 1 and 2: Classic, HyperSaw, Wavetable waveforms; Oscillator 3: (4) modeled analog, (64) digital waveforms; Suboscillator: square, triangle waveforms; variable-color noise generator

Filters

(2) resonant multimode (lowpass, highpass, bandpass, bandstop); Filter 1 also has (4) analog-modeled resonant lowpass modes

LFOs

(3) with (68) waveshapes

Envelope Generators

(2) ADSSR (attack, decay, sustain, slope, release)

Modulation Matrix

(6) slots, each with (1) source, (3) destinations

Arpeggiator

(64) presets, (1) user pattern per Single

Display

160 x 32-pixel LCD

Effects

analog boost, chorus, delay, distortion, envelope follower, EQ, phaser, reverb, ring modulation, vocoder; (145) simultaneous

Software Component

VirusControl plug-in (VST for Windows; VST, AU for Mac OS X)

Dimensions

Desktop, 18.5" (W) x 3.2" (H) x 7.4" (D); Keyboard, 39.2" (W) x 4.6" (H) x 14.6" (D); Polar, 22.3" (W) x 4.4" (H) x 13.2" (D)

Weight

Desktop, 7.2 lbs.; Keyboard, 27.6 lbs.; Polar, 19.2 lbs.