

SOUND ON SOUND

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Roland XP30 64-voice Expandable Synthesizer

Reviews : Keyboard

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Take the sound engine of the acclaimed JV1080/2080, add the data from three expansion boards (plus space for two more), a 5-octave keyboard, arpeggiator, 40 multi-effect algorithms and four real-time control sliders and what do you get? **Paul Farrer** turns (XP)30...



Roland are a company not known for resting on their hi-tech laurels. Just as the worldwide applause for the JV1080 and JV2080 synth modules seems to be dying down, out comes the next generation of Roland JV-type keyboards, utilising the same powerful sound engine plus a few refinements and improvements. While the XP30's older siblings (the XP60 and XP80) could, perhaps, be compared to the 2080, the XP30 itself has more in common with the 1080. The similarities, such as the same size of orange backlit LCD screen and the basic patch layout, will be familiar to any 1080 user. What becomes apparent the more you get to know the instrument is just how many improvements Roland have managed to squeeze into what was already a top-flight piece of studio gear. To call it merely a 1080 with a keyboard is to overlook a number of clever design features and, crucially, the fact that Roland have essentially quadrupled the number of sounds you get for your money -- you get not only all the sounds from the 1080 and 2080, but also the equivalent of three further JV wave expansion card soundsets.

Physical X-Pectations

The 5-octave, velocity-sensitive keyboard responds to aftertouch and, as you would expect from Roland, has a typically solid and professional feel. Despite being packed with circuitry, the whole unit measures only 1011 x 289mm, making it only slightly bigger and heavier than my prehistoric Roland D5 and enabling it to slot neatly into almost any studio. At the back are the power socket (with internal PSU -- thank you Roland!), Smart Media card slot (about which more later), MIDI In, Out and Thru, a dedicated computer connector socket switchable between Mac, PC1 and PC2, hold pedal and control pedal jack sockets, headphone socket, and a pair of stereo outs. This is one obvious difference between the XP30 and the JV1080. Where the 1080 had six outputs as standard, the XP30 offers a single stereo pair, with no chance for expansion if needed.

The focal point of the front panel is the bright orange LCD screen, supported by eight soft-keys which have multiple functions depending which screen you're looking at or which mode the keyboard is in. To the right of the screen is a substantial data wheel with increment/decrement buttons, directional cursors and a large numeric keypad. Next to the keypad are the five illuminated wave-expansion selector buttons (more on the wave expansions in a moment), making it easy when you're auditioning patches to jump between sound sources and still know where you are. Overall, the clear labelling, good ergonomics and many chunky backlit buttons make it easy to navigate the keyboard's potentially complex performance and editing features.

One feature that the XP30 has inherited directly from the 2080 is the phrase preview button, which helps during sound auditioning by helpfully performing a short musical passage appropriate to the sound you have currently selected. Although it stops short of the lengthy MIDI masterpieces behind the audition button on Emu's Proteus 2000, it's certainly more refreshing than constantly banging a middle C while flicking through 29 electric piano sounds in search of inspiration.

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To the left side of the front panel are a few performance-friendly buttons, such as Portamento and Solo, and a transposing octave selector. The arpeggiator, offering 43 styles of note repetition, is also accessed here. Pressing the button once activates the arpeggiator, and keeping it depressed calls up an on-screen mini menu of four editable parameters (Tempo, Style, Accent and Octave). There are more in-depth edit pages for the arpeggiator in the System menu, but this is a quick and easy way of having some fun (what arpeggiators

ROLAND XP30 £999

pros

- Huge number of great sounds for your money.
- Instantly usable.
- Good effects.
- Packed with features.
- Pro feel.

cons

- Smart media cards may not be to everyone's taste (or budget).
- Limited to a single stereo output.
- Only two actual expansion card slots.

summary

A sound source *par excellence*, which will win plenty of friends for its usability, range and quality of sounds, look and feel. Despite a few expandability shortcomings the XP30 is a serious product, and with 1406 patches and 26 rhythm sets to choose from it represents excellent value for money.

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were originally designed for). Top marks to Roland for making an often under-used feature so readily accessible.

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On the extreme left of the front panel are the four sliders which make up the multitasking 'Palette' seen on numerous Roland keyboards of the past few years. The four small faders can serve a number of purposes, most obviously as real-time filter envelope editors for filter cutoff Frequency, Resonance, Attack and Decay parameters. Alternatively, you can specify that they control the sound level of the four tones that make up the average patch, enabling you to make quick tweaks to sounds as you're working, without having to trawl through edit pages. Another bonus is that these changes are transmitted via MIDI, which can be particularly useful if you want to record dynamic filter sweeps throughout a song. With the main volume control slider on the far left-hand side and the Roland-style pitch wheel/modulation controller in the usual place, our tour of the front panel is complete.



More Bangs For Your Bucks

The XP30 is all about sounds, and the number that you get for your money is quite astonishing. The JV1080 without any of the expansion cards was still a fairly tempting offer when it came out -- add a few well-chosen expansion cards and you were talking about a serious production tool. The XP30 starts off by giving you the equivalent of all this, plus three cards built in.

Those new to the JV and XP series of synths will be impressed by the range and quality of patches the XP30 provides -- everything from techno-influenced squidgy basses, through harsh electric guitars and soft pads, to realistic acoustic instruments, and seemingly everything in between. With 640 patches to choose from, the chances of not finding the sound you're after are slim, but the addition of the 766 patches on the *Session*, *Orchestral* and *Techno Collection* cards has made that a near impossibility. The expansion cards themselves have been around for quite a while, so I won't go into too much detail (see Paul White's reviews in SOS November '98). However, as a quick note it would be fair to say that the *Session* board, with its wide range of usable keyboard, drum, bass and guitar sounds, is a natural and highly desirable extension of the XP30's own internal patch styles. The *Orchestral* board marks a real high point in realistic, expressive sound design and sampling, and is hugely usable. With this set of sounds (obviously mainly strings, brass, woodwind and percussion) you don't need to know about orchestras in order to sound like one (preset B092, Oboe 1, is so beautiful it's almost worth the price of admission on its own). *Techno Collection* is, as you might expect, crammed full of retro analogue insanity in the form of drums (particularly vintage Roland beatboxes such as the TR909, 606 and 808), basses, pads and effects. In addition, there are a few wonderfully grainy drum loops, as well as vocoder speech samples and vinyl scratches, and at every turn the sounds utilise the XP30's excellent effects section to its full potential (see the 'Effects' box). One of the six internal preset banks is a dedicated General MIDI bank with the familiar 128 presets from Piano

Sound Diver

Bundled with the XP30 is this Emagic-designed editing and librarian software for the JV and XP range of instruments. Mac- and PC-compatible, it enables quick and painless transfer of patch and performance data from your keyboard to computer, and vice versa. As you might expect from an Emagic piece of software, the operational aspects are a doddle, and once it has established a clear MIDI dialogue between your host computer and the XP30, dumping and backing up sound data couldn't be easier. Aside from the obvious benefits of a patch library system, the comprehensive onscreen editing features offered by the software will be a real bonus to anyone whose idea of sound creation and editing is *not* staring at confusing numbers on a small LCD screen. This software provides a large multi-coloured display of patches and Performances, complete with lots of virtual faders, pan pots, mini numeric displays and waveforms.

Brief Specification

- 61-note keyboard with velocity and channel aftertouch sensitivity.
- 64-voice polyphony.
- 16-part multitimbrality.
- 1,406 Patches, including all sounds from *Session*, *Orchestral* and *Techno* wave expansion boards.
- 26 factory rhythm sets.
- 128 user patch memories; 32 user Performance memories; 2 user rhythm Sets.
- 2 expansion slots for SRJV80 expansion boards.
- Advanced arpeggiator derived from XP60/80.
- Reverb, Chorus and 40 multi-effects.
- Serial port MIDI interface
- Four assignable Sound Palette sliders.
- Smart Media card storage (or save via MIDI using the supplied *Sound Diver* software).
- 40-character, 2-line backlit LCD.
- Connectors: Output (L/Mono, R); Phones; MIDI (In, Out, Thru); computer interface (Mac/PC1/PC2); Control Pedal, Hold Pedal.

1 to Gunshot, and although the patches in this section are largely limited by the fact that they have to conform to GM standardisation (and are therefore a little tame), the bank is still a welcome inclusion.

In familiar Roland style, all the individual patches can be used singly, as part of a larger combination of patches (called a Performance), or in a 16-part multitimbral setup. It's in the latter case that you really start to feel the benefit of the XP30's 64-voice capacity. In all of the above modes assigning and editing patches is a simple enough task (easier than on the JV1080 module, due to the larger data wheel and bigger directional cursors), and the screen always manages to convey just the right amount of information at any one time.

Expand & Contrast

As its name suggests, the XP30 is heavily geared towards expansion, giving the user the opportunity to add to their sound arsenal as they go along by investing in Roland's own SRJV80 range of expansion cards, currently retailing at about £250 each. As mentioned earlier, the XP30 comes pre-loaded with three of these cards, leaving two slots free to fill later. However, those of you pondering the possibility of taking out the three supplied cards and starting afresh with five free slots will have to forget it, as the three 'expansion' cards are actually just the sound data chips from those cards hardwired to the main processor. I can't help thinking that this has limited the XP30's true usefulness somewhat. The sound engine as it stands, with the addition of the three 'cards', is mightily impressive, but those keen on the *Techno Collection* are probably less likely to be wowed by the *Orchestral* board (and *vice versa*); giving users the chance to chop and change their sounds more freely would have been a smarter move, and perhaps one more fitting to the Roland XPansion ethos.

The XP30's other expandability option takes the form of a Smart Media card slot on the unit's back panel. You may not be familiar with this format of data storage yet, but Roland are hoping to increase its popularity for storing patches and other sound data instead of producing unit-dedicated RAM cards. Smart Media card slots have appeared on a few other Roland modules, such as the MC505, JX305 and Boss SP202 sampler, and it's a good enough idea. However, you do have to look in the right place for them (most Roland suppliers I spoke to recommended I try my local specialist camera shop to see if they had any!). In addition, at current prices the 5 Volt cards that Roland units require could set you back as much as £45 for a 4Mb card, with the 2Mb card costing £30-35. I can see most users (or, at least, those with computer-based sequencing packages) opting instead to use the excellent Emagic *Sound Diver* software bundled with the unit. (See 'Sound Diver' box.)

Effects

The effects section of the XP30 comes with 40 different effect types, or 'sets', as Roland call them. In addition to these 40 there is a dedicated Chorus set and a Reverb set with eight different variants (rooms, stages, halls, and so on) on call at all times. These, of course, can be assigned to different patches within a performance or multitimbral setup. If you're using the XP30 as a multitimbral sound source you have the use of the Chorus and Reverb effects assignable to each of the 16 parts, as well as one so-called 'insertion effect' (as on the JV1080), which sticks with the part even when you put it into a multitimbral setup. The insert effect can be copied from any patch, so if you find a screaming guitar sound with a big delay and distortion effect whilst flicking through the presets and want to retain the effect sound while adding additional keyboard and drum parts in multitimbral mode, simply copy the multi-effect from that patch into the multitimbral setup, just like you can on the JV1080 (although admittedly, the JV2080 offered *three* such handy insertion effects. Oh well, you can't have everything...).

Many of the types of effects presented here will be familiar to Roland users already, and I imagine Roland are hoping that the range of sheer effects processing power you get for your money will negate the need for separate keyboard outputs. There are too many effects to list them all, but a few choice favourites include:

- 2: 'Overdrive': a meaty, yet surprisingly subtle way of beefing up electric guitar patches. Also works nicely on some of the softer electric pianos.
- 10: 'Compressor': a no-nonsense, ballsy-sounding compressor perfect for dance pianos and tight bass noises.
- 13: 'Space D': an interesting multiple chorus sound that applies two-phase modulation in stereo, without any noticeable pitch changes. Great for artificial stereo imaging.
- 16: 'Step Flanger': allows you to synchronise the flanger speed to the tempo of your track. Works especially well for dance music on harsh-sounding analogue pads and effects.
- 20: 'Quadruple-Tap Delay': this takes about a week to set up, but to hear a hi-hat bouncing around four different pan positions in time with your track is a real treat.
- 31: 'Distortion/Delay': an old effect, but for heavy and realistic power-chord guitar sounds, nothing else comes close.
- 33: 'Enhancer/Flanger': harmonic overtone boosting wired in series with a flanger for an amazing effect. Switch the arpeggiator on, mess around with the real-time cutoff frequency/resonance sliders, and you'll be in analogue heaven.

Conclusion

If you look at the XP30 in purely economic terms, it has to be the hands-down winner amongst keyboards in (and possibly, for that matter, outside of) the Roland family. The XP30 is priced at just under a grand, and you could argue that you get £750-worth of expansion boards, leaving a pro-feel keyboard and the guts of a JV1080 for just £250. Had the expansion cards been largely useless, or even non-existent, you might still have expected a similar asking price for an instrument of this calibre and pedigree. As it stands, when you consider the enormous range of sounds you get for your money, and the features Roland have crammed into this comprehensive package, the asking price makes the XP30 a tempting offer. On the down side, there are many who claim that the price of the expansion boards is too high anyway, and if you were cynical you might even conclude that the unusual collection of the three 'boards' in the XP30 was the result of the factory making too many chips and not knowing what to do with them. Also, I can't help feeling that Roland have shot themselves in the foot somewhat by only allowing the unit a single pair of stereo outputs (this is a serious piece of studio equipment, after all). Finally, the Smart Media card system may or may not catch on; it certainly won't at the current availability and price levels. However, these gripes are more or less forgivable in the light of the XP30's design quality, build construction and ease of use. With its easy layout and handy real-time control features, it makes a great on-stage performance tool, and the comprehensive MIDI spec and solid keyboard also make it a reasonable controller keyboard for other modules. If you'd like a massive collection of Roland sounds ready to use in a neat keyboard package, the XP30 is a slimline *tour-de-force*. **SOS**

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