

## REVIEW

STAGE COMBO

KURZWEIL  
Forte 7

BY STEPHEN FORTNER



**BY THE SALES FIGURES, KEYBOARD COMPANIES' MID-SIZE INSTRUMENTS OF 73 or 76 keys are often underachievers compared to their 61s and 88s. That's surprising because anecdotally, a lot of keyboardists who do live gigs, myself included, praise them as the ideal compromise between stretch-out room and portability. With the Forte 7, Kurzweil's flagship instrument arrives in this form factor, while sporting a roster of improvements in the latest OS. Now as then, the Forte goes well beyond its stage piano appearance, combining multiple synthesis methods into a do-it-all combo keyboard that aims to occupy the all-important bottom tier on your keyboard stand. It's so powerful, though, that it could easily get you through any gig occupying the *only* tier.**

**What's New**

The Forte is a deep instrument with a workstation-class sound set, and it's even deeper as of OS 1.40, which should be preloaded in any new Forte 7. If not, downloading it to a USB stick and updating the unit is nice and quick, and all updates apply to the original (88-key) Forte as well. Since we have room mainly to detail improvements here, please refer to our original review from November 2014 for a thorough overview and evaluation that still stands.

As before, 16 GB of Flash Play memory is where the wave data lives, and all of it is addressable by the sound engine at once with no load time. Eight-velocity-layer acoustic and electric pianos take up much of the room here. Sympathetic string resonance has now been added to the pianos for extra realism. KB3 drawbar organ sounds can live alongside "regular" ones in a multi, and since KB3 runs on its own DSP chip, these don't draw on the Forte's 128 voices of polyphony. In the unlikely

event you brush the ceiling, Kurzweil's voice robbing is still the least audible in the industry.

A new Advanced User mode, accessed by a toggle in the Global menu, lets you address up to 16 Multizones (available since OS 1.30) for complex splits and layers, as compared to eight previously. Every part gets an independent arpeggiator, each of which in turn can work in either Classic mode for the expected up-down and note-order-as-played fare, or as a programmable step sequencer with up to 48 steps. User patterns can be saved as their own memory objects. Musically useful options for drum beats, bass lines, and the like are among the 148 arpeggiator presets.

Another boon of Advanced User mode is that you can now edit all VAST parameters from the front panel, accessing pages via the soft buttons as on a PC3 or K-series synth. Kurzweil's VAST has long been one of the deepest synth engines found in hardware, amounting to an almost virtual-modular canvas that lets you configure oscillators, filters, DSP functions, and other sonic building blocks in various chains and

**Snap Judgment**

**PROS** Killer acoustic and electric piano sounds. Drawbar organ mode with Leslie simulation doesn't draw on the main polyphony reserve. A dedicated virtual analog synth for all intents and purposes. Virtual analog, KB3 organ, and "regular" sounds can be combined in multis.



**CONS** No dedicated buttons for octave shift or arpeggiator. Acoustic and electric guitar sounds are still a weak spot.

**Bottom Line**

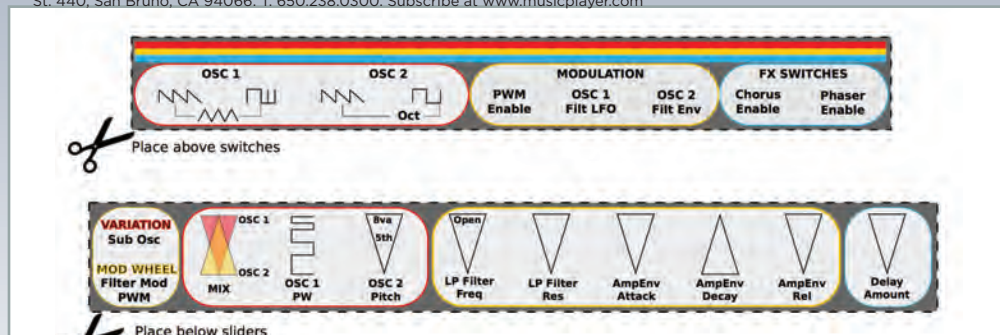
In the same stage combo stratosphere as the Nord Stage 2EX, but does more for less.

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provides virtually bottomless modulation routings. For seriously rolling my own sounds I'd still opt for the free Mac/PC editor (iPad version please!) but this access is nice to have when your Forte is away from your computer.

The Fatar action is identical to the original Forte except for its shorter key range. It's decidedly weighted but is quicker under my fingers than most 88s that focus on pianism—a non-fatiguing compromise ideal for the organ and synth sounds you'll no doubt be playing alongside pianos and such. Aftertouch? Yes.

The user interface is generally intuitive, with things being where you'd expect to find them and the color (though not touch) screen momentarily show-



**Fig. 1:** These cut-outs from the accompanying PDF file for the KVA Patch Kreator, a free download, show how the Forte can become a bona fide virtual-analog synth.

ing a meaningful assignment, not just a MIDI CC, for any control you grab. A couple of nuisances: Octave shifting is still relegated to soft buttons even though there are dedicated transpose buttons—I'd reverse these roles. Moreover, the only top-level (meaning, not in Edit mode) control of the arpeggiator's on/off and latch functions is via the same soft buttons that shift octaves; this is an either-or choice in the Global menu. Fortunately, all arpeggiator settings including on/off status are saved at the Program level.

## Playing

The Forte 7 arrived just as I'd completed last month's review of the Yamaha Montage, which is still in my studio. So I was able to take both to a function gig that covered half a century, from '60s Motown to recent Top 40. This isn't meant to be a "shootout" and the two instruments take quite different approaches, but given that the Montage 7 and Forte 7 are neck-and-neck on price, I'll indulge in a little comparison. Keep in mind, these are first impressions of factory sounds that I just flung into the gig.

**Acoustic pianos.** The Montage's best pianos offered a bit more sparkle and detail where the Forte's delivered more midrange punch and body. Both are in the 99th percentile of piano realism. With all reverb removed and envelope release made as even as possible, the Montage pianos seemed to have slightly longer tails and more room ambience sampled in. But you could play either instrument for a solo piano gig and sonically want for nothing.

**Electric pianos and Clavs.** Again, we're in that high-percentile realm. The Montage's Rhodes, Wurlies, and Clavs are utterly realistic and respond plenty to aggressive playing, but the Forte's do the same with a bit more dirt and dynamism; there's just a little more of the good kind of trouble to get into as you hit the keys harder.

**Tonewheel organs.** The Forte certainly has an advantage with its modeled KB3 organ mode, which

uses the sliders as drawbars. Its Leslie simulation is good but still not in the league of dedicated drawbar organs such as the Hammond SK series. In terms of the organ tone itself, many Montage presets (which can also map drawbar control to the sliders) had more of the transparency and "air" I prefer in my B-3 sound, compared to the Forte's more compressed, focused character. Its organs are certainly more than good enough to make you think twice about carrying a separate clonewheel to a gig with tight space or load-in time.

**Synths.** The Forte stands out for its modeled-analog KVA oscillators. This gives it warmth and attitude in this sound category that few all-around combo instruments can boast; the Nord Stage series comes first to mind. Because of VAST, though, KVA programs can be far more complex than anything the Stage 2EX's synth section can do. You can also download a set of KVA starter programs that map the Forte's buttons and sliders to parameters including waveform selection, pulse width, and the usual filter and envelope suspects, resulting in a highly credible "analog synth" playing experience. The accompanying PDF includes cut-out label strips for these settings (see Figure 1). Of course, tons of pads, leads, and chordal comping sounds are on hand outside of the KVA paradigm. The Montage isn't an appropriate comparison here; its synth sounds are consistently excellent, but the addition of Motion Control and a full FM section make it a very different animal.

**Orchestral instruments.** My comments here are largely unchanged from the original Forte review, which is to say that the strings and brass still comprise some of the most engaging section and solo instruments in the hardware synth world. The brass samples, first found in the Kore64 expansion (reviewed September 2013) are generally newer than the strings, which still excel at cinematic passages and "Ain't No Sunshine"-style ballad arrangements. Nonetheless, some of the Forte's orchestral patches are beginning to show the age of their underlying sample sets.

**Guitars and basses.** Electric and acoustic guitars, though serviceable, remain an Achilles' heel on Kurzweil instruments, especially in comparison to

the stellar piano and keyboard sounds. On the contrary, the acoustic, electric, and synth basses are as dense and creamy as flourless chocolate cake. "Flea/Bootsy," with its envelope wah, and the octave-doubled "Levin/Gabriel" fretless are two funky favorites of mine.

**General impressions.** For almost ten years, my gig rig when I wasn't playing active review gear was a Motif ES7 on the bottom and a Kurzweil K2661 up top. The Motif sounded more hi-fi and polished, the Kurzweil more raw and in my face. Of course, this comes from actively listening for differences—playing them separately you'd never peg the K2661 as anything less than hi-fi nor the Motif as lacking in aggression when called for. This was exactly true of the Montage-Forte pairing, with each machine sounding proportionally better for being so new.

## Conclusions

For gigging keyboardists, the Forte 7 hits a Goldilocks zone of feel, relative compactness, high sound quality, and musical range. This is a *very* high-end, multi-synthesis-method machine that just happens to prioritize kicking pristine piano, nasty Rhodes and B-3, and tweakhead virtual analog—all at the same time if you want.

While my Montage comparisons arose from opportunity, the Forte's more direct competitor in terms of design goals and intended customers is the Nord Stage 2EX. One could debate which sorts of sounds each does best, but it's an objective fact that the Forte is more powerful; there is more multi-timbral implementation, more polyphony, more memory for current and future sounds, and a more sophisticated sample-based and virtual analog synthesis architecture. Factor in that it costs appreciably less and that closes the case for crowning it the current king of stage combos and a Key Buy winner. 🎹

Read our review of the original Kurzweil Forte.

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