KURZWEIL
Artis

BY DAVID BRYCE

IN THE EARLY '90S, KURZWEIL TURNED THE KEYBOARD MARKET ON ITS EAR with the PC88: an affordable, portable 88-key stage piano that quickly became the go-to instrument for gigging keyboardists everywhere, including me. Now, Kurzweil has introduced the Artis, their latest stage piano-meets-all-around gig keyboard, featuring a highly anticipated new piano sample. Obviously, expectations are high. Will it turn as many heads as so many of their other offerings have done?

Overview

Basically packing all the processing power and the entire sound set of Kurzweil's flagship PC3K8 (reviewed Jan. '11), the Artis offers a new streamlined interface designed to deliver easy access to all the sounds and features sought after by keyboardists looking for a "bread and butter" instrument.

Program navigation uses a large scroll wheel and Previous/Next buttons, or 16 Category buttons, each of which has 16 individual Program buttons that do double duty for alphanumeric data entry. Double-pressing the Program buttons on the bottom-most row allows access to MIDI program change, ROM-play demo tunes, and a very nice feature called Program Demo that plays a short phrase showing off how the designer who programmed each sound intended it to be used.

Nine sliders and five assignable buttons deliver realtime control over all sorts of useful parameters that vary per Program. Four more buttons toggle

zones on and off. A three-band master EQ is located by the volume slider, providing high and low shelving as well as sweepable midrange. Dedicated transpose buttons are above the pitch and mod wheels, along with a Variation button that changes function depending on the program, such as kicking in a pad or adding an effect. Under the display, six soft buttons do different things depending on the unit's mode. Under those, ten more buttons provide one-touch access to Favorite sounds.

The Artis sports the same hammer-action Fatar TP-100 keybed used in the SP4-8 stage piano. It's smooth, and faster for playing non-piano riffs than many weighted actions, at the trade-off of not feeling quite as solid as the TP40L action used in the PC3K8. As implemented in the Artis, the action doesn't transmit aftertouch.

Architecture

The Artis is loaded with sounds selected from

onboard wave ROM of the PC3K, the KB3 organ engine, and the Kore64 expansion ROM (reviewed Sept. '13) for the PC3 series. This provides what might be the most widely varied sonic palette of any stage piano to date: 256 Programs organized into 16 banks of 16 Programs each. Another 256

Snap Judgment

▶ **PROS** Brand new 128MB German grand piano. Extremely powerful VAST engine. 128-voice polyphony. Best voice-stealing algorithm in the industry. Killer vintage keys and non-piano sounds.

⏸ **CONS** No access to primary programs when split/layer is engaged. No recording/playback of audio files via external flash drive. No onboard drum patterns. No aftertouch.

Artis

The back panel is home to two footswitch jacks that can take either single conventional pedals, TRS pedals that support half-dampering for piano sounds, or double pedals. A separate jack is for a continuous control pedal. USB jacks are provided for both computer connectivity and thumb drive storage of Program data. The 1/8″ stereo input is for routing a music playback device to the outputs. The headphone jack is around front, below the pitch and mod wheels.

slots are for saving your own, but editing you can do onboard the Artis is limited to storing variations within the parameters that Kurzweil pre-assigned to a given Program's controllers. A free software editor (available at kurzweil.com/product/artis/downloads) makes virtually every parameter in the machine available for editing.

Any four programs can be split and/or layered across the keyboard into Multis; as with Programs, you get 256 factory presets and 256 user memories. You can also load in any PC3 program.

In Program mode, the Artis can be split and layered using the soft buttons under the display. This calls up a secondary program, which can be changed and tweaked as if in Program mode—but the only way to access the primary Program is to cancel the split/layer. Also, activating a split or layer sets the first two sliders to control the volume of both the primary and secondary program; however, you have to move them to the full volume position before they'll engage. In Multi mode, the first four sliders control the volume of all four zones, and each zone can be toggled on and off using the buttons found above each of these sliders. Whenever a slider is moved in Program mode, the parameter that it controls is reflected in the display, so you don't have to guess what the sliders do in any given context. Considering the myriad of realtime options available given the VAST engine, this is a really nice touch. As with the PC3, the first couple of sliders typically control filter cutoff and resonance, and the last few control effects such as reverb depth and delay time.

All the effects found in the PC3K's formidable engine are in the Artis, but only those chosen by Kurzweil for each Program can be used, and again, onboard editing is limited to changing values for pre-assigned parameters. Multi mode gives you more control over effects chains, but you'll still want the free editor software for deep customization.

In Use

Being a diehard Kurzweil fan, I was eager to hear the Artis' new "German Grand" piano sample. It's pretty darned impressive, and is obviously an improvement over the triple-strike piano multisample Kurzweil has been using for many years. The sound is rich and full, and the power of the VAST engine and its ability to use up to 32 layers per Program (each one able to be woven in at a finely tuned velocity, and/or key range) has been used very effectively to produce a very realistic and nuanced piano that is clearly superior to anything Kurzweil has yet brought to market. The *fff* piano sample may be a bit strident for some players, but those who like a very dynamic piano that cuts through a mix will probably find it suited to their taste.

The EPs and Clavs are almost all lifted directly from the PC3, and offer a very nice selection of really useful sounds. It's also really cool to have the KB3 organ in a stage piano. In KB3 mode, all nine sliders act as drawbars, and the nine buttons located over the sliders control all the functionality expected in a dedicated drawbar organ: harmonic percussion, vibrato/chorus, key click, tonewheel braking, and more. When KB3 mode is engaged, the Variation button acts as a dedicated toggle for the rotary speaker effect. Although this doesn't beat the better dedicated pedals and clonewheels cur-

rently on the market, it sounds better than anything else you'll find in a do-it-all instrument of the Artis' type.

Synth sounds are outstanding. The same goes for pads, which are very warm and great for layering. The 16 string programs are culled directly from the PC3's String ROM, Orchestral ROM, and (for Mellotron strings) Vintage Keys ROM, and sound gorgeous.

There's also a drum bank featuring killer samples and Programs from the Kore64 expansion, but no drum *patterns* are found anywhere in the machine, save for the aforementioned Program Demos.

Conclusions

Keyboardists have been waiting for a new piano sample from Kurzweil for years, and the Artis delivers that and more. Essentially, it's a PC3K8 sound engine (*sans* sequencer) with a different keybed, simpler interface, and the user-loadable 128MB Flash memory replaced by 128MB of piano ROM. If you've been wanting Kurzweil synthesis power but with fresh piano sounds and easier, more gig-oriented operation than the PC3 series, the Artis may be just the ticket. ♩

Hear It Now!

Original audio examples.

keyboardmag.com/march2014