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SEP 2006 \$5.99US \$7.99CAN



YAMAHA MO8

SYNTHESIZER WORKSTATION

by Scott Healy

A lot of workstations use a menu to search sounds by category, but the MO has a dedicated button and the category names right on the front panel.

In Pattern and Song modes, buttons 1-16 select which track you're working on, saving you from cursor-itis.

Information button displays a variety of useful info, including voice names and where things live in the MO's internal memory.

Master mode puts items from all MO operating modes — voices, performances, songs, and patterns — next to each other for quick access. It's great for live performance.

Function and "sub-function" buttons? The latter usually select from a myriad of musically useful arpeggio patterns or drum grooves, depending on the sound.

Faders adjust levels of the elements within a single Voice, the voices in a Performance, or the tracks in a pattern or song.

You can export riffs born in the arpeggiator to sequences or multi-layered performances. This ability is central to what Yamaha calls "Phrase Factory."

Using the MO's knobs, faders, and transport buttons to control your computer-based DAW is relatively easy and works well, thanks to thorough Mackie Control emulation.

Use the "USB to host" port for connecting to your computer, or plug a thumb drive right into the "USB to device" port to back up your work.

Weighted action is hefty enough for serious piano practice.

Synthesizer workstation with song and pattern sequencer and arpeggiator.

PROS

Fantastic sounds. Very flexible storage options. Onboard arpeggios, grooves, and musical phrases offer something for everyone. Well-implemented DAW remote control.

CONS

No sampling or audio inputs. No slots for Yamaha PLG sound expansion boards.

\$1,999; MO6, \$1,499.
Yamaha
www.yamaha.com

The 88-key MO8 and 61-key MO6 are "lite" versions of Yamaha's popular Motif ES workstations, featuring the same sound and music production features at a more affordable price. What kinds of features? For starters, how about hundreds of preset phrases, a powerful polyphonic arpeggiator, a 16-track sequencer, USB computer connectivity and DAW remote control, plus an expanded sound set based on the same wave memory as the Motif ES. While Motif veterans will feel right at home, new pilots have a learning curve ahead of them, but only because MO is such an overachiever. So much for the "lite" designation!

OVERVIEW

The MO8 can be a live performance axe, a stand-alone songwriting station, a sound source for a computer-based sequencer, a control surface for the same, or all of the above. Many of the preset sounds and performances emphasize modern dance club, urban pop, and hip-hop styles. Working with the MO8 is largely mode-based: Voice, Performance, Pattern, and Song modes are where you'll spend most of your time. Also present from the Motif and Motif ES is the Master mode, which lets you call up whatever the musical moment requires, be it a sound, pattern, song, or performance, from within a single mode, not unlike the "quick access" button on Kurzweil's K series synths.

Hundreds of phrases and beats can be used as the basis for patterns and grooves in the sequencer, and eventually chained into songs. (See "Phrase Factory" below.) You can save everything in the machine to an external USB device, which is great both for back-up and taking your work to MO- or Motif-equipped studios. USB connectivity lets you use the MO as a MIDI controller for your soft synths, for playing its internal sounds from your computer-based sequencer, and for extensive and well-documented remote DAW control through the built-in Mackie Control feature.

To keep cost down, Yamaha has foregone the sampling and PLG sound expansion slots found on the Motif ES. This is a logical choice, but not the same one the competition made for their "lite" offerings: Sampling is optional on the Korg TR (reviewed Mar. '06) and standard on the Roland Fantom-Xa (reviewed Jun. '05), which also takes one SRX expansion board. Neither of those have Yamaha's extensive repertoire of onboard phrases, though, and you can't get the Xa with an 88-key weighted action.

SOUNDS

Like most Yamaha keyboards, the MO8 uses Advanced Wave Memory 2 (sample playback by any other name) as the basis for its internal sounds. Yamaha is known for its clean and rich samples, and the MO8's sound quality lacks nothing in all the categories you'd expect from a do-it-all workstation: pianos, keyboards, drums, synth leads, comps, and pads, orchestral instruments, sound effects, and so on, as well as drum kits that assign a different sound to each of up to 73 keys. A unique and useful feature is the MO's "mixing voices." You get up to 16 per song or pattern (with an

VITAL STATS

SYNTHESIS TYPE

Sample playback plus subtractive.

KEYBOARD

88 keys, A to C, velocity-sensitive.

POLYPHONY

64 notes (at element level).

DISPLAY

Backlit LCD, 240 x 64 pixels.

FACTORY SOUNDS

512 voices and 32 drum kits plus 128 General MIDI voices and 1 GM drum kit.

SEQUENCER

16 tracks, pattern and song modes, approx. 226,000 notes.

AUDIO OUTPUTS

1/4" L/mono, 1/4" R, 1/4" stereo headphone out, coaxial S/PDIF digital.

PEDAL INPUTS

1/4" sustain, 1/4" expression/continuous pedal.

POWER SUPPLY

External in-line type, 12VDC at 1.5 amps.

DIMENSIONS/WEIGHT

53.4" W x 15.2" D x 6.6" H; 46.3 lbs.

upper limit of 256), and the idea is that if you've tweaked voices to sound right in a sequence — a little more open filter here or a bit less release there, for example — those changes are stored with that song or pattern, without altering the original voices they're based on.

For playing in voice or performance modes, I preferred leaving the MO in "category search" mode, which also works from inside the sequencer's Pattern and Song modes — a real time-saver for assigning voices to tracks. The more I listened to the sounds of the MO8, the more I liked them. Most offer tons of control: fader "drawbars" for organs, meaty synths with very analog-sounding filters you can sweep with the

PHRASE FACTORY

This is Yamaha's name for how the MO integrates musical phrases and grooves — either factory presets or your creations — into songs, voices, and performances. The preset offerings are generous: 1,700 arpeggio patterns and 700 drum beats. But the term "arpeggio" really doesn't do most of these phrases justice. An acoustic guitar voice might have a strum pattern with five variations, a distorted electric a chunky metal pattern, and synth comp voices feature pulsating rhythms. You then have a number of ways to build "molecules" out of these arrangement atoms, including recording them right into a sequencer pattern (or song), or making them a permanent fixture in a performance. Think of the chunk- and loop-based music making approach of software like Sony Acid or Ableton Live, only in a hardware synth, and you get a good idea of what Yamaha is going for.

SOUND HOUND

Check out these and other Yamaha MO8 sound examples at www.keyboardmag.com/0906119.

Voodooman: Lots of distortion, sustain for days, and clever velocity-switching will bring out any keyboardist's frustrated inner guitar hero.

TouchWah: A funky wah guitar with arpeggiator phrases that make us nostalgic for *Shaft*. Can you dig it?

Phaser Vin: One of these days, *Keyboard* will stop raving about the "Steely Dan electric piano sound." But not today.

16+8+5&1/3: Jazz organ that's evocative of Jimmy Smith. Yamaha even got the characteristic "legato triggering" of the B-3 harmonic percussion exactly right.

Mini Three: Just listen to us sweep the filter on this analog synth lead.

That's some of the nastiest resonance we've ever heard from an all-digital sound engine.

Masala: That's the polyphonic arpeggiator you're hearing on this complex, Indian-inspired performance sound, not the sequencer.

USB MIDI DRIVERS

Though the MO's USB MIDI interface is not class-compliant, the downloadable drivers work great on Windows XP and Mac OS X. Go to www.yamahasynth.com for the most current versions. Have a new Intel-based Mac? Yamaha says they'll have drivers available by the time you read this.

AUDITION

YAMAHA MO8
SYNTHESIZER
WORKSTATION



/0906119

Hear examples of the MO's sounds and Phrase Factory at www.keyboardmag.com/0906119.

GIMME SOME ACTION

I liked the firm, weighty feel of Yamaha's 88-key "Balanced Hammer Effect" keyboard. It's not a graded action, i.e. its keys are weighted the same across the whole range, but it's solid enough for a student to develop real piano technique on. It also has good "rebound" on fast runs, except for single-note trills, which are hard to play on most fully-weighted actions.

GORY DETAILS

WAVEFORM ROM

175MB, 1,895 waveforms total.

USER MEMORY LOCATIONS

256 voices, 256 performances, 64 patterns, 64 songs, 256 arpeggio patterns.

SEQUENCE FORMAT

Motif and Motif ES, Standard MIDI type 0 and 1 (does not save type 1).

EFFECTS

3 insert effects plus reverb, chorus, global "Master Effect," global 5-band EQ, and 3-band EQ per sequencer part.

DAW REMOTE CONTROL

Mackie Control emulation, supports Steinberg Cubase, Cakewalk Sonar, Apple Logic, MOTU Digital Performer, and Yamaha multi-part editor software.

assignable knobs, acoustic instruments where the faders let you change the timbre by mixing separate layers of rosin buzz and body in a string voice. Be sure to check out the electric guitars, as the faders control various types of noise, feedback, and effects, and the acoustic guitars, which are famously realistic.

Each preset voice has five arpeggios or phrases saved with it, selected by the sub-function buttons, all appropriate to the type of instrument you have dialed up. The multitimbral performance sounds feature great film-type beds, groovin' beats with layers of bass and lead instruments, and some very interesting musical uses of the arpeggiator, especially on the guitar tracks, like a 12-string strum straight out of "Pinball Wizard" and funky wah-wah phrases worthy of any '70s cop movie.

IN USE

Being new to the Motif series, my first impressions of the workflow of creating a song in the MO's internal sequencer are that it's non-linear. In my opinion, it's not excessively difficult but not intuitive enough that a "Where would I be if I were a . . ." approach always had the desired result. To better grasp it, I decided to simulate a couple of situations drawn from real-world experience. The first is the familiar situation in which immediately after plugging in an instrument for the first time I'm told, "We have five minutes to build a rhythm track. Let's go!" I found a nice drum beat to start with, but when I switched to pattern mode, the preset phrases weren't immediately available. They are there, but from inside the sequencer assigning a voice to a track doesn't automatically bring those arpeggios that you accessed via the sub-function buttons when in Voice mode. Getting them there involved a copy function accessed by pressing the JOB button while on the correct page in Mixing mode, a process thoroughly described in the "Behind the Manual" section of the Motif user site www.motifator.com. It's simple once you know how, but at first it was a speed bump on

CLAIM CHECK

Yamaha says, "The MO was designed to bring the sonic power, song creation ability, and computer integration of our Motif ES workstations to a wider audience at a lower price. It not only has the same basic waveforms and many of the same voice programs as the ES, but also new custom voices geared towards contemporary music production. "Except for sampling, the MO also has the ES's workstation functionality, including both a song- and loop-based sequencer. With all the included Phrase Factory arpeggios and drum grooves, plus features like Realtime Loop Remix, it's very easy to put complete song tracks together.

"The Studio Connections editors let you integrate the MO into Steinberg Cubase software, treating the MO just like a VST plug-in. The MO also has full remote control capability for DAW software. The Motif series has always been about three things — inspiring sounds, easy song creation, and computer integration. MO offers all of those for much less money."


my road towards, "I wanna record *this* cool preset groove right now!" Since phrases are objects with names (like nearly everything in the MO), you can also pick exactly which ones you want and implant them into tracks from a page called "patch." You can also save licks you've created as user phrases.

The second task was to sync a music bed to my computer sequencer (MOTU Digital Performer 4), as I would on a film cue, and I quickly met with success. The MO8 simply worked great with my Apple G5 computer. I synced a few MO tracks to the tempo of existing DP4 projects, then recorded more tracks on the MO8 while synced, and used the MO's sequencer buttons to start and stop DP4. Yamaha's implementation of the Mackie Control protocol is very thorough: Tweak the knobs and watch your computer-based tracks do your bidding.

At first I thought that toggling whether the MO is slaved to an external tempo source required going into the MO's Utility pages, selecting the Sync screen, changing the setting, then exiting to continue your workflow. Then I discovered "Quik Set." From inside Song or Pattern mode, press the UTILITY button, then F3, then SF4, to bring up four templates for how you want to use the MO: recording on the internal sequencer only, recording from the sequencer to your computer, recording on your computer's sequencer only, and most cool of all, recording the arpeggiator to the computer. Pressing the Utility button when in Voice mode takes you to similar, but not identical, functions. The lesson? On the MO and Motif series, even buttons that seem very general or "bottom-level" might in fact be context-sensitive, so be prepared to spend some time studying to get fluent.

CONCLUSIONS

The MO combines excellent sounds with hundreds of high-quality beats and phrases. For live players searching for their first pro-oriented keyboard, it's impossible to find fault with the MO — its sound quality and variety is far beyond entry-level, and Phrase Factory is like having a couple of DVD-ROMs' worth of loops you can use without a computer. In fact, a great marketing move would be for Yamaha to rename the Arpeggiator section the Onboard Loop Library! Then again, loops on a piece of soundware don't follow your fingers and evolve as you play the way the MO's phrases do.

As for its use as a standalone production environment, I'm the first to admit I'm a "computer guy," and that the last keyboard workstation I was proficient at was the Korg M1. My deficiencies aside, I think that the best of intentions are behind the specific workflow Yamaha is going for, but also that a certain commitment is required to really wrap your head around it. As is the case with any music-making platform this powerful, though, the rewards of doing so are plentiful. Ultimately the MO is a very playable, thoroughly professional instrument, and given the price, an undeniably killer value. 

Scott Healy is the keyboardist in the Max Weinberg Seven. Watch him on NBC's Late Night with Conan O'Brien, and learn about his projects at www.bluedogmusic.com.