

Yamaha MOX6 review

Into:

Back in the days (the 70s) I used to get asked this question a lot: “what is the difference between a synthesiser and an electronic organ?” I would try to explain it, usually to the bemusement of the enquirer, who could only spot that they both had keyboards. Fast forward to 2011 and the question is “what is the difference between a Synthesiser, a Keyboard Workstation, and a Professional Arranger?” Today, the answer is much simpler; “not a lot, they probably all function as a combined ROMpler, sequencer, and MIDI controller.” In short, various keyboard types have converged into a ‘Swiss army knife’ style keyboard that is supposedly just as good on stage as it is at home or in the studio. To sidestep the issue, Yamaha have decided to name this keyboard a “Music Production Synthesizer” So what exactly is their new offering? Let’s explore...

Physical Checkup

- ❖ Weight! Only 7.0kg Big brother 88 note (weighted) 14.8kg
- ❖ Recessed plugs on rear (good for protection, not so good for finding)
- ❖ Power: 12v DC power pack. The MOX boots up quickly.
- ❖ 61 note keyboard. The manual describes it as semi-weighted but it is really more on the light side. This makes it excellent for a good range of sounds, but only passable for piano. The keys are slightly recessed from the front of the instrument to avoid damage. Overall, a good playable keyboard. No Aftertouch.
- ❖ Pitch wheel has a soft return action (nice).
- ❖ The display is a bit small, but adequate.
- ❖ Lots of button switches (91).
- ❖ Good build quality (very Yamaha), but in a plastic case – not very road worthy

Sounds

With 355MB of wave memory available to the AWM2 tone generators the MOX should have some good sounds. When switched on it wants to show off its ‘band in a box’ features (and some of the performances are very good). I was more interested in checking out the sounds sans drums and FX. Over to Voice Mode... here we find 1024 presets (‘voices’ in Yamaha-speak) and there can be up to 8 layers (‘elements’) per sound. A category search makes it easy to locate sounds by type, which is essential as there are 16 categories including ethnic, sound FX, and musical FX. The synth sounds are divided into three groups (leads, pads, comp).

Piano sounds are good, and within the E piano group there are some nice Rhodes and Wulitzers. Clav sounds are ok. Organs are good, with some great B3 sounds (and a good Leslie). The Mod Wheel works the Leslie, which changes speed nicely (think Leslie 122). Fast /slow is reversed on some presets which I found a bit confusing. Strings are quite good, although sometimes more string-synth than acoustic sounding. This may suit some users better. Brass sounds are ok. Bases include some good usable acoustics and electrics, and you shouldn’t have much trouble finding synth leads or pads to do the job.

The MOX6 “draws on the sounds of the Motif XS” but some of them are more of a sketch than a full drawing. Many rely more on FX than high quality samples and dynamic nuances. To my ear, this gives the sounds a somewhat ‘mushy’ tone, and they would need some EQ to cut through a busy mix. Nevertheless, there is a good range of usable sounds provided.

Performance Mode

Each performance can have up to 4 parts (each with its own arpeggiator), and there is a Favourites menu to make sound selection for playing live easier.

To check out the editing I used a sax preset and found it easy to change the tone, modulation and FX. Editing is done either on the voice overall (common), or individual layers (element). Some parameters can be adjusted for both (eg LFO), so it can get a bit tricky. This is where the free Voice Editor software is invaluable. Good documentation is provided.

Control

8 knobs and 2 select switches give access to 24 parameters, 2 of which can be user assigned. These can tweak either the whole performance, or a single voice. The parameter value jumps up on the display when a knob is adjusted. When using the rotary controls I found it fiddly to restore the value to 0 on parameters that can go negative (I kept wishing for a Control-click shortcut). Octave and Transpose switches are provided. The Arpeggiator has six buttons below the display that are usually assigned to quickly select 6 patterns from the 6,720 available! By default, the arpeggios play at maximum velocity. It can sync to MIDI.

Splits and Layers are easy to setup. Being able to balance the sounds here would have been nice but this must be done in the voices themselves. The keyboard can be split into 4 when in Master mode. This mode is great for live performance as voices or performances can be saved to make a playlist. The lack of colour and multitude of switches could be a problem in low light venues.

Yeah, Yeah, but what else can it do?

Quite a bit. For starters there a Vocoder preset (which I didn’t try as I had no XLR-jack lead). Providing an XLR and phantom power would have been good.

The MOX6 has been designed to work well with a computer. There is a separate DAW volume control beside the main volume (to control playback). A stereo A/D input acts as an audio interface for the computer, and sounds from the synth engine can be streamed into the DAW. Going the other way, it can send the computer audio out through the keyboard. Connection is via USB using a Steinberg driver. Cubase AI is included on a disk, and a B3 organ, and a VA synth (both VST plugins) can be downloaded. An editor is also available as a free download. This can either run as a VST3 Cubase plugin, or standalone (using Yamaha’s Studio Manager as a host). There is also remote control software, which allows the MOX to a control surface (directly with Cubase AI, or using the Mackie Control settings for Logic Pro,

SONAR, or DP). Interestingly, PT compatibility is not mentioned. Saving /loading data can also be done to a USB pendrive.

Conclusion

So where does it sit? Is it a keyboard for stage performance or for music production? Clearly, Yamaha's intention was to design a keyboard worthy for either studio or stage. On this note they have succeeded, by putting enough physical features to satisfy many performance needs (including a 220,000 note sequencer to build your songs – does anyone still do this?), and also being a good MIDI controller keyboard that includes an audio interface. It is a utility keyboard and does everything, but not as well as a specialised tool. My question is 'how relevant is it to use keyboard sounds and sequencers for music production in this computer age?' Maybe Yamaha need to follow other manufacturers who are making dedicated performance keyboards (eg the Nord Stage, or Roland's Jupiter 80). Still, this is a good all-round midrange keyboard that is definitely worth taking for a test drive.

Rivals - being priced at \$2695 puts the MOX6 squarely against the Roland Juno Stage performance synth, and the cheaper Korg M50 workstation (73 note). Also competing is the Kurzweil PC3 LE (61 or 76 note models).

- + lightweight
- + superior keybed
- + great DAW integration
- + great arpeggiator
- + up to 3 keyboard split-points

- a bewildering array of switches
- no 76 note version
- 64 note polyphony
- poor value for money

The Verdict

I didn't buy it, as what I was really after was a performance keyboard without the computer connectivity and so on. Thankfully my decision was made easy by the price being too much for what it is. I checked on the price in the USA and it retails for \$1200 and is available at a special price of \$1049 from two retailers. In NZ money that is \$1461, and \$1277 so you can see why I balked at it being \$2695 here. As much as I like Yamaha products, this one just doesn't add up to value for money.