

VINTAGE SYNTHESIZERS

A FIRST TIME OWNER'S EXPERIENCE



By Phil Roberts

I blame classical music for my love of vintage synthesizers. True, most classical artists would curl up and die at the thought of playing their exquisite compositions on anything other than the 'authentic' instrument, and the mere mention of electronics is enough to send the 'period instrument' purist into apoplexy.

So who to point the finger at? I'll suggest Johann Sebastian Bach.

J S Bach was a versatile fellow. Despite living a couple of centuries before the Moog family cooed over their new-born pride and joy and called him Robert, Bach was a master of transcription for any instrument. As he relied on his composing for his income, we can forgive him for recycling a tune once, twice, sometimes several times! Piano, strings, organ, harpsichord, as long as the punters loved it, he re-scored it. Frau Bach and the little Bach

's were provided for, and a musical legacy unequalled in the history of serious music was born.

And then, somewhere in the second half of the 20th century, somebody re-scored his work again. An enterprising and enormously talented young woman called Wendy Carlos produced an album called Switched-On Bach. It sold a million plus copies, the best selling classical record of all time and to the purists horror the sound was produced entirely on a modular Moog synthesizer!

The Moog Synthesizer became the talk of the musical world. S-OB was a big boost to the fledgling company of R.A.Moog, and a legend was born. Big modular Moog systems began to roll out into the big wide world and eager musicians, laden with fistfuls of patchcords and endless patience set out to explore a new frontier in music. The American synth industry took off, with names like Don Buchla, Tom Oberheim, Alan R Pearlman, Dave Smith and Ray Kurzweil becoming the new gurus of instrument design.

S-OB was a big hit. It was also my first introduction to the electronic sound world. I've never forgotten the experience. In the beginning there was Carlos...then cometh Wakeman and Emerson...

Yup, I soon discovered that rock music was the natural home for the experimental sound of the analogue synth. Emerson, Lake and Palmer, Jean Michel Jarre, Stevie Wonder and Rick Wakeman were among the gurus using these unique new instruments, but don't let us forget the jazzers - Herbie Hancock, Joe Zawinul. Even classical music has seen its fair share of innovative synthesists – Isao Tomita & Don Dorsey occur to mind, in addition to the all-conquering Wendy Carlos. Any examination of my CD and LP collection will tell you I have a very broad taste in music. From the most sober classics to experimental jazz and prog rock, I probably have it. And a high proportion was chosen purely for the sonic experience. I was bitten by the search for alternative musical sonorities, and electronic sounds offered a new and exciting avenue for my search.

I'll gloss over my ham-fisted attempts at learning to play a keyboard instrument (my piano teacher is still in psychiatric care); I just play for my own pleasure! But I despised the piano; I wanted an instrument which had wide sonic possibilities, so I chose the home keyboard. What a mistake. A home keyboard is filled with a multitude of sounds sampled, sometimes well, sometimes badly, from 'real instruments'. You are merely reproducing an obvious (and inferior) copy of a set sound. A true synthesizer is a unique musical instrument that allows you to create sounds yourself. I soon discovered the two sound worlds that turned me on: the classic Hammond B3 tonewheel organ/leslie speaker, and the analogue synthesizer. I couldn't afford a B3! So the synth route it had to be.

My first vintage synth was a lovingly restored Moog Prodigy. It was basic, monophonic, limited, and I loved it! The sheer pleasure of twirling the knobs to try new sounds, new worlds in my aural universe was utopia for me. Check out the real wood casing – phhroaaww!

It was said many years ago and it still holds true. Don't try to copy acoustic instrument sounds. Create new sounds. A synthesizer playing a flute solo whilst trying to sound like a flute will be less convincing than a synthesizer playing the same solo using sounds unique to the electronic spectrum. That's the beauty of the sound creation possibilities of analogue synthesis. I found I could play an absolutely blazing synth lead that put guitarist friends to shame. One particularly gobsmacked individual's comment was "Does that thing run on steroids?" He couldn't believe that this antique looking little keyboard instrument could be more cutting, more dirty than

his lead guitar! He also subsequently professed dissatisfaction with all his digital synth rack set-up after hearing the Prodigy.

Maybe we all have hidden desire to perform – I know I do. But facts are facts – I'm no great musician although I love all music with obsessive passion. However, I wanted the pleasure of pretending I was Rick Wakeman or Keith Emerson – in the privacy of my own home – and the buzz you get from tinkering with the same toys they play with. The Prodigy did just that...

Analogue synths are enjoying a revival right now. People are waking up to the fact that actually no modern digital synth sounds quite like the old analogues (not even the analogue modelling instruments, although some are very good). Johnny Greenwood of the innovative band Radiohead is actively using a large patchable modular analogue synth to supplement his wide range of instruments. Unfortunately as a general rule synthesists are techies by nature and always want the latest upgrades and gadgets whilst dismissing the previous generation as old hat. How foolish. Just because something is newer doesn't necessarily make it better. Yamaha makes excellent stringed instruments, and apparently

makes some of the best quality violins today in high quality materials. So why do top violinists pay ridiculous prices for a centuries old (and less than cosmetically perfect) violin by Stradivarius?

The bottom line is that in the hands of a master like Itzhak Perlman, a Strad is the most beautiful violin in the world. I will suggest that for similar ethereal reasons, a Minimoog in the hands of Rick Wakeman or Brian Eno is the same. Some instruments are imbued with a character all of their own, for reasons that defy the laws of physics and electronics, and a select handful of players can take them to the heights of inspiration. Bob Moog's famous Minimoog is the classic case and this is reflected in its high value on the second hand market – it really is the Stradivarius of the synth world. A classical composer, who is an acquaintance of mine, once told me that there were only three electronic instruments he considered unique enough to write a classical concerto for – the Stratocaster electric guitar, the Hammond B3 organ and the Minimoog. I am trying to persuade him to compose such an innovative triad of concertos!

But for the financially challenged (myself included) a Minimoog seems like a luxury! Never fear! Like as classical pianists may favour the Steinway model D as the definitive piano, there is a large number who prefer a Bosendorfer! So some like ARP synthesizers, some prefer the early Korgs or Oberheims - the choice is endless and a lot of models are more affordable than a Minimoog.

I love my beautiful Moog Prodigy. This lovely little 2-oscillator synth has provided me with many happy hours of synthesizer fun. The silly grin on the face when you discover a hitherto undiscovered timbre, and the mad scramble to draw up the patch chart so as to revisit that sound at a later date gives a whole new experience. I route my synths through the Lexicon MPX200 multi-effects processor to a powerful Roland mixer amp. My wife is despairing, the kids mystified, and the neighbours wear earmuffs – but Dad is happy!

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