

REVIEW

SYNTH » CLONEWHEEL » VIRTUAL PIANO » STANDS » MASTERING » APP



HAMMOND SK1-73

BY BRIAN HO

HAMMOND'S SK SERIES HAS SET A NEW PORTABILITY STANDARD FOR DRAWBAR organs that also function as versatile stage keyboards in virtue of having a complement of non-organ sounds that can be split and layered with the drawbar section. Where the original SK1 had 61 keys and the SK2 added a second manual, the new SK1-73 and SK1-88 aim for musicians looking for the same sonic capabilities in a single-slab form factor that's more akin to a stage piano. I got to use the 73-key model on several gigs and was very pleased with its sound and performance.

Keyboard Feel

I find that a 61-note keyboard is often too small for me to play acoustic or electric piano comfortably (especially for wide spreads between bass and treble parts) but an 88 is often a smidge too big for gigs where you're backed into a room's corner that's serving as the "stage." For such gigs, 73 keys seems to be just the right size.

The semi-weighted action on the SK1-73 is extremely playable and smooth. Since I'm primarily an organist, I find it much easier to play piano, electric piano, and Clavinet parts on a semi-weighted keyboard than I do on a weighted one—however scandalous that seems to proper pianists! There are also four velocity curves and a velocity offset parameter for additional control of non-organ sounds. The MIDI implementation of the SK series also makes it a simple matter to hook up an extra MIDI controller to devote to the non-organ "Extra Voices" or to the lower-manual organ part.

Key Features

Simply put, Hammond organists will be very happy with the SK1-73. There's little to say about its tonewheel and Leslie emulation that we haven't said in previous SK series reviews (we've reposted those at keyboardmag.com/october2013), other than that

they'll stand next to anything out there and not leave you or the audience wanting for realism. A notable addition, though, is that you can now add custom tonewheel sets. That said, the stock "1960s" set had the perfect combination of grit and clarity.

The LCD shows you all the drawbar registrations either as numbers or as bar graphs. This is an omission on some competing single-manual organs—as is any sort of discreet pedal part, for that matter. Speaking of which, it's easy to add a MIDI pedalboard to the SK1-73 or 88 for kicking bass. As I play in a lot of jazz combos and organ trios where I cover bass, this is important to have. If you don't have a pedalboard, the Manual Bass button brings the pedal sound up to the lower keyboard zone. As on the original SK1, this can be polyphonic or monophonic with low-note priority. With some practice, the latter lets you get both bass and chord mileage out of your left hand.

When I first tried the original 61-key SK1 back in 2011, I wanted the organs to trigger at a higher point in the key dip. In a recent software update to the SK series, they can be set to do exactly this—while leaving the trigger point of any non-organ sounds unchanged. This goes a very long way towards getting an authentic B-3 organ playing experience out of the same instrument

that you're using for pianos, EPs, Clavs, strings, and other sounds.

Even though there isn't a button that causes the entire keyboard to play only the lower organ part—useful if you want to switch between solo and comping sounds without disturbing the single set of drawbars—I found a cool workaround. Simply create a "Favorite" (Hammond's term for presets that save the entire state of the instrument) with the highest note on the keyboard as

Snap Judgment



PROS Killer tonewheel organ and Leslie speaker emulation with multitimbral upper, lower, and pedal parts. Non-organ "Extra Voices" are highly giggable. Ultra-portable. Easy to split and layer. Deep editing of tonewheel, Leslie, and effects settings.



CONS Acoustic and electric bass sounds are absent from Extra Voices. Some organ purists may dislike the non-clicky drawbars. Pitch-bend and modulation wheels would be nice to have on some of the Extra Voices.



the split point, so that hitting the Split button then toggles you between upper and lower parts.

Extra Voices

The non-organ voices on the SK series will get you through nearly any gig, with Rhodes and Wurly electric pianos, Clavs, and synth string ensembles being particular standouts. Again, for space reasons, we'll send you online for a more detailed tour in our reviews of the original SK1 and SK2. A notable exclusion is the lack of acoustic or electric bass sounds, but then, the pedal bass in the organ section is a warmer-sounding choice for most applications—and it includes a toggle for adjustable sustain.

I found that many of the Extra Voices initially played at different volumes. Since the Extra Voice section has its own volume control, and since its entry value is saved with any Favorites preset, correcting this was a simple matter of doing some re-saving.

As on previous SK models, splitting and layering the Extra Voices with the organ sound is very easy—one-touch buttons assign the Extra Voice section to either the upper or lower keyboard zone. It is worth mentioning that since you get one Extra Voice at a time, you can't do a split or layer consisting solely of Extra Voices—you get the current Extra Voice plus one organ part or the other. You can easily octave-shift either side of the split independently.

Each Extra Voices has an appropriate insert effect pre-programmed (e.g., a retro-sounding phaser on some EPs), which has its own on/off button and amount knob. Press and hold the button, and up pops a menu where you can change the effect. (In fact, holding nearly any button jumps you to the most relevant page in the editing

menu—a great shortcut for tweaking Leslie settings, Extra Voices, or anything else.)

On the Gig

One of my favorite gigs with the SK1-73 was at the 2013 World Baseball Classic in San Francisco. Since I had to take public transit, I knew I'd have to use the venue-supplied monitors and P.A. I grabbed the SK1-73, bungeed a stand to its case, threw my cords and expression pedal in a backpack, and jumped on the train. When I got to the gig, setting up took all of five minutes—which is about all I had between the previous band's set and mine. The organ section and onboard Leslie effect sounded fabulous through the house P.A., and I greatly enjoyed using the Clav and EP to supplement what I otherwise would've played in an organ trio. Afterwards, I was the first to be packed up gone—even before the guitar player!

Another gig called for a combination of jazz, funk, and R&B, and the band included a singer, bassist, and drummer. Normally, I'd bring a dedicated drawbar organ plus a stage piano to cover acoustic piano, EP, and Clav sounds. This time, the SK1-73 was all I needed. Organ and non-organ sounds alike cut through the mix nicely. Did I mention that in spite of its extended length,

the SK1-73 weighs in at about 21 pounds? I'll be taking the train more often and putting less gig money in the gas tank!

Conclusions

While there are other "organ meets stage piano" keyboards out there, the Hammond SK1-73 more directly appeals to "organist first" musicians like myself. If you're a pianist first and need no-compromise B-3 organ sounds without carrying an extra keyboard, then the fully weighted SK1-88 is your axe—at a weight increase of only seven pounds. It also needs to be said that compared to some other keyboards that give you organs with full drawbar control and non-organ sounds at the same time (as opposed to one mode or the other), the SK1-73 and 88 are priced far lower. Whether they're organs cleverly disguised as stage pianos or vice versa, there's no question that Hammond's new SK keyboards will get you through nearly any gig without breaking your back or your bank account. 🎵

Bottom Line

A full-fledged Hammond organ experience plus the key range and sounds you'd expect from a stage piano, all in a 21-pound package? Yes, please.

\$2,695 list | \$2,395 street
hammondorganco.com



Read our previous reviews of the Hammond SK1 and SK2.

keyboardmag.com/october2013