

Keyboard



Review: The Vox Continental

ANDY BURTON · FEB 12, 2018

Reimagining a Sixties Icon

The original Vox Continental, first introduced by British manufacturer Jennings Musical Industries in 1962, is a classic “combo organ”. This sleek, transistor-based portable electric organ is deeply rooted in pop-music history, used by many of the biggest rock bands of the ’60’s and beyond. Two of the most prominent artists of the era to use a Continental as a main feature of their sound were the Doors (for example, on their classic 1967 breakthrough hit “Light My Fire”) and the Animals (“House Of The Rising Sun”). John Lennon famously played one live with the Beatles at the biggest-ever rock show to date, at New York’s Shea Stadium in 1965.

The Continental was bright orange-red with reverse-color keys, which made it stand out visually, especially on television (which had recently transitioned from black-and-white to color). The sleek design, as much as the sound, made it the most popular combo organ of its time, rivaled only by the Farfisa Compact series.

The sound, generated by 12 transistor-based oscillators with octave-divider circuits, was thin and bright - piercing even. And decidedly low-fidelity and egalitarian. The classier, more lush-sounding and expensive Hammond B-3 / Leslie speaker combination effectively required a road crew to move around, ensuring that only acts with a big touring budget could afford to carry one. By contrast, the Continental and its combo-organ rivals were something any keyboard player in any band, famous or not, could use onstage.

So how is all this ancient history relevant to 2018, and why would Korg (which has owned the Vox name since 1992) want to put out a modern version today? And why should you care?

Perhaps it may have something to do with the enduring popularity of a certain line of keyboards coming from Sweden that produce a variety of retro sounds (including a take on the original Continental) and also happen to sport a visually-striking bright red hue?

If nothing else, the enduring popularity of Clavia's Nord Electro and Stage series shows that vintage keyboard textures are alive and well even in today's digital-driven, hip-hop/dance-pop-dominated music industry. So why shouldn't Korg make its own play for that sector of the market with a new keyboard bearing a classic name and equally striking visuals?

However, to compete in the current marketplace, a new entry based on the classic Continental can't just be a great combo organ like the original. Today even a "retro" keyboard has to be versatile and have a foot in the present.

Which the new Continental certainly does. On top of a flawless reproduction of the original Vox Continental sound, you get two other types of organ emulation (CX-3 & Farfisa Compact), plus acoustic pianos (grand & upright), electric pianos (tine, reed and FM), a surprisingly usable synth, and a good selection of PCM - sampled instruments. All of these come courtesy of Korg's proprietary sound engines: SGX-2 (pianos), EP-1 (Rhodes/Wurlly), AL-1 (virtual analog synthesis) and HD-1 (Clavinet and PCM samples). Plus you get some nice onboard effects and really cool performance controls to bring these sounds to life.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Despite its somewhat superficial physical resemblance to the Nord line, the new Continental really has its own highly distinctive look and aesthetic. On first removing the Continental from its box, the first thing I noticed was the aforementioned cool orange-red color and retro stylings. On a personal note: I own a vintage 1967 Vox Super Continental, a double-manual Italian-made model favored by such great players as Steve Nieve of Elvis Costello and the Attractions. (I bought mine from Pat Irwin, former touring keyboardist with the B-52's. Thank Pat!) Therefore I was able to make a visual comparison in my studio between the 1967 and 2018 versions with my own eyes. I can truly say the color is actually pretty close to the original (which may in any event have faded or changed over 50 years). I found myself thinking, "Wow, now if only the new one had those reverse-color keys..."

As cool as those reverse-color keys might be, I'm sure they would add to the cost, and people who aren't total retro-heads might not even like them anyway, so I understand this is a safer bet marketing-wise. The other visual features certainly contribute to the powerful retro vibe in other ways. The color is something you might find on a '60's Italian sports car (or a super-high-end modern one with retro design touches). The chrome logos are awesome. The front panel is, of necessity, more complicated than anything made in the '60's would ever be - because it does so much more - but it's still relatively simple by today's standards. It does have a few features that are visually and functionally reminiscent of the work of their Swedish competitors (most notably the LED touch sensors, the different instrument sections, and their programmable section-volume knobs with circular LED level indicators). But as we'll see, the differences far outweigh any similarities.

FRONT PANEL LAYOUT

The centerpiece of the front panel is the "Control" section - and the centerpiece of the Control section are the 9 Touch Sensors, surrounded by buttons for Bank and Scene selection, Exit and Write functions, and buttons which activate the Organ, E. Piano, Piano and Key / Layer sections.

The touch sensors, at first glance, appear quite similar to the 9 LED "virtual drawbars" found on most Nord Electro and Stage models, but they actually do much more. On sounds from the Organ section, they indicate the current drawbar registration (or, for the Farfisa Compact emulation, tone-switch registration) that you're hearing. The cool new feature is: Unlike the Nord with its in-out buttons, on the Continental you move the virtual drawbars by touching the LED display itself with your finger.

I got used to this fairly quickly; the sensors are plenty responsive to sliding, and you can also just touch the sensor where you want the individual drawbar set and the LED's will quickly jump to your finger position. Once I got accustomed to this method, I found that it offers precise, intuitive and fast control of your drawbar settings. When moving only one or two virtual drawbars at a time, I found it just about as quick as physical ones. I then decided to test the unit's CPU by holding an organ chord with a sustain pedal (you can do that), releasing my hand while the chord sustained, and then using four fingers from each hand to move 8 drawbars at once. The response was significantly slower than moving one or two. But I can't imagine this scenario coming up often enough to be a real problem; if you want instant full drawbars, you can always save it as a scene.

But wait, those touch sensors do much more! In EQ mode, they can also act as a touch-sensitive 9-band master graphic EQ, or, in Key / Layer mode, as an array of synth parameters. Talk about efficiency! This saves 18 additional knobs without burying functions deep in menus or losing a shred of intuitiveness in the interface. More on this later.

KEYBOARD ACTION

Without reservation, I can say that the Continental's semi-weighted waterfall action makes it a perfect choice either as a lightweight bottom keyboard or as a "compromise action" for a one-keyboard gigging situation. I found the waterfall action on the Continental to be really nice - way better than my flimsy 1967 plastic action, certainly! It was easy on my fingers without being too easy, and I found I was quite comfortable playing piano, organ and synth sounds on it. I could do a glissando effortlessly. There are 9 velocity curves to choose from in system settings, and the response can be further adjusted on the fly using the Dynamics knob (see below). The only real missing ingredient here is aftertouch.

SOUND SELECTION

There are seven Sections on the front panel: Master Controls, Organ, "Control", E. Piano, Piano, Key/Layer and Effects.

The Master Controls section is located at the left end of the front panel. It contains a Master Volume knob which controls the overall volume of all sections. (The instrument sections - Organ, E. Piano, Piano and Key/Layer - each have rotary encoder knobs whose values - relative to the Master Volume - can be saved in a Scene. More on that further on.)

Below this, you get controls for two master effects, Valve Drive and Dynamics. Valve Drive features a real vacuum tube developed specifically for Korg called Nutube, which adds a pleasing compression and crunch to everything. When engaged, you can see it glowing through the artfully-placed heat sink directly over the volume knob, and the intensity of the glow indicates the amount of drive you have going. The Dynamics master effect, described above, is a real time adjustment to the user-selected velocity curve for non-Organ sounds, and doubles as an additional treble boost/cut for the Organ section.

On the other end, past the instrument sections, you find the Effects section. All the effects sound really nice. You get Chorus, Phaser, Flanger, Compression, Drive and Wah. (The Wah works really well with the included expression pedal, which is solid and sturdy, bears the Vox logo in regal style, and doubles as a stereo volume pedal to boot!) You can adjust the depth of each effect by turning the Effects knob; one additional parameter (depending on the individual effect) can be adjusted by holding down the Effects button as you turn the Effects knob. The same process allows for Feedback to be adjusted on the Delay effect and Reverb Time to be adjusted on the Reverb effect.

ORGANS

The organ section is also located on the left, just to the right of the Master Controls. At the top is a programmable volume knob surrounded by a circular red LED level indicator, which dims when the Organ section is not active, but still shows the level and allows you to adjust it while inactive - a useful feature. Of course, the other sections - E. Piano, Piano and Key / Layer - also have this knob and functionality.

You select the organ model by pushing a button at the bottom of the section that cycles between “Vox” (our namesake combo organ), “Compact” (the Farfisa Compact Combo) and “CX-3” (Korg’s Hammond-B3-emulation engine), with a corresponding LED indicating the selected model. Above this we find up-and-down Variation selector buttons and a numeric display. You can select 11 Variations each of “Vox” and “Compact” organ tones, and 19 Variations of “CX-3”. The downloadable Name List is very helpful in guiding you to understanding the historical context of the factory Vox and Compact Variations - they are given labels such as “Light My Fire Organ” or “Rock Lobster Organ” which really do nail the organ sounds heard on those classic tracks.

To the right of the Variation buttons are 3 more buttons that control model-specific organ effects such as Percussion and Chorus-Vibrato for the CX-3, MTB (Multi-Tone Boost) for the Compact - which uses one of the touch sensors to emulate the Farfisa’s knee-lever tone control, pitch vibrato for both Vox and Compact, and a Rotary effect which can be applied to any organ model. With the rotary effect enabled, you can control the Leslie speed with the Bend lever located to the left of the keyboard, or with a foot switch attached to the Rotor Speed jack on the back panel. I found the bend lever to be both solid and satisfying to operate as a Leslie speed control. It does more than that, but we’ll get to it later.

I would have liked more control over the organ-specific effects, such as vibrato depth and speed for the Compact model - you have the ability to vary these on the original - and percussion volume / decay / harmonic selection for the CX-3 model (you only get the 2nd harmonic).

ORGAN SOUND

As an owner of a vintage Continental, I can tell you that the reproduction of its namesake is absolutely spot on, sounding like a studio recording of a well-recorded ’60’s Continental in perfect condition (which is probably quite rare today. Trust me when I say the originals can be pretty frail). Digital it may be, but there’s plenty of warmth and grit along with the clarity, which can be enhanced using the Valve Drive master effect. On the touch sensors, you get a faithful recreation of the drawbars, including the ones that control the “flute” and “reed” waveforms. Couldn’t have been done better as far as I’m concerned.

The sound of the “Connie”’s one-time arch-rival, the Farfisa Compact Combo organ, is beautifully rendered here as well. They are both transistor-based, octave-divider organs, but the differences between the two are not subtle at all - they each evoke a distinct vibe. Some call the Farfisa sound “garage-ier”. I call it haunting, in its own way. I also own 2 vintage ’60’s Farfisa Compact’s and can assure you, Korg absolutely nails this tone too. The vibrato is accurate, even though it lacks the original’s ability to vary speed and depth. And as stated above, they even successfully recreated the Farfisa knee-lever-controlled “multi-tone boost” - a kind of primitive, less-resonant wah-wah - using one of the touch sensors.

You also get a Hammond B-3 / Leslie emulation via Korg’s well-known CX-3 virtual tone wheel engine, so that base is covered as well. As stated earlier, percussion control is limited to 2nd-harmonic on-off, vibrato is limited to “Chorus-3” or nothing, and there are no Leslie parameters other than rotary speed - to say nothing of keyclick or the myriad other controllable parameters we’ve come to expect in a modern clonewheel organ. If those are crucial for you, best to look at a dedicated clonewheel instead.

There is a split function, but only for the Vox and CX-3 organ models (not true multi-timbral functionality, alas). You can split the organs (except the Compact, which has a permanently assigned bass section) into upper and lower manuals with different registrations on each manual. The lower manual can be an external MIDI keyboard, or the lower part of the Continental’s own keyboard, with a user-definable split point. With the CX-3 model you can have vibrato on one manual but not the other; with the Vox model, the vibrato is on both manuals or none.

PIANOS

Under the touch sensors are the buttons that activate the various Sections. The “Piano” button activates the SGX-2 piano engine, which is capable of 60 “dual stereo” notes (equivalent to 240 voices max.) according to the manual. I certainly never ran into any audible voice-stealing.

These grands, uprights and e-grands offer most of the essential piano sounds you'd want from a dedicated digital piano, like Korg's own Grandstage. You get 6 multi-sampled Grand Pianos, 7 Uprights, and 5 Electric Grands - which include emulations of both the Yamaha CP-series and Korg's vintage-1980's M1 piano sound. I found the action, although it's certainly not anything like a weighted hammer action, is nonetheless quite comfortable for piano and allows for good dynamic control and expressiveness in my playing. It would be a good lightweight solution for gigs that are primarily about organ and/or synth but require some acoustic / electric piano (but not so much that you need to lug a big, heavy hammer-action digital piano as well).

The variations are nice - and here's where layering can really enhance your sonic palette. You can layer any two of the four sections by pressing their corresponding buttons simultaneously. You can dial up a string sound in the Key / Layer section and easily combine it with a grand piano from the Piano section, adjust the relative volumes using the section level knobs (whether they're active yet or not), press Piano and Key / Layer simultaneously, and you've got piano / strings. That is the tip of the iceberg - you can really get a lot of mileage out of layering. Try strings with organs, electric pianos with acoustic pianos, or Key / Layer sounds with just about anything.

Layering is great, but I did find myself wishing I could split the keyboard between piano and organ sounds. You can't have everything, I guess. What you can do (and it's admittedly not a substitute) is hold a note or chord on organ while switching to another Scene featuring a piano sound. You can hold the organ note or chord indefinitely and it will continue to sound while every new note you play will be piano. It's not like splitting the keyboard but it will at least allow you the chance to generate both textures at once in certain instances.

ELECTRIC PIANOS

If you've heard the Korg Grandstage, you've heard the EP-1 engine, and in my opinion it's capable of some mighty fine electric piano emulations. You get the best and most essential of those EP's here: 9 multi-sampled Rhodes' (labeled as "Tine"), 6 Wurlicizers ("Reed"), and 7 Yamaha DX7-derived digital FM electric piano sounds ("FM"). They cover all the bases quite nicely. (Clavinets are available under the Key / Layer section, which brings benefits I will discuss later.) Some have built-in effects, like Tine #5, which is your basic '70's-sounding Rhodes through a phase shifter. I expected to see the built-in effects in the Effects section (see below) light up to show that the phaser effect was on, but it didn't! The phasing was in the sound itself. All of the available effects were available, applied post-phaser. It's nice to be able to have 2 effects going, but you can actually have a third, as long as one of them is a tremolo and it's first in the signal path. You can apply a tremolo effect to all E. Piano sounds simply by pushing up the Bend bar, and turn it off by pushing the Bend bar down. This applies even to the EP's with built-in effects. It's in stereo for the Tine and FM models, mono for the Reed. Tremolo speed is adjustable via the tap tempo button at the bottom of the Effects section.

KEY / LAYER

This section is where a lot of the Continental's sonic variety - and its foot in the modern world - comes from. You get 13 "Key" sounds (clavinets, harpsichords, pipe organs and accordions); 9 "Brass" sounds (all ensembles, with a solo flute and a Mellotron flute sample thrown in for good measure); 12 "Strings" sounds (again, all ensembles, with pizzicato, Mellotron violins and a few choirs); 13 "Leads" (analog-ish monophonic synth leads); 11 "Synth" sounds (polyphonic pads and stabs); and an "Other" category of 11 sounds (mallet instruments, digital bell tones, a couple of guitars, a Kraftwerk-like synth bloop and an orchestra hit) It's a nice broad range of textures, most of which are quite good. Quite a few of the synth textures would fit in on contemporary pop tracks, which will be a boon to those not completely obsessed with the 1960's and '70's - although several of the pads can take you into the '80's (or to '00's hip-hop, however you want to perceive it).

The touch sensors come to life in a whole new way in this section. In the Key / Layer section they become touch-based synth parameter sliders. On any sound in this section - not just the “synth” sounds - you can adjust Attack, Decay, Release, Filter Cutoff, Resonance, Pitch LFO Amount, Pitch LFO Frequency, and 2 “Assigned” parameters which vary from instrument to instrument. For example, on the clavichords, Assign #1 becomes the damping lever, while Assign #2 controls the depth of a built-in phaser. The clav through a resonant filter is a really cool sound, and easily “programmed”, if you can call it that, in the heat of the moment onstage. It really is simply a matter of sliding your finger - as intuitive as any knobby analog or VA synth with dedicated controls. You can even create an auto-wah effect, even before the effects section. Using the synth parameter controls, you can turn a basic organic sound into all kinds of “synthetic-organic” textures. I had a lot of fun with this one. You can even make the resonant filter self-oscillate! Super cool. (And the Bend lever becomes a pitch bender with a fixed bend range of 2-semitones.)

There are all manner of other hidden goodies in the Assigned parameters that you’ll have fun discovering. Plus, when you start layering these sounds with the pianos or organs, you’ll discover all kinds of cool textures (tremolo Wurflitzer doubled with portamento square-wave synth lead, anyone?) And best of all, you can create all these combination and hybrid textures totally spontaneously, without any menu-diving or head-scratching. You’ll find that you can travel to many places very far away from a garage band in 1966. Or stay in 1966 if you want to, it’s pretty cool there too.

SCENES

You can immortalize your sound creations in 16 “scenes” - 4 banks of 4 scenes each. Stored in each scene are the part select buttons, the individual sounds within each section, the touch sensor settings (except for the 9-band master EQ) and all the non-EQ Effect settings. Master EQ is applied across the board to all sounds and is remembered after power-off.

Scenes can be stored and recalled on a USB flash drive.

MIDI IMPLEMENTATION

The Continental does MIDI over MIDI cables or via USB. You can connect an external MIDI controller keyboard to act as the lower manual for organ sounds. You can also turn local control of for when you have the Continental connected to a computer sequencer so as not to get double-triggered sounds.

OTHER NOTABLE FEATURES

A great feature included in the new Continental is Korg’s SST (“Seamless Sound Transitions”). You can hold a note while changing sounds and the Continental will continue playing the old sound, complete with whatever effects processing is going on, for as long as you hold that note, or until it dies out naturally, though in this case it only truly works on sounds from within the same section - say, from one Vox, CX-3 or Compact variation to another, or from one electric piano to another. This can make for some really interesting combinations of textures, even when transitioning between variations on the same sound. For example, I had the original-Vox-Continental emulation going, and held a note while switching to another original-Vox variation which had vibrato and a completely different drawbar registration. Hearing those two different organ textures combined reminded me of the sounds I can get from my vintage double-manual Super Continental.

The Continental comes with an expression / stereo volume pedal (it does both!) which is really solid and looks great with that vintage Vox logo emblazoned on it. Also, on the keyboard itself, the Vox logo lights up - a feature which can be turned off if it doesn’t work for you. I personally like it. You also get a custom chrome stand which feels solid and allows for a good variety of angles. This is not so much to my taste - I’m a fan of the original Continental Z-stand - but it’s solid and sturdy and certainly nicer than a lot of the generic X-stands we all encounter. I give credit to Korg for providing good value here; not many keyboard manufacturers include these kinds of quality accessories, even with keyboards far more expensive than the Continental.

CONCLUSIONS

In spite of - or maybe because of - its vintage heritage, this is simply a great keyboard for a gigging musician in 2018. It's retro in all the right ways, and modern in all the right ways. At a list price of \$2199 US for the 73-note version, you get a really nice semi-weighted waterfall keyboard that allows you to play piano, organ or synth, comfortably and expressively.

PROS:

Flawless reproductions of classic vintage combo organs. Usable B3 and Leslie emulation, great Kronos-engine-derived pianos, electric pianos, clavinet, Mellotrons, synth leads and pads from all eras, plus bread and butter orchestral textures, layering, great sounding effects, and the ability to make all kinds of great spontaneous variations on your sound set using a synth engine with extremely intuitive parameter controls. Lightweight, awesome-looking retro-cool package.

CONS:

Other keyboards cover similar territory with more flexibility and more options. But they are much more expensive - and they don't have the Vox mojo.

BOTTOM LINE:

Improbably, 56 years after it was first introduced, the Vox Continental is back and better than ever!

Both versions include a volume/expression pedal (V861) and dedicated keyboard stand (ST-Continental).

www.voxamps.com

Reviewer Andy Burton has toured as the keyboardist with John Mayer, Rufus Wainwright and many others. He is currently the touring keyboardist with Cyndi Lauper and Little Steven and the Disciples of Soul.