



Yamaha S70XS

Yamaha's S70XS is an all in one performance solution for the gigging and studio musician. Mike Willox sounds it out.

KEY FEATURES

- 456MB of instrument samples
- Virtual Circuit Modeling effects
- S6 concert grand sounds
- Performance Creator feature
- Mic input
- 76/88-key piano-feel response

S70XS

Manufacturer **Yamaha**

Price **£2,252**

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Yamaha proclaims the third step in the evolution of its S Series performance keyboards – the S70XS and S90XS – to be ‘a

performer's dream'. The only difference between the two is that the S70XS has a 76-note keyboard and the S90XS has an 88-note keyboard. Audio recording and playback to and from USB memory as well as microphone functionality make this version much more versatile, giving the player real control over all aspects of their performance.

Got the look

Yamaha has retained the same sleek, black-and-burgundy look of the ES but added four additional assignable rotary knobs. The layout is nicely spaced, with backlit buttons offering easy access to parameters that you'd need to edit on-the-fly. Around the back are all the usual ports, including MIDI I/O and thru, foot controller and assignable sustain as well as a stereo pair and two assignable outputs. Dual USB ports are also provided, enabling audio, SMF and program files to be imported and exported with ease. There's also a combi

socket for a dynamic mic. As with its predecessor, the LCD display is small, but given the available space on the control surface it would have been nice to see something a bit bigger. And with a 25-second boot time, you could be stuck at a gig if the power went down – 25 seconds is a long time in showbusiness.

Multi modes

The S70 has the familiar Voice, Performance (enabling you to split and layer sounds) and Multi modes that draw on the sounds available from the internal AWM2 tone generator, as well as a Sequencer mode that enables you to play SMF MIDI files either from an external sequencer or from uploaded MIDI files. With 1,024 Voice, 128 Performance, 128 General MIDI and 512 user patches you can have a lot of band sets permanently available. The Audio Rec/Play mode is the real addition, making it possible to play back high-quality backing tracks tailored to your needs. Given the SMF facility and the logarithmic expansion of space available on memory sticks these days, you could have a lot of songs in your pocket.

Finally, the Utility mode contains tuning mode variations and all the controller access that you'd need.

Sounds to go

The 456MB of instrument samples includes 142MB of dedicated piano sounds that feature samples taken from

the Yamaha S6 concert grand and are exclusive to the S70/90XS. The sound of the S6 grand is rich and warm, with an elegant clarity in the top end. It can be given a more individual character by inserting a compressor and a bit of EQ before the default send effects. The Voice patches are logically laid-out through electric pianos, keyboards and tuned percussion – again, using the wide range of insert effects you can create some authentic old-skool-sounding keyboards.

You can really lay into the weighted action, which is adjustable via the Velocity Sensitivity Depth on the individual Voice patch. Along with the half-damper facility (possible with the optional extra FC3 sustain controller), it gives a seriously visceral quality to the instrument. As a standalone digital piano it's as good as any we've played.

The S70/90XS has the same Virtual Circuit Modeling effects as the flagship Motif XS, so the sound quality and diversity of the effects is impressive. Each effect has plenty of editable parameters and we never found that we couldn't achieve the effect we were after. The onboard compressors and amp simulators sound great, with the VCM Compressor 376 having a very musical quality to it.

Like all of the sounds, the excellent acoustic guitar patches – and there are plenty of them – are made even more playable when using the two Assignable Function buttons. On one nylon string patch the strings sound muted when you press AF1 and the octave harmonic sounds when you use AF2. Both of these buttons can be set to either latch or momentary and assigned to different elements (the basic building block in a Voice patch), so you have a lot of dynamic control over the instrument you're playing.

The brass patches are some of the most realistic we've heard on a keyboard and again, via the Assignable Function buttons you can put a lot of expression into your playing. The overall presets are comprehensive with a lot more SFX than before, including some truly superb patches that are practically complete



tracks on their own. There's every kind of bass that you'd want as well as a massive amount of synth patches. You can easily layer up any of these sounds with the Layer button that automatically changes the Voice patch to a Performance patch. From there, all of the individual volume, pan, chorus and reverb send levels are easily adjusted with the data sliders. Keyboard splits are also easily set up. We particularly like

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the way that the S70/90XS enables you to work intuitively: you can start with a simple piano patch and end up with a sophisticated Performance patch in just a few minutes.

Arp to the beat

The arpeggiator is the function that brings out the best in all of these sounds. There are 6,779 different types of arpeggio divided into the various instrument categories, including MegaArps, which are designed to be used with guitar and bass Mega patches. These offer incredibly realistic combinations of picking, pulling, strumming and chopping, with five variations on each being selectable in tempo from the front panel. The arpeggiator also converts the individual drum sounds into loops, with the same five variations available from the front panel. Sounds from hip hop through to samba, rock, jazz, techno and most other contemporary genres are all there – and more realistic than a lot of other performance keyboard's. Any voice can

be arpeggiated and we found ourselves building up complex four-part sequences that would be ideal for a game soundtrack.

Studio time

The Arp buttons on the front panel also double as a useful DAW transport supporting all the main sequencing packages, including (for Windows) Cubase 4.5/5 and Sonar 8. On the Mac

they cater for Cubase 4.5/5, Logic Pro 8 and Digital Performer 8. The S70/90XS ships with Studio Manager, which enables you to save your song settings within your sequencer package and recall them to the keyboard on startup, as well as enabling you to edit the keyboard from the computer.

Mic it up

The mic facility is a real bonus. You can plug in a dynamic microphone (there's no phantom powering option) to the combi socket at the rear and the signal is routed via the A/D converters and through the effects block before being assignable to either the main or individual outs. It's easy to get a decent mic sound as the signal can be routed through an insert with one of the three excellent onboard compressors before being sent to the send effects. Volume, pan, chorus and reverb sends are all adjustable using the data knobs. It's possible, with a couple of powered speakers, to go out to work without a mixing desk, just the S70/90XS.

MEASURING UP

Costing £2,252 and £2,349 respectively for the 76- and 88-note versions, these machines are not exactly cheap, but having said that, they're pretty much the only instruments on the market that combine a high-quality piano with a synthesizer that isn't a workstation as well. The Roland RD-700GX (£1,999) is for us still one of the best-sounding and playing digital piano around, while the Korg M3 88-note workstation (£2,399) has some amazing sounds and functionality that you'd need in the studio as well as fully weighted action.

The audio recording and playback function is the function that steers the S70/90XS more towards the live performer than the studio user. Basically, when you're in record the S70/90XS captures everything (including the mic input) that's running through the audio output and exports up to 74 minutes of audio as a 16-bit/44.1kHz stereo WAV file to either the internal Flash memory or an external USB storage device.

In playback mode you can import either 16-bit/44.1kHz stereo WAV or AIFF files and create playlists, which can be triggered in sequence from a foot controller or the front panel. The possible live applications for this are enormous, even though there's no way of triggering the audio from a key note or, as far as we could determine, trigger MIDI and audio files at the same time, although you can create playlists that contain both audio and SMF files.

Conclusion

The S70/90XS is an incredibly versatile performance keyboard with a great piano sound and action that could find its way into many live situations as well as sit in your studio as a multi-timbral master keyboard and DAW remote. Its ease of use when building patches and the powerful arpeggiator enable you to create sounds that are contemporary in every sense of the word. Its live applications are enormous, with musical theatre and any kind of live band work being the main contenders. **MTM**

SUMMARY

WHY BUY

- Great piano sound and feel
- Superb, intuitive arpeggiator
- Excellent-sounding effects
- Very versatile
- Play list capability

WALK ON BY

- Relatively expensive
- Small display

VERDICT

An excellent-sounding performance keyboard that is versatile enough to satisfy a wide range of musical scenarios.



METHOD SPOT

Yamaha's Motif XS effects that come with the S70/90XS include both inserts and sends and includes a special set of VCM (Virtual Circuitry Modeling) effects that authentically model the elements in analogue circuitry, realistically re-creating the uniquely warm characteristics of vintage processing gear. Really authentic sounds can be created if some of the factory presets sound a bit lacking in character.