

The Classical Beat

By STEPHEN DANKNER

THE BRAVE NEW WORLD OF ELECTRONIC KEYBOARDS

I was recently asked by a neighbor in my condo development to offer advice on the purchase of an electronic piano. I had a sense of déjà vu, as I recalled my involvement with electronic keyboards in the mid-1980s. The question got me to thinking about the state of the art in electronic incarnations of the beloved, ubiquitous piano. A bit of background, if I may:

For a period of about 10 years, living in New Orleans, I'd kept up with the latest innovations in electronic keyboards, as electronic organ technology melded with the budding home computer market. 1984 saw the emergence, through the marriage of the PC and electric pianos, of the digital synthesizer – an electronic keyboard, once-removed from the home Hammond organ, containing the sounds of pianos, strings, brass and woodwinds. Indeed, the synthesizer contained an internal orchestra that could be easily transported by working musicians to “gigs” or “club dates.” For only \$11,000 you could own a Kurzweil K250 synthesizer. The era of the one-person band had arrived, minus the washboard and kazoo.

In the home studio, another option was available for recording or composing. You hooked up the K250 (which itself was a dedicated musical computer that stored sounds in memory) to your PC through a ‘MIDI interface.’ (MIDI is an acronym for Musical Instrument Digital Interface. Interface simply implies a connection, via cables, from the synthesizer to the computer.)

So, what, exactly is being transmitted? Lots of ones and zeroes – the on-off switches that send musical information, such as the notes you play; how fast; how loud; what sounds in the memory of the synthesizer are being accessed, and lots of other stuff. The ones and zeroes are sent as data, not sound.

Imagine a player piano with the old piano roll scrolls. Do you remember the holes punched in the rolls? Well, they activated notes in the piano's hammer mechanism, playing the song. Your feet activated one or two pedals, thereby affecting the tempo, or speed of the music. Some player pianos were even

mechanically advanced enough to record and play back accents, musical phrasing and degrees of volume from pianissimo to fortissimo.

If you're with me so far, then you understand MIDI, which is a latter-day version of the same idea, in digital form (those ones and zeroes instead of holes punched in a piano roll). The toy music boxes we grew up with as kids operate on the same principle: you turn a hand crank and the ridges in the cylinder lift and pluck tuned musical bars, playing "Happy Birthday" or "We've Only Just Begun."

Back to my neighbor and how to advise him to buy this or that keyboard. Today, they all come with lots of bells and whistles: thousands of sounds; the ability to accompany yourself with pre-programmed drum beats; and best of all, a built-in "record" function that stores your performance in computer memory which you can then save to a CD disc. If you play some wrong notes – not a problem; you can edit them out, one at a time, and play the right notes. Want to sound like Lang Lang? Just speed up the tempo using the built-in metronome.

Despite all the short cuts and cheesy accompaniment possibilities (I like Bach with a bossa nova beat, myself,) there are two distinct advantages to these keyboards – price and virtually no maintenance. These digital pianos, since they have no moving parts, just computer-memory recordings of stored sounds, never have to be tuned. And they're truly portable; some weigh only 50 pounds. Most have headphone jacks, so you can play to your heart's content at 3 a.m. without disturbing your spouse or the neighbors.

If you don't want the 88-note model, you can opt for the five-octave, 61-note keyboard, which is correspondingly less expensive and even more at home in a tight apartment space. Prices for these keyboards have come down a lot, and run anywhere from about \$700. - \$3,000. for a top-of-the-line Yamaha, Roland or Kurzweil model. How do they sound? Generally, excellent, depending on your home stereo or dedicated music room speaker system. These babies do have to be plugged in, remember.

If you want access to the universe of MIDI, in order to see your notated music appear on your Mac or PC screen as you play, these keyboards are all equipped to get you up and running in no time.

My neighbor, the last time we spoke, was still happy with his purchase after several months.

“I know a fine way to treat a Steinway,” wrote Irving Berlin in his 1913 ragtime classic “I Love a Piano.” Today, he might write, “Every kiddie loves his MIDI, a keyboard with a smorgasbord of ditties, oh so pretty.”

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