



way ahead of
its time

In a specially commissioned one-off article, Alex Payler revisits his first professional instrument - the YAMAHA HS-8 Electone. When it was released back in 1987 it was one of most versatile and best sounding instruments of its kind but is it still any good today?



The YAMAHA HS-8. AWM sampling, a ubiquitous Multi-Menu, a wealth of programmable features such as voice editing, rhythm programming, digital effects as well as 'universal' midi compatibility all housed in a modern hi-tech design. I could easily be talking about an instrument made today let alone one conceived nearly 30 years ago, but to coin a phrase - the YAMAHA HS-8 could be considered way ahead of its time.

Shortly after YAMAHA released the revolutionary HX-1 Electone in 1986, the new HS Series Electones were born.

Utilising much of the same technology but at a price point more affordable to the average buyer, the top of the range HS-8 continued the bold new design principle of

its bigger brother making no excuses that this was an instrument designed to be an 'orchestra' first, and definitely an 'organ' second!

Now maybe I'm stirring up a hornet's nest here, but for me it wasn't until YAMAHA released the HX/HS Electones that any instrument of its type REALLY could sound just like an orchestra rather an organ *trying* to sound like an orchestra. With the dawn of digital sampling as well as clever FM synthesis, all with the intuitive expressive control that came from Initial and After-touch sensitive keyboards and pedals, the voices were crisper, more natural and more authentic than ever before - well at the very least that's how I remember anyway! But as technology has come on in leaps and bounds

ever since has the HS-8 stood the test of time? Does it offer the player enough versatility and most importantly – does it actually sound any good anymore?

So first impressions? To my eyes it still looks modern today - just as it did when it was released nearly 27 years ago. With no dated wood veneered cabinet in sight (thankfully!), it is compact and neat with brightly coloured button schemes all surrounded by swathes of black plastic. It's finished off with the now common (for Electones at least) full length music rest that also folds down to cover the keyboards to protect the instrument when not in use - very useful and looks good too.



Overall it's a fundamentally sound piece of design that has stood the test of time pretty well all things considered.

On closer inspection there's no doubt the general interface of various features has moved on some way. The main panel is completely full with buttons and controls including pitch and modulation wheels that we are more used to seeing on single keyboards and synths these days. The central LCD screen - a 2x16 character backlit green window - is positively microscopic in comparison to the huge display windows we're now used to on the latest EL and Stagea Electones, but that said it does a decent job showing the various setup and parameter data as required.



The key action however (the HS-8 having an uprated design compared to the rest of the range) is of excellent professional quality and still feels great to play - indeed the same basic design is still used on upper-end Electones today as well as YAMAHA's Tyros (2-5) workstation keyboards...

But just like instruments of today there's a lot more than meets the eye to the HS-8. Where lesser manufacturers at the time were making larger and increasingly complicated looking consoles to accommodate ever



growing specifications (you've got to remember we're talking a time when LCD screens were in their infancy!), some bright sparks at YAMAHA came up with the ingenious 'Multi-Menu' which allowed for a far more sophisticated approach as well as a more compact slim-lined instrument. Located just above the upper keyboard and accessed via a convenient thumbwheel,

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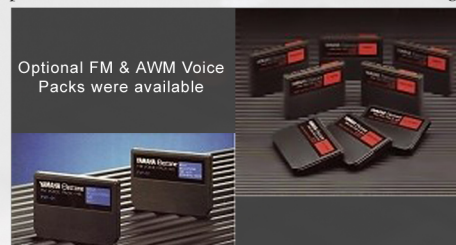
a highly intelligent master cylinder (that became affectionally known as the 'rolling pin') incorporates 12 'pages' of ten menus with extremely broad-based features. Everything from dozens of extra voices transferable to virtually any voice section of the instrument, FM voice editing, drum programming, effects editing as well as easy play functions can all be accessed from it. Although virtually impossible to use whilst playing, it's a clever and practical way of expanding the instruments specification without cluttering up the console.

So now I've re-evaluated the basic specification, what does it actually sound like - especially through 'modern' ears. There's no question sound creation and reproduction have improved immeasurably with high resolution sampling taking preference and synthesis very much taking the back seat if not disappearing altogether and it's perhaps this area where the HS-8 shows its age the most. Apart from a handful of nice AWM sampled voices and a fair sized AWM percussion kit for the rhythms, the HS-8 is a

classic FM based instrument. Refined by YAMAHA to a high state, FM technology was a highly respected form of synthesis which not only gave realistic voices for the time but those same voices layered and balanced together very well boasting a certain warmth sometimes lacking in sampled equivalents. Compared to today though they do sound very dated - lacking the detail and clarity we now expect.

That's not to say they sound incredibly bad or unmusical though. In fact I tested several dozen of the voices from across the spectrum with a completely unbiased 'test subject' and if played in their correct ranges he was able to identify virtually all correctly - so they are certainly authentic to a point! When combined together there's no doubting some good sound combinations can be achieved. The added bonus of a comprehensive built in voice edit function allows you tweak any of the FM voices right down to their very building blocks as well as load in entirely new voices from optional FM voice packs containing literally hundreds of extra voices.

So there's certainly a pleasant realism and when layered together a very decent sound can be made but the HS-8 also has 6 (yes just 6!) AWM sampled voices (including a nice Piano, bowed String Bass and a plucked Double Bass) - 3 of which can be 'exchanged' with any from a set of 8 additional AWM voice rom packs which were available at the time - all of which I am lucky enough to have. These make a terrific addition to the instrument and certainly cover a broad range of life-like voices including an excellent Timpani and additional percussion, Acoustic Guitar, shimmering



Tremolo Strings, a stunning choir as well as some weird and wonderful Japanese Voices.

Combining the AWM voices with the FM sounds can make some very pleasing and authentic mixes - including *the Brian Sharp* (one of the greatest 'orchestral' exponents and players of these kind of instruments of all time with world-wide recognition) String sound - a sound many believe he hasn't bettered before or since...

All the voices can be spruced up with a range of digital effects including symphonic, celeste, delay and most importantly digital reverb. Set at 7 different levels, this makes a tremendous difference making all the sounds come alive and in my opinion should never be switched off!

The HS-8 contains 50 different rhythm styles complete with 2 fill-ins, intros and endings each coupled with 4 basic (and I mean basic) accompaniment patterns. Any of these can be edited or completely brand new patterns can be made from scratch and stored in the many user locations as well allowing brand new

patterns to be loaded from optional Rom Packs.

The percussion sounds themselves are fine but the samples are very 'short' which is ok for a snare drum but not a crash cymbal which is woefully brief. A few extra percussion sounds wouldn't have gone amiss either - a tambourine for instance. Strangely - and this has always been one of the HS's idiosyncrasies - the drum section isn't routed through the digital reverb so they do sound very dry compared to the rest of the instrument. However if balanced correctly it really doesn't sound as strange as you might think. An excellent Rhythm Sequencer is available to create complete tailor made drum



The add-on YAMAHA MDR-3 Floppy Disk Drive

sequences with the added bonus of adding a custom Registration Sequence to run along side. This allows you not to have to worry about pushing any buttons whilst playing, keeping your fingers on the keys where they should be!

A host of now familiar performance functions are available including the

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modulation/pitch wheels (whose functions can be controlled via an optional 2nd exp. pedal), 16 Registration Memory locations, expressive Touch Vibrato control, Lead Slide to add a smooth natural legato to solo instruments as well as variable sustain, transpose, 'Melody on Chord' and 2 multi-function footswitches either side of the main expression pedal to trigger rhythm fill-ins,



registration changes as well glide and other effects. A knee lever is also available to control sustain - similar to the damper pedal on a piano.

The first thing that often ages an instrument is its memory storage. From Ram Packs to floppy disks to SD cards and USB Flash Drives, data storage has gone through the roof! The HS has a built in Ram Pack facility which even at the time was expensive and limited. With a cartridge costing between £30-50 even back in the 80's, only one set of Registrations along with all accompanying user data could be stored per pack at any one time! Thankfully the 3.5" floppy disk came along and YAMAHA swiftly released separate 'bolt-on' floppy drives (such as the MDR-3) which allowed for many MANY times more storage for a fraction of the price...

Finally everything is pushed through a fairly basic 2x30W speaker system comprising two 5cm and two 20cm tuned bass reflection-type speakers located in a tidy enclosure under the keyboard section. It's certainly adequate and delivers quite a powerful enough punch but doesn't come close to the smooth and effortless power of the multi-channel configurations on the newer EL series for instance. It also lacks the small but very useful 'monitor' speakers positioned either side of the console like those on the EL's that really open up the sound to the player. Needless to say if you do put the HS through some quality amplified speakers there is a dramatic improvement.



So it's clearly versatile and it can still sound surprisingly good but what on earth made me want to get another one?! I first owned and toured with an HS-8 back in 1994 when I was 14 but today I am well known for touring on YAMAHA's highly acclaimed EL series of instruments - chief among which is the prestigious flagship and what I consider to be world's most complete musical instrument - the YAMAHA ELX-1m Electone.

Even though in every measurable sense my ELX-1m is FAR superior, the HS is special because for me it was really where it all began - call it my genesis moment if you like. Yes of course I owned a few different instruments before it, but I always wanted an HS-8. It had it all and it is the only instrument I have (apart from the HX-1) actually missed since.



Also Available in White!

Getting another HS-8 after all this time perhaps in a moment of rose-tinted nostalgia could have been a huge disappointment and burst a childhood bubble - but it hasn't. It is everything I remember it was and perhaps even a little bit more. Working with the instrument with an older and more experienced head on my shoulders that's now used to the sheer awesome power and authenticity of something like the ELX-1m is a fascinating but more importantly fun experience.

Creating sounds, rhythms and registrations is quite a different game to what it is today. The HS has to be moulded and shaped differently. You have to really play with the FM voices to get them to sing. Yes the programming and editing side of things is a bit fiddly in parts and not as sophisticated and detailed as I'm now used to but I don't care - if you work with the HS, push it as far as you can, I think you will be surprised what can be possible. That for me is the essence of what the Electone is all about.
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COMING SOON....

Due to the huge success of Alex Payler's incredible new album 'Electone Player' performed on the YAMAHA ELX-1m, Alex has been commissioned to record 'spin off' album featuring the YAMAHA HS-8 Electone...

Check out WWW.ALEXPAYLER.COM regularly for the latest news and latest information about Alex Payler.

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