

ROLAND FP-8 & WERSI CPF 1

DIGITAL PIANOS

By Jim Aikin

IF YOU'D LIKE TO HAVE A REAL piano in your home, but you don't have room for the big wooden box, you'll probably be pleased to discover how good the new crop of digital pianos sound. They're not perfect, mind you — and there's a surprising range of differences between manufacturers. Everybody has a slightly different idea of what the ideal piano sounds like. Roland's new FP-8, for example, has a very

smooth quality, while the Wersi Grand Piano is beefier but not as clean.

Ultimately these differences are subjective. When people call and ask us for advice on what instrument to buy, there's not a whole lot we can tell them beyond, "Go down to the store, play them both, and decide which tone and action you like better." Likewise, when we go to



PROS & CONS

Wersi CPF 1: *Pros:* Fast repetition action. Built into sturdy road case. *Cons:* Some grainy distortion in the overtones. Difficult user interface.

Roland FP-8: *Pros:* Attractive styling, smooth sound. *Cons:* Soft playing sounds less realistic. Sequence recorder doesn't play back over MIDI.

WERSI CPF 1

Description: Digital piano.

Keyboard: 88 notes, A to C. Weighted action. Velocity sensing. 64-voice polyphony.

Features: Twelve acoustic piano variations, six electric piano variations. Seven reverb choices, four reverb volume levels. Splittable keyboard can transmit on two MIDI channels with local-off for either half. Sequence recorder. Damper, sostenuto, and soft pedal. Six preset tuning tables. Front panel transpose buttons. Music rack. Comes built into road case.

Interfacing: L/R line outs, stereo line in, L/R speaker outs, headphone out (all 1/4"). Multipin pedal connector for three-pedal unit (supplied with piano). MIDI in/out.

Dimensions: 52" x 19-1/2" x 5-1/4".

Suggested Retail Price: Road case model \$3,995.00. Home console \$4,499.00.

Contact: Wersi, 1818 Elm Hill Pike, Nashville, TN 37210. (615) 871-4500. Fax (615) 889-5509.

write a review of a couple of digital pianos, opinions on our own staff differ about their relative merits. Bob Doerschuk (the only person on the staff who gigs regularly as a pianist) much preferred the Wersi's action and its response to soft playing. While I agreed with him, I still preferred the smoother sound of the Roland. Tom Darter initially liked the Roland's action better, because the Wersi felt spongy to him, but he reports that the more he played, the more dissatisfied he became with the musical responsiveness of both instruments as compared to the response of a real piano. Looks like it's still a horse race.

All of the European music mags have been raving about the Wersi's wonderful sound — as did we, in our April report on the NAMM trade show. While we're not quite so enthusiastic now that we've had a chance to listen in a con-

The Wersi Grand Piano comes in three models, including the road-ready CPF 1. The piano sound and operating system are identical in all three.





The Roland FP-8 has the classic digital piano product profile, including built-in speakers and sampled Rhodes and vibes.

controlled environment, we should make it clear up front that the Wersi represents a significant step forward in terms of velocity response and the evolving character of sustaining tones.

We can make more definite statements about the two instruments' MIDI features, operating systems, and the like. Neither the FP-8 nor the Wersi CPF 1 (the portable version of their Grand Piano, which also comes in several home console models) has a full set of MIDI master keyboard functions. You won't find aftertouch, pitch and mod wheels, or multiple keyboard zones. They both have rudimentary built-in sequencers suitable for home hobbyist use, but nowhere near the list of features that you might expect in a synthesizer in this price range. Heck, they're pianos, aren't they? What more could you ask?

Roland FP-8. With its clean styling and built-in speakers (to say nothing of the audio input jacks for playing a second instrument through those speakers), the FP-8 would seem to be aimed at the home player rather than the pro, but Roland tells us they're selling them to both markets. It offers 16 sounds in four groups — five pianos, three electric pianos, four mallet instruments, and four string-family sounds. Two sounds can be layered on the keyboard, as long as they're from different groups. Built-in reverb and chorus add to the palette; you can choose any of four different settings for each.

While the front panel announces that Roland's "advanced structured adaptive" synthesis is used, everything but the acoustic pianos is clearly sampled. There was some debate around our office about whether the pianos were sampled or not. We definitely hear loops

on some of the bass-register notes, but we also hear harmonic components that don't seem to be looped. Overall, the sound is very smooth from one end of the keyboard to the other. If we had a criticism of the FP-8's piano sound as a whole, it would be that it's so smooth that it lacks character. When you play quietly, there's perhaps too much treble in relation to the volume; it's as though you're hearing a piano being played at normal volume in the next room rather than as if you're hearing softly played hammers and strings that are right in front of you. The Wersi was clearly preferable for soft playing.

As you move from piano variation 1 to piano 4, the FP-8's sound gets brighter. The fifth variation, 'honky-tonk,' adds a detuned layer to the

first piano variation. The mallet sounds include vibes, marimba, xylophone, and an FM-type chime. The sampled Rhodes is wonderful, and the FM electric piano is certainly okay, but the third "electric piano" is that infamous D-50 "Faatasia" patch, which is so ancient by this time that it has moss growing under its armpits. One of the string variations is a real sampled string orchestra, two are synth string-type sounds, and the fourth is a sampled choir. It sure sounds like the same choir multisample that was used in the U-20, Roland's popular sample playback synth. The sample in the tenor range, the one where one of the guys is singing way out of tune, is definitely the same.

By layering the Rhodes or a mallet with a

ROLAND FP-8

Description: Digital piano with built-in speakers.

Keyboard: 88 notes, A to C. Weighted action. Velocity sensing. 28-voice polyphony.

Features: Sixteen sounds (five acoustic pianos, three electric pianos, four mallet instruments, four string-type). Built-in chorus and reverb. Separate volume controls for internal speakers and line-level output. Play along with recorded sequence using a different sound. MIDI input can use a different sound than keyboard. Independent MIDI transmit and receive channels. Can transmit all MIDI program changes. Transpose. Damper pedal and music rack included. Red, white, or gray finish.

Interfacing: Damper and sostenuto/expression pedal ins, L/mono and R audio ins (with input level control knob) for playing second sound source through internal speakers, L/mono and R stereo outs (all 1/4"), MIDI in/out/thru.

Dimensions: 52-7/8" x 15-1/16" x 4-3/4". 58 lbs.

Suggested Retail Price: \$2,695.00.

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piano sound, you can get some nice expressive hybrids. There's no way to adjust the relative volumes of the two layers, however. Nor is there any way to split the keyboard, with one sound assigned to the left half and another to the right.

The front panel controls are easy to use — no cryptic button sequences to look up in the manual. (Except for the four MIDI mode options. These don't correspond to the standard four MIDI modes, so being a MIDI whiz won't help you.) The single row of buttons does double duty, with a second set of functions, whose names are printed on the panel, called up by the 'function' button.

The dual volume sliders are a nice touch. One controls the volume of the internal speakers, the other the volume of the line-level outputs. Since the internal speakers are real shy on the bass response while the line output is decidedly tubby, you might find that a blend of the two outputs gives you a better piano sound than either output by itself. And speaking of blends, both the internal and external sounds automatically use keyboard position for panning, so that bass-register sounds are toward the left and treble sounds toward the right. (The same is true of the Wersi.)

The FP-8 has a built-in 4,500-note sequencer, which is a nice extra, even though it has no features to speak of. You can record. You can play back what you recorded and play along live from the keyboard using a different sound — record a string accompaniment for your piano concerto solo, for example. And that's it. No adjustable tempo, no overdubbing of a second part, no storage of more than one recording at a time. Sequence memory is retained for about 24 hours when you switch the instrument off. But if you should record something you like and want to save it for posterity by transmitting it to an external sequencer, you may be dismayed to discover that the FP-8's sequencer only plays back the internal sounds. It doesn't transmit MIDI data.

Three velocity response settings are provided. The rear-panel fine-tune knob is small and awkwardly placed, but it does cover a complete half-step. The keyboard can be transposed from the front panel, and you can set the MIDI transmit and receive channels independently. You can send any program change number from the front panel if you like. In addition, you can choose whether or not to transmit a program change message each time you select an internal program, which is handy if you're hooked up to an external sequencer. Speaking of which, the FP-8 can operate in local-off mode, which is handy for some sequencer/MIDI system hookups. Two pedal inputs (damper and switchable sostenuto/soft/expression) are provided, and a damper pedal is shipped with the unit. This pedal has a sort of heel flap that sticks out under your shoe when you're pedalling; this very effectively keeps the pedal from sliding. Great design concept! The second pedal input can be used with a sweep volume ("expression") pedal, but this will only affect the volume of

sustaining-type sounds, i.e., the strings and one of the electric piano variations.

We found that the FP-8's key repetition was more sluggish than the Wersi's. The key bounces a bit as it springs up, making it more difficult to perform fast repeated notes.

Wersi Grand Piano. Several of our staff critics liked the sound of the Wersi CPF 1 better than that of the Roland. It has more character, certainly. When you listen to it through studio monitors, however, certain ranges of the keyboard are raspy at high volume, and the long fades on the envelopes are not uniformly realistic.

To our ears, it appears that the Wersi's sustaining sound is not made simply by looping whole samples. Instead, some type of component resynthesis is being used, so that various groups of overtones fade in and out in different ways. Playing louder doesn't simply add to the volume or brightness; if you listen carefully you'll actually hear new overtones being introduced. This is a very forward-looking design, and it adds a remarkable degree of realism to the tone and response. Unfortunately, certain of the overtones sound more grainy or gargly than anything we've ever heard out of a real piano. And some of them rise and fall in amplitude in a too-regular sea-sick way as the note fades out, just as if they were standard loops.

The raspy quality is audible mainly at high velocity levels, and is somewhat less prominent in the home console model, perhaps due to the fact that the built-in speakers are facing away from you as you play. The room ambience smooths the sound to a point where it's very acceptable, especially when you're playing a musical passage. Soloing one note and putting it under a microscope reveals more sonic artifacts. We're told that the Wersi contains only 3Mb of waveform ROM, and that data compression has been used to give the equivalent of up to eight different velocity-layered samples per key. At a guess, the data compression is what's responsible for the grainy quality. Or maybe a real piano does sound that way if you forget about the soundboard resonance and simply jam the microphone right up against the point where the hammer strikes the string.

With 64-note polyphony, this instrument lets you jam down the pedal and roar. And it has a few features that you won't find on the Roland — a splittable keyboard that can transmit on two MIDI channels, for example, and half-pedalling. Even so, we're not sure it offers quite enough to justify its price tag. The road case in which the CPF 1 is permanently installed strongly suggests that it's aimed at the pro market, yet the awkward programming interface, identical to that on the three home console models, is not something that pros are going to want to mess with. And can we talk about the fact that the case only has one handle? Maybe you can lift a piano this heavy with one hand, but we can't.

The Wersi boasts four basic sounds — two acoustic pianos and two electric pianos. (In the home console model, one of the electrics

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is replaced with a honky-tonk piano.) These can't be split or layered, but the internal sound can be switched on or off independently for each half of a split keyboard if you're transmitting on two MIDI channels. You can select any of 12 variations for the acoustic pianos, and any of six for the electrics. Although the manual alleges that some sort of EQ is being used, the variations actually seem to work by changing the relative loudness of two or more samples in a bright/dark composite layer. This type of layering can be heard clearly in the "slap style" effect, which seems to bring out the brilliant layer while muting the layer that makes the dark body of the tone. It can also be heard in the

"crossfade minus" setting, which causes the bright layer to play at low velocities instead of high ones. Not a very musical effect.

On the bright side, the Wersi's sustain pedal will do half-pedalling. Some earlier Roland pianos allow half-pedalling, but the FP-8 doesn't. Speaking of realistic piano effects, though, we spotted a minor intermittent bug in the Wersi's voice playback. Play a note in the top register, and you'll hear a sample of a piano's acoustic harp resonance, which goes on ringing when the key is released. This is very realistic. But if you play that note and then immediately play one in the octave below, the harp resonance will sometimes be cut off abruptly, which is very unrealistic.

You're given seven possible reverb settings, any of which can be at one of four different vol-

ume levels (or off). Each of the four front-panel voice select buttons stores your settings for reverb, sound variation, and even tuning scale. Four non-equal-tempered scales and ten velocity-scaling curves are included in the instrument.

The Wersi's user interface has no LED or LCD display at all, and the front panel is short on buttons. Instead, the keyboard itself is used for giving commands to the machine. You press a 'program' button, and then your next note on the keyboard is interpreted as a command — octave shift, for example, or reverb volume, or velocity curve. The problem, of course, is that the commands aren't shown on the front panel. You have to consult a diagram on a sheet of cardboard that's shipped with the unit. With an 88-note keyboard, you have to constantly count octaves up from the bottom or down from the top to figure out where the various command keys are. Everybody on the staff hated this data entry system.

A simple record/playback sequencer is included. This has a memory of up to 20,000 notes, but what you record will be erased when you switch the unit off. You can store a recording in long-term internal memory if you like, but this memory only stores about 2,000 notes — plenty for most piano performances, but a jarring discrepancy in the design. If you've recorded a selection that's too long, the Wersi won't store the first 2,000 notes in long-term storage, it will just refuse to store it at all. Unlike the FP-8's sequencer, the Wersi's will transmit over MIDI, which is certainly an improvement. It won't record program changes, however. And if you play along with it, you have to use the same sound that it's using.

Another curiosity of memory management can be found in the preset storage system. When you switch the Wersi's power off and back on, all four preset buttons will be restored to their factory defaults. But in fact, the settings you gave them yesterday aren't gone. One of the command keys restores your settings, which have been tucked away safely in memory. This is only two extra keystrokes, so it's certainly no big deal, but it does seem backwards to us. Shouldn't the machine assume that you want to start with your preferred settings? Shouldn't the command key be used to restore the factory defaults?

In addition to its line-level outputs, the Wersi has a built-in amp and a pair of speaker outputs, which could be handy for home use, assuming you've got a pair of speaker cables that end in quarter-inch plugs, and that you have some sort of crystal ball for determining the wattage of the speaker outputs, which is not listed in the manual.

Conclusions. We liked both of these instruments, but we also had reservations about both of them. Call us demonically picky. In spite of its slightly sluggish action, the Roland FP-8 seems like a reasonable package. If the Wersi Grand Piano were priced lower, it could hurt the competition because of the responsiveness of its sound, and never mind the clumsy operating system or the odd sonic artifacts that are revealed by close listening. But at \$4,499 for the home console model, it may have trouble getting up airspeed. ■

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