

# Korg Triton

Korg continue to hone the workstation concept they made famous with the M1. Gordon Reid gets hyper integrated.

Everybody seems to be talking about the Triton, which is not surprising... Korg defined the affordable workstation when it introduced the world-beating M1 in 1988, and the O1-series maintained Korg's position well into the early '90s. A number of other manufacturers seemed to be catching up towards the middle of the decade, but in '95 Korg demonstrated that it had lost none of its innovative zeal releasing the Trinity. The Trinity offered physical modelling, digital I/O and hard disk editing options, and proved to be perhaps the most revered synthesiser of the last few years. So maybe it's not surprising that many players see the Triton as 'Trinity 2: The Sequel'. Indeed, it's hard to approach the Triton without referring to its predecessor. It shares the same brushed aluminium appearance, and is dominated by a similar, large, touch-sensitive screen. But what's this... knobs? And buttons marked 'arpeggiator' and 'sampling'? While the cosmetics are out of the Trinity mould, the guts of the Triton are significantly different. So let's cast preconceptions aside and dive in.

## The Basics

The Triton is a 62-note polyphonic, 16-part multitimbral digital workstation. Like all Korg's recent flagships it comes in three models: the basic 61-note Triton, the 76-note 'Pro', and the weighted 88-note 'Pro-X'. All the models share the same 'HI' (Hyper Integrated) sound engine, dual arpeggiators, sequencer, high-density floppy drive, MAC/PC interface, and a sampler with (initially) 16MB of RAM. Irrespective of model, you can then add two PCM expansion cards, a six-voice multitimbral physical-modelling synthesiser, a SCSI interface, and up to 48MB of additional RAM for the sampler.

As always with Korg instruments, the Program is the fundamental unit of a sound. In the Triton this is a complex patch based upon (up to) four PCM multi-samples. In my experience Korg don't necessarily lead the way in good multi-sampling, and if you remove all the effects and filters from certain Triton Programs they suffer from a number of sounds that go ee-ee-ee-oo-oo-oo as you play up the keyboard. But there are 425 multi-samples and 413 percussion samples in the instrument's extensive 32MB ROM, and a good many of these are excellent.

Once you have selected your waveform(s), you have the Triton's extensive Program architecture at your fingertips. This offers a bewildering array of filters, LFOs,

and amplifiers, plus the most elaborate modulation matrix of any current synthesiser. But Korg's forte has, for the past few years, been in the effects sections of its synths. These allow you to take almost any voice and warp it into the most refined or outlandish sounds imaginable. The Triton does not disappoint. There are no less than five Insert effects busses offering 102 algorithms, plus dual Master effects busses that support 89 of the aforementioned 102 algorithms. There's also a three-band Master parametric EQ, and flexible routing from all the busses to the six outputs. Some of the effect algorithms are 'double size', and using these reduces the total number of effects and busses available, but the effects section remains a sound mangler's dream. You can even use the audio inputs to direct external sounds to the effects, making the Triton a powerful multi-effects unit and a vocoder in its own right.

Despite its potential complexity, the Triton encourages experimentation and, once mastered, it simply feels like a powerful analogue-style synth soaked in digital steroids. The signal path remains resolutely oscillator-filter-amplifier-effects, so it should strike terror in no-one.

As for the sounds themselves? A trip to your local music emporium will demonstrate that the Triton maintains – or perhaps extends – Korg's pre-eminent reputation for luscious pads and ethereal textures. There are also many excellent organs (no other manufacturer comes close to Korg's Leslie rotary speaker effect), genuinely deep basses, powerful brass and smooth string sounds, plus scores of other notables contained in the 512 Program memories. Oh yes, and there is also a GM bank compatible with both Yamaha's XG and Roland's GS formats. Is GM incongruous on an instrument of this cost? Yes, but it's potentially useful nonetheless.

## Room to Expand

The Triton also has space for two 16MB PCM expansion cards, and there are currently two boards that you can slot into them. [News is that there are two new boards just released: Drum Loops and also Synth Waves/Dance – CH.] The first – Pianos/Classic Keyboards – majors on acoustic and electric pianos, and (if my sonic memory serves me correctly) appears to be derived from Korg's SG piano sounds. The second, called Studio Essentials, is essentially an orchestral board with a handful of choirs thrown in for good measure. Both cards have their pros and cons. Many of the electric pianos on the

Pianos/Classic Keyboards are excellent, while I can live without the acoustic pianos, an area which I consider has never been Korg's major strength. Meanwhile the Studio Essential board is more consistent and is, for my taste, a worthwhile addition to any Triton. As a bonus, each board comes with a diskette of new Programs and Combis.

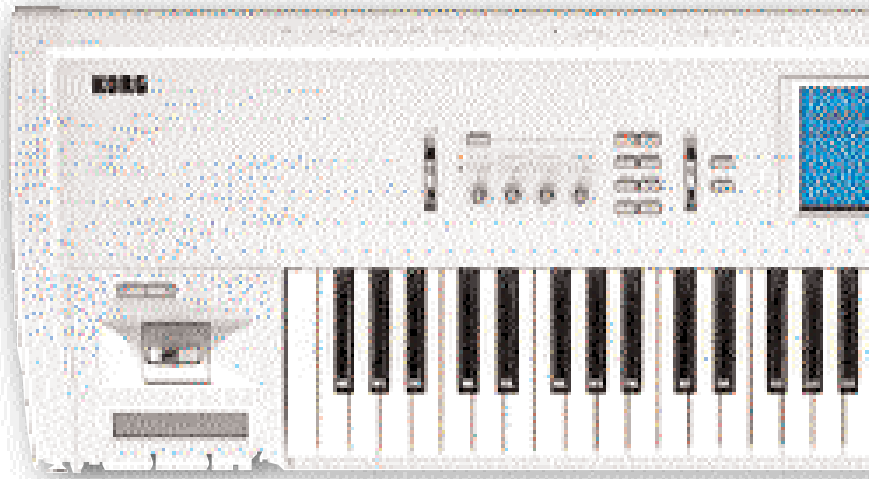
Arpeggiators are becoming de rigueur on other manufacturers' synths, but the Triton is the first of Korg's flagship instruments to feature one. The company hasn't stinted on the specification. There are 180 pre-programmed arpeggio patterns, plus 20 user-programmable slots in banks A and B. If you have the expansion boards fitted, you'll find a further 16 slots in bank C, and yet another 16 in bank D. The factory patterns include guitar strums, bass riffs, drum patterns, brass stab patterns... it makes the standard up/down/random of other synths look paltry in comparison.

Each arpeggio offers up to 48 steps, and each step can host up to 12 notes simultaneously. You can use these to produce everything from analogue-style sequences, to full polyphonic-accompaniments, to movement within Programs that sounds very much like wave sequencing. I'm hoping that there will be a software editor for this soon (as there was for the Z1's almost identical arpeggiator) because, fully utilised, this will help you to open musical doors that you hardly knew were closed.

If PCM-based sounds do not satisfy your requirements, the optional MOSS board adds six voices derived from Korg's OASYS development system. In essence, the MOSS board is half a Korg Z1 and offers the same thirteen physical models as the earlier instrument. These include a selection of analogue synth models, plus FM, plucked and bowed strings, reeds, organs, and more. The expansion board can access all the Triton's Insert and Master Effects, offering greater flexibility than the Z1 itself, and it is six-part multitimbral, which is more than can be said of the monotimbral version in the Trinity V3. Unfortunately, you must insert all 'effected' MOSS sounds through a single Insert Effect buss. This severely curtails the benefits of multitimbral use. But on the other hand, the six MOSS voices add to the HI system's polyphony, making the expanded workstation 68-note polyphonic.

### Combis

Anybody who has played a previous Korg workstation will be fully conversant with the philosophy behind the Triton's Combis. This is where you can take up to eight Programs and map them to the keyboard in complex layers, splits, and multitimbral setups. For some reason, Korg has always done this more elegantly than other manufacturers, and the inclusion of the truly multitimbral Insert Effects structure makes this aspect of the Triton truly powerful.



The dual arpeggiators in each Combi reinforce the power of this architecture, because you can map each of them freely to the keyboard and the Programs within the Combi. Indeed, with careful programming, you can freely create Combis with (for example) complex drum patterns and bass riffs playing underneath your own real-time six-part multitimbral playing. This effectively places the Triton in the same league as most specialised auto-accompaniment keyboards and modules.

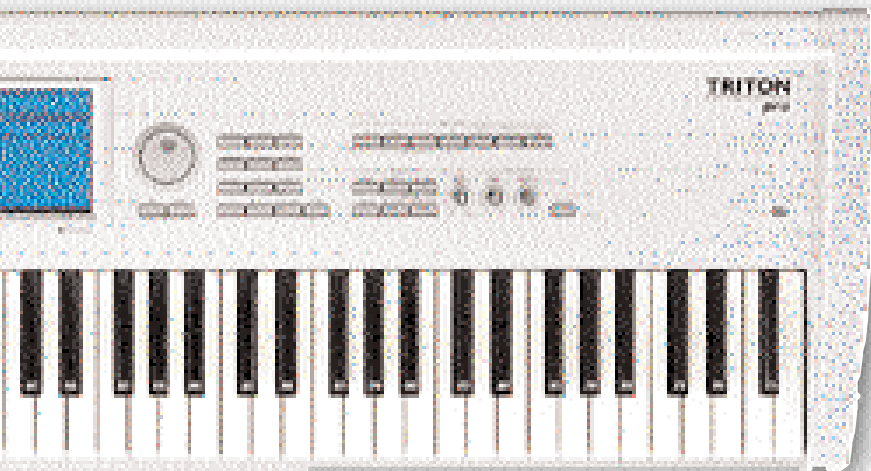
### Tri Sampling

If all of the above was the full extent of the Triton's capabilities it would still be a big step forward. But perhaps the most exciting addition is that of the fully integrated sampler.

Korg is not losing its sampling virginity here: the DSS1 combined sampling, synthesis, and rudimentary effects as far back as 1986. But, despite offering sample options for the T-series and Trinity, Korg has not released a fully featured sampler for 13 years.

The basic specification is adequate enough: 16MB RAM expandable to 64MB, with 1,000 multi-samples available per 16MB bank. The sample rate is 48k, and down-sampling is possible after sampling to a minimum of 2k. You can sample directly from the audio inputs or through the Insert Effects section (neat!) and, once you have captured your samples, you can transpose them, truncate them, normalise them, reverse and/or loop them, apply rudimentary envelopes, cut rhythms to a tempo grid... in fact, almost everything that you would expect. You can also import Akai S1000 and S3000 format samples, PC-format AIFF files, and PC-format WAV files. These are in addition to the Triton's own format.

Okay, that's the good stuff. Now for the not so good. If you import an Akai program you will get the full multisample, with the keymap and a loop for each sample, but because the Triton isn't compatible with many of the Akai capabilities I more often found myself returning to the raw waveform. Also, the Triton lacks the equivalent of Roland's 'Timbre' layer, so you can't assign filters, ADSR envelopes or key-scaling individually to each of the samples. Less damning, but omissions nonetheless, are the lack of 'alternate' and 'cross-fade' looping, and the absence of the time-bending capabilities of latter-day Akai and E-mu offerings. Furthermore, there are no S/PDIF or ADAT digital inputs for direct



loading from DAT, ADAT, or CD-ROM. As a subjective observation, I also found Korg's method for creating keyboard maps rather arcane. And finally, you can't export any of the Akai, WAV and AIFF formats.

Perhaps the 'Convert MS to Program' command displays Korg's true intentions for the sampler. This tells the Triton to translate the complete multi-sample – envelopes, loops, effects, and everything else – into a Program that you can treat identically to the ROM-based sounds. But there is a catch, the Triton will not save a single Program/Multi-sample combination and allow you to recall just that one Program with all the samples correctly positioned. This means that, under certain conditions, you must reassign the samples when you reload them. This is crazy... the samples' locations are saved when you write the Program, but if you don't reload them in the right order, the Triton does not appear to be able to determine which is which by name alone. Also, don't forget to save your samples before powering down, as the samples themselves are held in RAM, not Flash ROM. Speaking about saving, if you're going to take your sampling seriously you'll want to invest in the SCSI option from day one, because saving to floppy disk will soon become a drag.

If all this sounds a little critical, I may have over-estimated Korg's intentions. Despite its faults and certain omissions, such as the lack of re-sampling, the Triton's sampler is very quick and easy to use, and provides a totally integrated way to get your sounds into the synth's Program and Combi structure.

### Seq' time

Finally, we come to the sequencer. This offers up to 200,000 events spread over 16 tracks, and all the standard high-resolution composition, editing, and looping capabilities you would expect. You can load up to 200 Songs (or sections of songs) simultaneously, and a 'Cueing' capability allows you to string these into finished tracks and/or sets.

The sequencer includes three unexpected bonuses. The first is the 150 preset patterns that you can drop into sequences simply by pressing an appropriate key while the sequencer is running. You'll see this facility on the likes of Korg's N364 and iX300, and I found it makes it possible to build tracks extremely quickly and easily – especially in styles that may not be your forte. If the

factory patterns are not quite what you are looking for, there are a further 100 locations into which you can drop your own patterns. The second bonus is the ability to sequence arpeggios and arpeggiated sounds intact. The third is the provision of sequence templates that provide starting points for your compositions.

### Over The Moon?

My first, second and third impressions of the Triton as a synthesiser workstation were exceptionally positive. Okay, so it isn't quite as physically sexy as my Trinity Pro, but the keyboard does invite you to play, the Z1-esque knobs do invite you to twiddle, and the improved operating system overcomes many minor niggles. My feelings about the Triton as a sampler are, obviously, a lot more mixed.

On a technical level, the appearance of six audio outputs raises the Triton into the premier division, as do the dual audio inputs. Admittedly, my Trinity's hard disk recorder/editor and digital I/O options have disappeared but, on the other hand, what is the cost of an 8-track HDR today? Not much, in fact, probably less than an optional Triton upgrade would cost – so perhaps we should be applauding Korg for its astute market knowledge. Already some users have criticised the Triton for its lack of a serious on-board storage medium (a Zip drive for instance), and I tend to be sympathetic to that view.

In thirty pages I could tell you all about the Triton and convey a balanced view of all its great strengths as well as its annoying weaknesses. Unfortunately, three pages is hardly enough to give you a flavour. But you need to know this: the Triton sounds stunning and, despite a few omissions, offers more facilities than most players will ever fully explore. No, it's not all of a Trinity, a Z1, and an Akai S5000 in a single box, but it's not a million miles away, either. With its combination of superlative sound, expandability, and the sweetest user interface in the keyboard world, it deserves to be a permanent presence on any serious player's wish-list. Let's hope that software updates comes thick and fast, especially in the sampler department. If they do, I reckon that the Triton can be Numero Uno.



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### Price

• RRP: \$5,499; Triton Pro: \$5,999; Triton Pro X: \$6,999