

Kurzweil K2600

A new Kurzweil synth/sampler doesn't come along every day. Brad Watts puts the K2600 through its paces.

Kurzweil were the first manufacturer to build a sampler that I really fell in love with. I'd been down the Roland path, the Casio FZ-1 fiasco, the Akai S1000, the Ensoniqs. Hmmm, the Akai was reliable and sounded great but it wasn't enough of a synth substitute. The Ensoniq Mirage and the 16plus were cool for synth duties but sounded a bit... well... a bit weak. I'd never even looked at Kurzweil's offerings because I didn't want to be hooked on something I couldn't afford. That was until the K2000 arrived. I scrimped and saved for a rackmount model. It was the first sampler I'd seen with a modulation matrix from hell and the capacity for a gobsmacking amount of RAM (64MB in those days) and a ton of outputs. It must have been a sensible purchase because six years later I still have the K2000 and it continues to handle my 'bread and butter' sonic requirements and RAMbunctious sampling appetite. It's had just about every optional extra added and has never, touch wood, broken down or freaked out in any way. The formula must have also served Kurzweil rather well, as their newer machines, like the K2500 and 2000, have the same operating system and philosophy. What's different is how they've brought the beast closer to the 21st century with some canny additions squarely aimed at contemporary production techniques.

The first noticeable change is the blue colour scheme - similar colour to the K2000VP keyboard. Colour isn't a big deal, really, but it does differentiate the unit from previous models. The only other change when looking over the front panel is the addition of a dedicated contrast control for the screen. Everything else is exactly where you'd find it on a K2000 or K2500.

We should really look at some of the rudimentary and integral features of the K2600 and begin to compare the worth of trading in that ageing K2000 or K2500. In its standard form (like the model I've been furnished with) the K2600R is, in effect, a well appointed synthesiser. It's 16-channel multi-timbral with eight outputs - ten if you include the mix outputs. The additional outs may also be used as insert points for outboard equipment. There's two 25-pin SCSI ports. The unit comes with 12MB of waveforms in ROM but this does include a 4MB stereo piano set. The piano sounds marvellous by the way,

Kurzweil are renown for their piano recreations, and rightly so. With the addition of extra ROM blocks the total internal waveform memory can be expanded to 44MB, 16MB more than the K2500 and 20MB more than the K2000 could accommodate. Unfortunately the choice of ROM blocks is still limited to the Contemporary or Orchestral ROMs, the same collections that have been available since the K2000 days. Kurzweil promise that two more ROM blocks are in development to take advantage of the K2600's 44MB capacity, let's just hope they hurry those along. Storing programs that use these waveforms (or RAM-based waveforms for that matter) requires



another section of battery protected RAM. A standard K2600 arrives with 465kB of PRAM - reasonable compared to the K2500's 256kB and generous compared to the K2000's piffling 120kB. With 465kB you won't be immediately rushing out for an upgrade. The K2600's program storing capacity can be expanded to 1.5MB, a 256kB improvement on the K2500's capacity. Of course the K2600, like its predecessors, will accept sampling RAM. The 72-pin SIMMs are still the order of the day, but 128MB is still the limit.

The Kurzweil machines operate in a very synth-like fashion. All waveforms, whether they be internal ROM sounds or sampled RAM-based sounds can be processed via Kurzweil's proprietary VAST synthesis system. VAST stands for Variable Architecture Synthesis Technology, and variable it is. Sixty different DSP functions presented as 31 different algorithms are at your disposal. From simple resonant filtering through to wave-shaping, distortion and waveform syncing. The modulation matrix is second to none with pretty much every internal parameter able to be controlled via internal mod sources or Midi continuous controller information. There's been no further algorithms added to the K2600, the DSP set is

still the same as what the K2500 offered. But this area could hardly be improved upon. The VAST system can replicate most synthesis methods without a hitch.

Polyphony is always an issue - you can never have enough polyphony - and I was hoping for a leap forward in the K2600 but, sadly, polyphony remains at the K2500's quota of 48 notes. Kurzweil should really address this, other manufacturers are leaving them behind. Internal resampling of polyphonically greedy patches is an option, but in practice I'd prefer to have more notes available.

Kurzweil have long been in the drawbar organ game and many folk buy a Kurzweil machine for this reason alone - recreating that classic B3 or pipe organ sound. The K2600 comes fitted with KB3 mode. It's a system designed specifically for recreating organ tones. On the keyboard model of the K2600, the eight sliders become virtual drawbars and the result is phenomenal. There's even KDFX settings (see below) specifically for this mode that further enhance the gleefully effective organ tones.

Slick FX

The K2600 comes equipped with Kurzweil's own KDFX system. This was an option with the K2500 but is now a standard offering. Thank the Young Chang gods of Kurzweil for this, as the original effects in the K2000 and K2500 left a lot to be desired. The KDFX remind me very much of how Ensoniq's EPS and ASR effects function. Signals can be sent via an EQ section, then through any of the four KDFX input points and, once processed, sent to any of the 2600's outputs. With this topology, different instruments playing from the K2600 may have their own processing and still retain a dedicated output. You could have, say, reverb processed programs leaving the unit from outputs A, flanged programs on output B, delay affected sounds from output C and compressed and distorted sounds from output D. In terms of flexibility, it's light years ahead of the borrowed Digitech system first used in the K2000 and K2500. The quality of the effects is far superior as well. Quite lush reverbs and a swag of time-based, distortion and dynamics algorithms to choose from. The KDFX really set up the K2600 as a total production station.

With the sampling option installed, signals can be routed into the KDFX and back out the K2600's outputs. The unit will function as a stand-alone effects processor. But that's not all. A signal can be routed via the K2600's VAST synth engine. Now you can apply any of the unit's DSP abilities to a source in real time. The last machine to have this type of feature was the much sought after Korg Wavestation AD. This does rely on the unit having its RAM and the sampling option installed, so I was unable to shunt anything through the review model, unfortunately.

A mode that was hidden in the K2500 but is now a standard, documented feature is the 24-band vocoder. It's a real vocoder with full signal and carrier choices available. Main and carrier signals can come from the outside world (with the sampling option fitted) or from

sources within the K2600. A nice touch that is bound to come in handy as this effect continues to regain popularity.

Interface Off

Kurzweil have decided not to use anyone else's digital I/O interface with the K2600. On the back of the unit is a slot to connect the KDS digital interface. This allows the K2600's eight outputs to be transmitted digitally at 16- and 20-bit wordlengths. Why they haven't embraced the 24-bit regime is a bit mystifying. All sampling and ROM waveforms in the K2600 are 16-bit, so the extra four bits are really to squeeze a little extra resolution from the KDFX section. As to why they've used a proprietary interface? Who knows. I think Kurzweil would have been wiser to opt for a popular format such as ADAT or even TDIF - people are trying to standardise digital in their studios, they're not looking for yet another protocol. Interfacing the KDS audio stream with other eight channel digital formats requires the Kurzweil DMTi unit. It's a single rack box that will allow the K2600's eight outputs to be transferred to any ADAT or TDIF equipped device. The DMTi will also take care of real-time sample rate conversion and wordclock sync issues. There is rumour of other manufacturers releasing KDS format cards for their digital consoles and the like, but at the moment I'm unable to confirm this. Nonetheless, eight outs digitally from the 2600 would be a blissful experience.

Decision Time

The audio specs for the K2600 are impeccable. It sounds very large indeed. Kurzweil have addressed the issues involved with having the unit connected to a Mac or PC via SCSI, while the KDFX and digital options are extremely desirable. That said, I just have a sneaking suspicion that Kurzweil are resting on their laurels slightly. They know they have a loyal following, and perhaps in that knowledge they haven't been quite as aggressive in their upgrade development as the other sampler giants. Don't get me wrong, it's a very 'pro' box that will do a studio's worth of chores. But offering an increase in polyphony, RAM expandability and a standard digital interface would perhaps have won more people over to the Kurzweil way of doing things. I'd still urge anyone who hasn't given the Kurzweil a try to find out what it can do for them - you won't be sorry, I certainly wasn't.



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