Issue **393**
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FM|REVIEWS

FutureMusic Platinum Award

Cherry Audio Synth Stack 3 $299

Cherry Audio's product line has exploded recently. **Si Truss** asks if Synth Stack can now rival the likes of the V Collection...

CONTACT **WHO:** Cherry Audio **WEB:** cherryaudio.com **KEY FEATURES** 16 virtual instrument plugins, including 15 self-contained instruments and Voltage Modular Core + Electro Drums. Formats: PC/Mac, VST/AU/AAX

U S developers Cherry Audio first made waves releasing Voltage Modular back in 2018, but their rate of output in recent years has been eye-watering. In 2022 alone, they released seven plugins – not including the new batches of modules added to Voltage – bringing their catalogue up to a total of 19 products in less than five years. As a result, the company's Synth Stack bundle has rapidly grown from a mere bulk-buy

deal to a comprehensive package that looks like a legitimate rival to Arturia's V Collection or Roland Cloud.

This latest Stack launches with 16 instruments, adding six since version 2 was released in late 2021. These are, broadly speaking, inspired by vintage hardware instruments, although some of them play the emulation game straighter than others.

Let's start at the more conventional end of things. First up is Miniverse, which is Cherry's take on the Minimoog Model D. Most electronic musicians will be familiar

with the Minimoog design these days, thanks both to its influential role in the history of synth development and its status as one of the most commonly emulated instruments in both hardware and software. Cherry's take both looks and sounds bang on the money, capturing the authentic essence of the classic hardware while adding some handy – if not groundbreaking – extras, such as 16 voices of polyphony, a virtual feedback loop and master limiter.
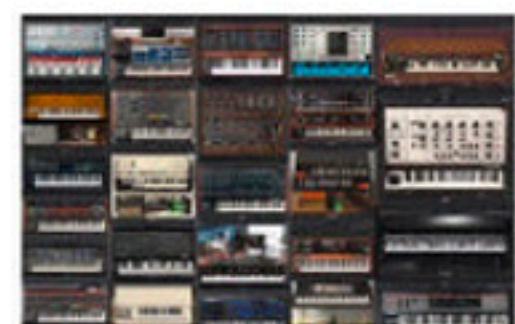
As a standalone plugin one of Miniverse's biggest selling points is its

bargain price (at the time of writing it can be had for under $40), although that's somewhat negligible when assessed as part of a bundle. As plugin emulations go, this is bread and butter stuff, but executed well. On the unlikely chance you don't already have access to a Minimoog emulation, this is up there with the best of them. The generous and highly usable library of presets is nothing to scoff at either.

Similarly conventional albeit a little less common is Lowdown, which emulates Moog's pedal-controlled

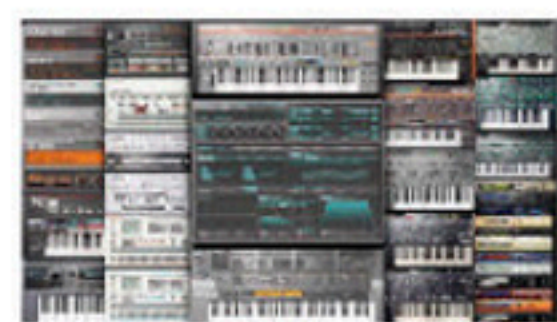Taurus bass synth. The Taurus was a favourite of classic prog acts, but its ability to conjure meaty detuned and filtered bass sounds makes it an excellent tool for electronic music too. It's particularly good for subs that find that perfect balance between low-end weight and mid-range presence. As with their other emulations, Cherry Audio's UI recreates the original hardware layout, which makes sense on one level, but does result in the odd situation of using a mouse to adjust a control layout largely designed to be operated with the feet.

GX-80, Cherry's most recent release, is another faithful emulation, albeit one that pushes the envelope out a little. The inspiration here is Yamaha's iconic CS-80, another heavyweight of synth history (both figuratively and literally) commonly associated with Vangelis and his beloved soundtrack to *Blade Runner*. Cherry Audio's take is frankly stunning – in both looks and sound it oozes vintage cool.

Where the GX-80 moves beyond rival emulations, however, is in its incorporation of elements modelled on Yamaha's rare GX-1, which was similar in design to the CS-80 but had variations in filter and oscillator functionality. Cherry Audio's plugin also has a dual layer design, allowing users to layer or split full polyphonic synth sounds. There are also four effects integrated – phase/flange, chorus/rotary, delay and reverb, which are limited in their customisation options, but sound fantastic.

Once again, the range of presets is a highlight here. There are 1,000 sounds that show off what the GX-80 is capable of while also presenting plenty of usable and inspiring sounds. It all adds up to one of the finest vintage emulations we've tried.

Next, the Elka-X emulates the Synthex, an often overlooked and less frequently emulated '80s poly from Italian brand Elka. The original was a rich eight-voice analogue synth that sat neatly between the realms of late-'70s and mid-'80s synth design, capable of thick pads, cutting leads and timbrally complex drones. Cherry Audio's take captures this faithfully, but also doubles the voice count to 16, adding in layer and split functions for good measure. The plugin design also refines the onboard sequencer, making it easier to sync and edit but without losing the simplistic hardware charm.

Cherry on the cake

Of Cherry Audio's recent synths, however, the two highlights are those that step away from the realm of straightforward emulation. The first of these is Dreamsynth, which exists in an intentionally uncanny valley by virtue of looking vaguely like some forgotten synth from the 1980s whilst cutting its own, original path.

Dreamsynth takes inspiration from the first wave of hybrid digital/analogue synths, including the likes of Ensoniq's ESQ-1, Kawai's "K" series synths and the Sequential Prophet VS. Elements of each of these come together here to inform a three-oscillator design that simultaneously draws on virtual analogue waves and PCM samples – allowing two wave types to be combined within each oscillator. There's also an additional string machine layer, which captures the wonderfully unconvincing synthesised string sounds of the era.

The retro influences carry through to the Oberheim-style 12dB filter and a bank of nicely retro effects, which can be routed to the synth oscillators and string machine separately. There are modern touches too though, including an impressive array of modulation options and compatibility with both aftertouch and MPE.

> # Sines is both genuinely unique and sonically gorgeous – a must-try

DOWNLOAD AND INSTALL

By their own admission, one of the downsides to Cherry Audio's catalogue expanding so rapidly is that the install process isn't as slick as that offered by rivals like Arturia or Native Instruments. With no global download/activation tool in the style of Arturia's Software Center, each plugin needs to be downloaded and activated individually. However, with a decent internet connection it's not much of a hassle to download each individually, and a quick log in to your account when first opening a plugin is all that's required to activate the whole stack.
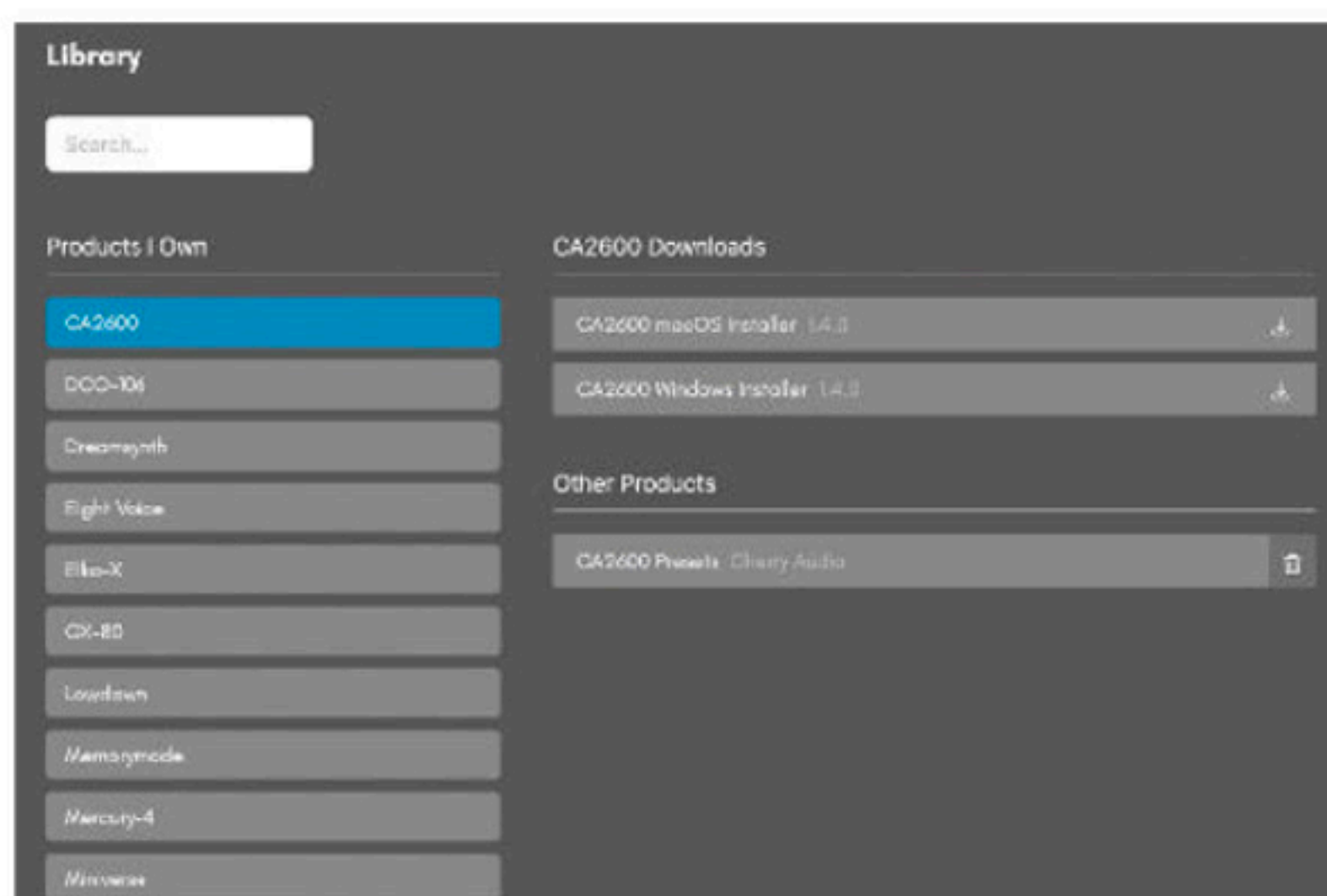
I really like Dreamsynth; it's joyfully retro without being entirely beholden to any one instrument, and as such makes a great option for inspiring vintage-styled synth patches that have their own unique character.

Equally if not more interesting is Sines, another original polysynth. The core of the instrument's sound engine is focused around four sine wave oscillators. While this might sound like a rather basic premise, each of these oscillators comes equipped with a variety of controls designed to shift, reshape and combine these simple waves in order to create rich and complex tones.
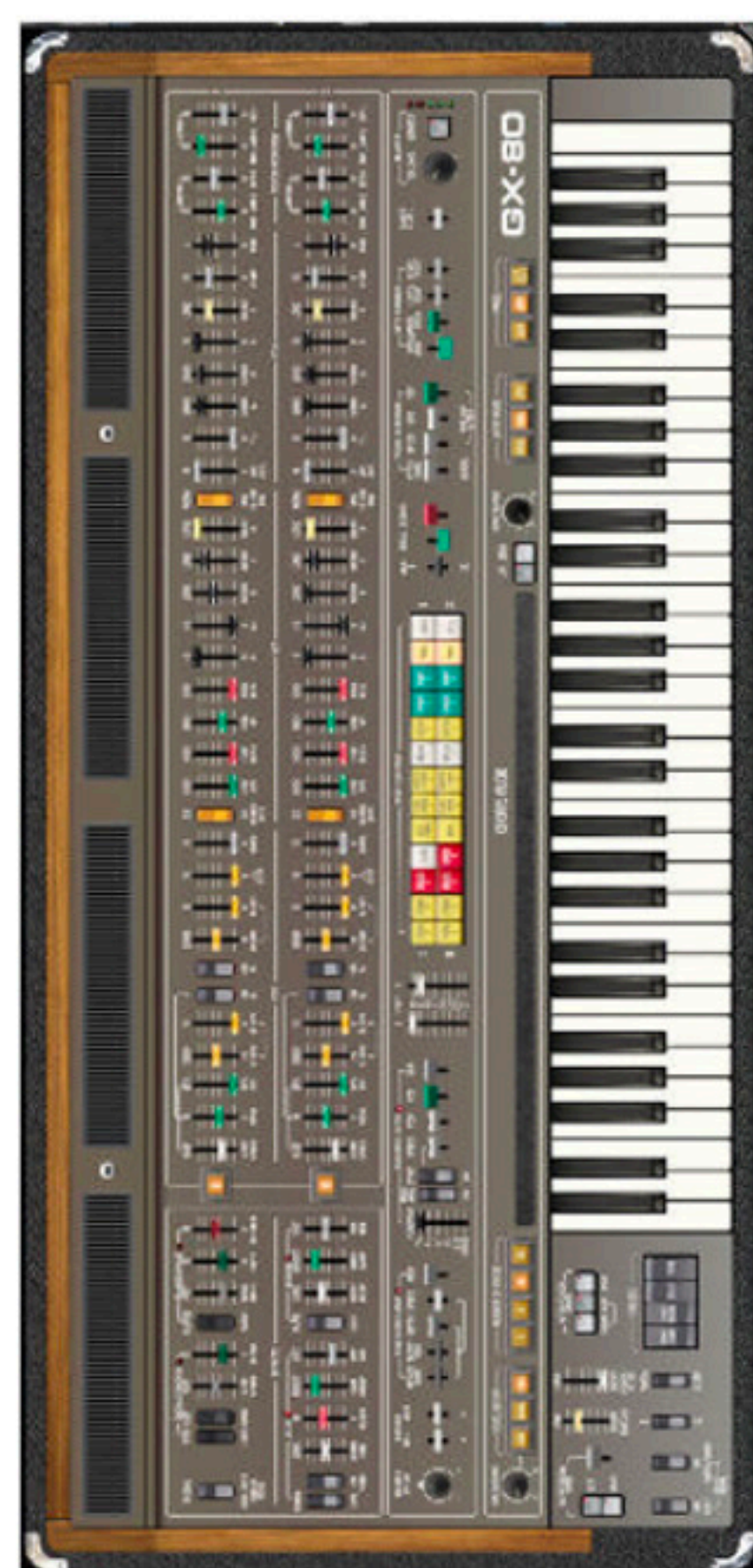
Each oscillator has controls to adjust feedback, phase, width, shape, wavefolding, and drive, along with sub and super oscillators that introduce further sine waves an octave below and above respectively. Each oscillator also gets its own LFO, plus level and pan controls. The four oscillators can modulate one another too. As a result, Sines has a sonic remit that combines elements of subtractive, additive and DX-7-style FM synthesis. A filter section and an assortment of effects similar to those found on Dreamsynth and GX-80 finish things off. Taken as a complete picture, it's both genuinely unique and sonically gorgeous – a must-try.

Fully stacked

What of the older inclusions in Synth Stack? These include several plugins we've previously reviewed and rated highly. That category includes Eight Voice, Cherry's emulation of the rare Oberheim instrument, which adds the ability to link the original's unwieldy stack of analogue synth voices.

There are also impressive emulations of Korg's MS-20 (PS-20), Moog's Polymoog (Polymode) and MG-1 (Surrealistic MG-1 Plus), the ARP 2600 (CA2600) and Quadra, as well as Roland's Juno-106 (DCO-106) and Jupiter-4 (Mercury-4). The quality is consistently high across these virtual instruments, even if some of the early additions lack a few of the bells and whistles found on the more recent entries (or their equivalent rivals from other brands).

On top of this, Synth Stack also bundles Voltage Modular with its core collection of modules and Electro Drums expansion. This totals 120 module options to be patched and played through the flexible and slick virtual Eurorack environment. It also

offers 600 preset patches, ranging from interesting sequenced patches to basses and lead through to hard-hitting modular drums.

The total list of content within Synth Stack isn't quite as extensive as some of the bundle's rivals, such as Arturia's V Collection or Roland's Cloud subscription – and there's a fair amount of crossover with both – but it is a broad, well-balanced selection of instruments. There are a few obvious places where comparable bundles offer things you don't get here; Roland Cloud boasts classic drum

machine recreations, NI's Komplete features effect processors and samples, V Collection offers pianos, organs and some more unusual emulations of vintage digital gear.

It's worth noting though, that at $299 Synth Stack undercuts many comparable bundles whilst, for synthesists at least, ticking a broad range of boxes. Everything here is of a high quality too, from impressive if conventional emulations to genuinely top-tier virtual instruments. Given Cherry Audio's relative infancy as a brand, it's hugely impressive. **FM**

GX-80: A top-quality CS-80 recreation with added features from the GX-1. A must-try

ELKA-X: Elka's Synthex is a slightly rarer choice of analogue poly, but worth attention

MINIVERSE: The Model D is hardly a rarity in software, but Cherry's take can compete with the best

DREAMSYNTH: Cherry's imagined hybrid instrument is brilliantly retro whilst still packed with unique character

LOWDOWN: Moog's pedal-controlled bass synth was a prog favourite, but it's great for club-worthy subs too

SINES: Combining elements of subtractive, FM and additive, this is a brilliantly original synth

FM VERDICT

9.0

Synth Stack is an excellent value bundle of quality instruments, including a few standout highlights that are genuinely top-tier