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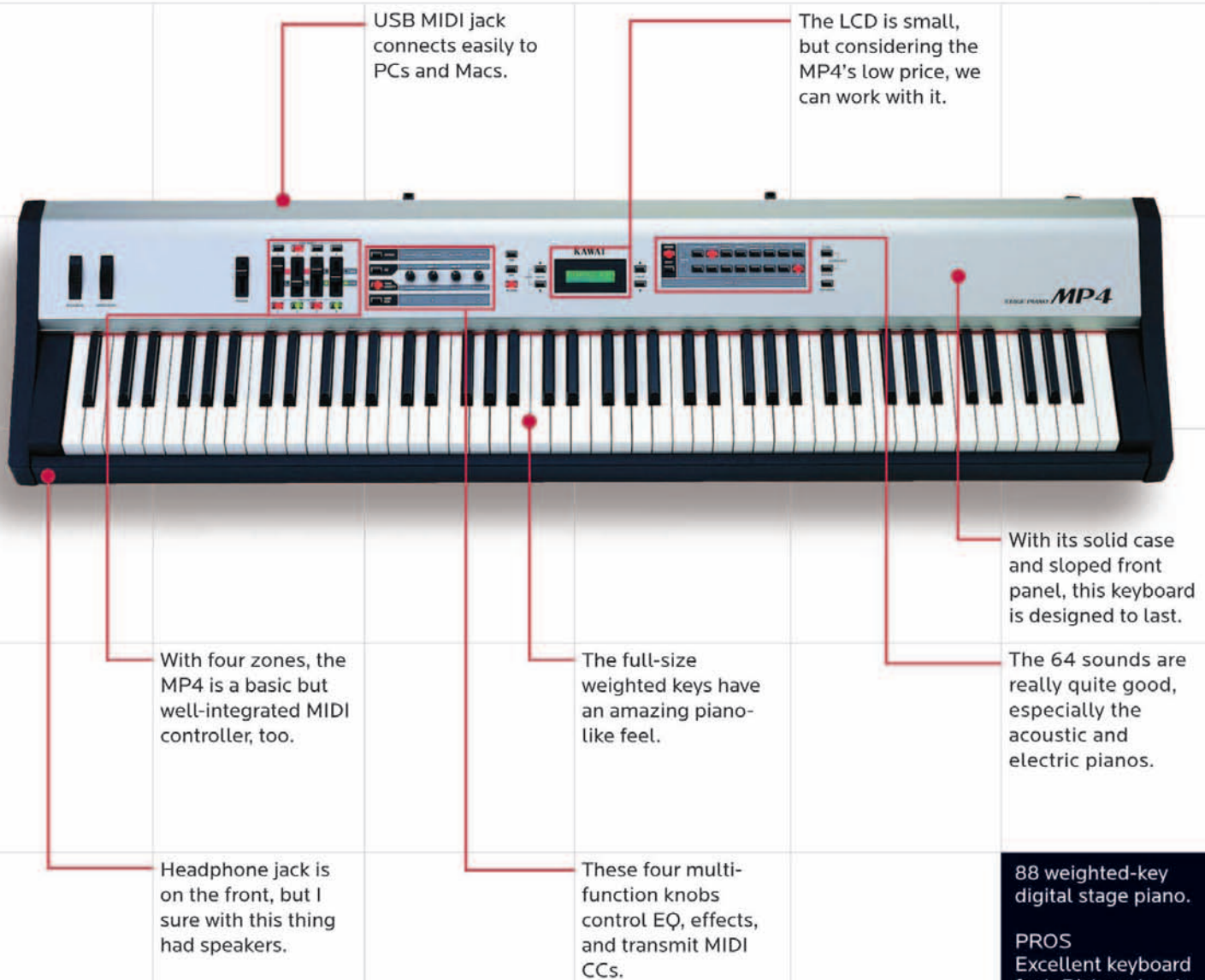
M-AUDIO PROJECTMIX

IK MULTIMEDIA PHILHARMONIK MIROSLAV

KAWAI MP4

DIGITAL STAGE PIANO

by Scott Healy



88 weighted-key digital stage piano.

PROS
Excellent keyboard feel. Rich and satisfying acoustic and electric piano sounds. USB MIDI port. MIDI control capability and some synth-like editing exceed expectations for a stage piano.

CONS
Small LCD hampers digging into the rather extensive MIDI control functions.

Kawai,
www.kawaius.com.

\$1,495

Coming on the heels of its widely-loved predecessor, the MP9500, Kawai's MP4 is little brother to the wooden-keyed MP8 (reviewed Feb. '06). Billed as a stage piano, the MP4 is targeted at pro players who need solid acoustic and electric piano as the foundation of their keyboard rigs, with a price a bit lower than others in its class. Is it right for you?

OVERVIEW

First, some nitty-gritty: Kawai's graded "Advanced Hammer Action IV" emulates the tactile response of a real piano, which is heavier in the bass and lighter in the treble. Really great sounds include two variations of a 9' concert grand and many others of varying quality and usefulness including electric pianos, Clavinet, organs, strings, bass, pads, and brass. MIDI

controller functions include four discrete zones for internal or external sounds, and 64 slots to save your own setups. Four multi-purpose knobs adjust parameters for built-in EQ and effects.

I was immediately struck by the distinctive shape of this solid, substantial keyboard. Cool and a bit retro-looking, it reminds me of the adding machines in my dad's office in the '60s. Laid out on the steeply-sloped front panel, controls are easy to reach yet out of the way. By contrast, I can't tell you how many times I've accidentally triggered a program change on my Yamaha P200 while bashing out rock and roll. Though the P200 is bigger and heavier, I do prefer its flat top to accommodate sheet music, my laptop, or a metronome. You can't do this on the MP4, but its totally kickin' music stand, which pops into the upper

back edge, is the strongest I've seen included with a keyboard. The slanted panel also makes it ideal as the bottom 'board in a two-tier setup, as there's no craning your neck or reaching between to work the controls.

SOUNDS

Eight banks of eight sounds each are organized by instrument type. I immediately loved the rich, warm "Concert Grand" that appears on power-up, with its lush bass register and punchy upper range. If these samples are looped, I can't hear it, as decay seems very natural. It's not a totally dry sound, as even with reverb off it's nice and live, plus there's a good deal of ambience in treble notes from about *G4* up. This is quite noticeable when you play hard, yielding a distinctive "thwack" and tail.

The piano attack is very clear (and perhaps a tad harsh) on notes above *C5*. On *E5*, I heard an unnatural resonance that cuts off abruptly. I'm missing the mellow ping I expect at moderate velocities, especially since I'm listening for a "hammer" sound. By contrast, *G3* through *G4* have a very sweet ping at soft volumes, and a rich sound with nice room reflection when hit hard. Playing a pedal-down trill of a five- or six-note chord, it's as if each note's strings are ringing together, having been struck repeatedly. The 96-note polyphony is really shining here. Release the damper while holding a chord, and its notes ring through realistically as the others cut off. Repeating scales made me notice how well the notes are imaged, traveling in my headphones as though I were facing a real piano. A couple nitpicks: I noticed a sample change between *D2* and *E♭2*, with more attack and higher harmonics in the upper notes. I did feel after playing a while that the midrange was a bit cloudy, more so with the pedal down.

"ConcertGrand2" seems subtler in the upper register but even murkier in the mids and low-mids. "Studio" grands are brighter and more cutting at the extremes with a compressed close mic character, which may sound great in a track, even though it doesn't feel as realistic to play. "Mellow Grand" offers that classic Hollywood film score ballad sound, and speaks beautifully.

The variety of punchy and warm Rhodes sounds and the Wurly are first-rate. Clavs and organs are better than I expected (with a fairly nice rotary effect to boot) and strings and brass are workable and nice to have on hand. Eight slamm'n' bass sounds will delight the left-hand jockeys out there. All in all, there's way more wheat than chaff in the presets, and certainly a lot for the price.

CONTROLLER FUNCTIONS

The MP4 has many sophisticated MIDI control and sound editing functions available from the front panel. Up to four discrete MIDI zones can play internal sounds, external sound sources such as synth modules or computers, or both together. Key

range, MIDI channel, and a host of other functions are edited using the Menu and Value buttons. There's no data slider, though, which is something I really missed on a few edit pages. Four multi-function knobs can shift from EQ, envelope, and effects parameters, as well as MIDI continuous controllers for realtime control of anything in the outside MIDI world: DAW channel volume, synth filter cutoff, pan etc. Knobs, faders, and buttons all feel good and firm.

There are some nice performance-enhancing features, such as the ability to lock the panel to prevent accidental program changes, a built-in metronome for practicing or setting the tempo of an external sequencer, and alternate touch and tuning settings. The MP4 can also be set to receive MIDI in multitimbral mode, though all these features are buried inside the mildy torturous Zone, Common, and System edit menu pages. Don't worry, you can easily navigate most of the important MIDI stuff using only the zone buttons and sliders without venturing into tweakster-type editing. This is a good thing, since it's easy to get lost in the multitude of sub-menus that all have to live within one small backlit LCD.

IN USE

I used the MP4 in my studio in a number of situations and, overall, it's a very satisfying axe to play. I love being made to work for the music, like on a real piano — a vibe the MP4 conveys quite well.

So you're playing "ConcertGrand" . . . want strings with that piano? Zone 2 defaults to an internal string patch: simply hit the ZONE ON/OFF button, which lights up to indicate the fader above it is hot, so add strings to taste. Of course you can

VITAL STATS

KEYBOARD

88 wooden keys with weight-graded hammers.

POLYPHONY

96 voices.

EFFECTS

7 reverbs, 20 effects, 4-band EQ.

DISPLAY

16-character x 2-line backlit LCD.

AUDIO OUTPUTS

L/Mono, R 1/4", stereo 1/4" headphone out.

PEDAL INPUTS

Damper/Soft, Footswitch, Expression pedal.

MIDI

In, out, thru.

DIMENSIONS/WEIGHT

53-3/8" W x 13-3/8" D x 6-7/8" H; 45 lbs.

INCLUDED ACCESSORIES

Damper pedal, AC power cord, music rack.

CLAIM CHECK

Kawai says, "The MP4 is the first introduction of our new generation of MP Professional Stage Pianos. Its primary design goal is to provide an instrument similar to popular MPs of the past in a lighter and more affordable package. We accomplished this by substituting our AHA-IV graded hammer action for earlier MPs' wooden-key action, significantly reducing the MP4's weight, footprint, and cost. Our next goal was to offer good sound and performance by retaining many features and functions of previous MPs. You'll find the familiar four-zone internal/external sliders and real-time control knobs, along with a 64 sound/setup matrix of many excellent keyboard sounds, including the great MP acoustic pianos."

JARGON JOCKEY

■ **MIDI Continuous Controller:** A type of MIDI message that sends a continuous range of values, between 0 and 127. In the keyboard world, messages such as these are transmitted from a front-panel slider or rotating knob, and they affect some aspect of the sound, such as reverb or chorus depth, filter cutoff, envelope characteristics, or other sound parameters.

AUDITION

KAWAI MP4

DIGITAL STAGE PIANO

CONTROL CENTRAL

The center section of the piano's console has four volume sliders, each with select and on/off buttons, and multi-function knobs for effects, EQ, tone, and MIDI CC control. Red and green lights show zone status and knob functions. Some may quibble with the menu-based EQ and its associated "click the button — squint at the screen" method; though dedicated EQ controls are indeed easier to grab in a live situation, Kawai's solution lets you save your changes.

change this zone setting to any internal or external sound, and then store your whole setup in one of 64 available memory slots. The preset sound and setup layers and splits are convenient and well conceived.

I wish the MP4 had built-in stereo speakers. For practicing scales, for example, it's great not to have to turn on an amp or monitor system. On a trip to my local music store I saw an MP4 displayed prominently, but sonically hobbled because it was plugged into a very small mono keyboard amp at knee level. Never a great way to show off a keyboard's sound.

Since every room, amp, speaker, and live gig sounds different, easily-accessible EQ is essential. As the MP4's tour of duty in my studio progressed, I was constantly modifying and tweaking the presets' touch response and EQ. I admit that at first I didn't care for the multi-function knob solution, preferring hardwired EQ knobs or sliders on a stage piano, though I did get used to it as I carved away. I also found myself reaching for knobs and buttons a lot to edit settings for the effects. They're generally very good in quality, although basic in that there are only two adjustable parameters for any one effect. The MIDI CC# function sends MIDI controller information (pan, expression, sustain level, resonance, vibrato rate, depth, delay, and chorus depth) to either the internal or external zones, and it worked well when I tried playing soft synths on my computer DAW from the MP4. Envelope adjustments allow for some pretty interesting sonic variations, and the variable filter is another cool synth-like touch I wouldn't normally expect on a stage piano. It sure is nice to be able to save edits to all these things within a setup.

Did I mention the USB MIDI port on the back? I was able to control both my PC and Mac just by plugging in to the USB port, which overrides the MIDI jacks when active. Both computers recognized the USB drivers flawlessly.

Now for the gripes. None of the user memory is blank, meaning that once you've edited a sound or a MIDI setup, you're forced to overwrite the factory preset in one of the 64 existing memory slots. Second, many of the best EPs have tremolo built in, so if you don't want it, you need to disable the effect and save into a setup slot. Also, there's no real Exit button for editing. Instead, a combination of two Menu buttons simply reverts you back to sound mode. A different two-button combo goes right to piano-only mode and resets the zones, but sends a MIDI volume of 127 to external zones, something to be very aware of if using the MP4 as a master controller! Volume faders are always active even if a

GORY DETAILS

INTERNAL SOUNDS

Grand Piano x 8, Electric Piano x 12, Clav x 2, Vibes, Marimba, Organs x 15, Harpsichord, Strings x 4, Brass x 4, Vocal/Pads x 8, Bass x 8.

REVERB

7 Types: Hall 1, Hall 2, Stage 1, Stage 2, Room 1, Room 2, Plate.

OTHER EFFECTS

Individual for each zone, 20 types: Chorus, Flanger, Celeste, Ensemble, Delay x 4, Auto Pan x 2, Tremolo x 2, Phaser x 2, Rotary Speaker x 2.

AUDITION

KAWAI MP4

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zone is off, and fader position is not transmitted as volume when you change a patch, so again, watch those speakers, as you might trigger something loud.

The "SW" button is a simple toggle that do different things such as change the rotary speaker effect speed, start, or stop a sequencer, or switch the panel lock. While it's nice to have a programmable button, make sure you don't forget what it's set to do in the heat of live performance, as this information is one menu layer away. "I think I'll lock the panel . . . Oops, it's set to start my drum machine, which is now going at 100dB!" To be fair, while it's easy for me call for more dedicated, hardwired controls, that would certainly increase the price.

CONCLUSIONS

The MP4 offers the best true piano action of any lightweight digital piano in its class. Seasoned pianists will not be disappointed by it. Although it's weighty and a bit stiff at first, it's more like a grand piano's hammer action than any other digital piano I've played. This is an axe you can practice on, with key response that's quite amazing. Beginners, or players used to a springier feel will have to do some shedding to feel comfortable on the MP4 . . . just like they would on a real piano. The R&D Kawai put into this is definitely paying off.

Onboard sounds are quite good, on par with some and better than most. Kawai is in a tough market, having to compete with a number of dedicated digital pianos in this price range, all of which in turn get compared to samplers and virtual instruments, though more so in a studio than a live context. Control functions are well executed within the obvious design constraints. The same goes for sounds other than acoustic and electric piano, but of course, someone whose priority is strings or ultra-slick MIDI control is obviously not shopping in the stage piano section of the music store to begin with. My nitpicks about the user interface are balanced by the fact that it does the job on the MP4 as it was intended.

All things considered, the instrument represents a lot of engineering for the price, and is a further example of how the new millennium is turning into a great era for digital pianos. Pianists, unite. Our time has come! 

Scott Healy is a New York City-based keyboardist, composer and producer. Contact him to complain about his impossibly high standards for gear at www.bluedogmusic.com.