

## KAWAI MP8 II DIGITAL STAGE PIANO

by Richard Leiter



The top row of buttons selects sound categories, the middle row selects sounds within a category, and the four bottom buttons give you four further variations on the current sound.

Plug in the included dual damper/soft pedal to a special 1/4" TRS jack on the rear panel, and the MP8 II's sustain will correctly interpret your half-pedaling technique.

Grab one of these knobs to tweak the EQ, envelope, filter cutoff, or any MIDI continuous controllers. Then, save all your settings in Setup mode, which is also where you save split and layered combis.

Control volumes of internal and external zones with these faders. The top row of buttons selects a zone for editing; the bottom row turns the zone on or off.

XLR outputs should be mandatory on any keyboard meant for gigging pros — they let you plug right into the house PA without the need for direct boxes.

Another "there oughta be a law" feature: a ground lift for the XLR outs. Got buzz from a ground loop? Flip a switch on the Kawai's rear panel, and it's gone.

Kawai is the only manufacturer using real wooden keys in a digital piano intended for carrying to the gig. The keys' balance point is in the middle like a real piano, rather than hinged at the back like a synth.

In our opinion, the headphone jack should be in the front on just about every keyboard.

Digital stage piano with real wooden keys.

### PROS

Outstanding piano sounds. Action seems slightly more expressive than on the original MP8, which was already excellent. XLR outputs with ground lift switch can be a life-saver onstage. Handsome design.

### CONS

Big and heavy. No aftertouch. Non-piano sounds, though quite usable, come off as a bit dated.

\$2,495

Kawai,  
[www.kawaius.com](http://www.kawaius.com)

It's been about two and a half years since I reviewed the original Kawai MP8 (Feb. '06) and at first glance, not much has changed. Same front panel, same rear panel, same overall look and feel. It's still a handsome devil. If Armani made a digital keyboard for formal events, it might look something like the MP8 II, which sports a burnished black finish with red and green backlit buttons that respond with a sure click. This is Kawai's top model for stage use, and like the first version, everything about it says "quality."

Kawai is known for their excellent acoustic pianos, and it's clear that their commitment to pianism continues here. At 77 pounds, the MP8 II's heft reminds you that its action uses real wooden keys, and we'll remind you that lifting an instrument this heavy onto a keyboard stand should be done with the help of a second person. At first touch, it seems a smidgeon closer to the experience of playing an acoustic grand piano. Here's the bottom line, though: The sounds are the same. All the improvements are subtle tweaks, and the most important of these has to do with the action.

**ACTION**

Touch is so subjective that it's hard to state a preference for any fingers but one's own. Kawai touts its new AWA Pro II action as superior in the areas of dynamic control, key repetition, and key return, and my fingers felt that the new touch was indeed nicer than on the original MP8. It's slightly lighter, more responsive, and less fatiguing when I dig into it. We're dealing with fine degrees here — Kawai's own words are "evolutionary, not revolutionary." Nonetheless, I immediately noticed that they'd rounded off the edges of the black keys. Big thumbs up here, because on the original MP8, they had rather harsh, straight edges that could graze fingers that flew too quickly. However, the edges of the white keys, where the plastic laminate meets the wooden key body, still feel a little scratchy when I'm playing vigorously. All told, the Kawai designers have done — and continue to do — a masterful job of replicating the tactile aspect of the acoustic piano experience.

**SOUNDS**

To get the original MP8's main piano sound, "Concert Grand I," Kawai sampled a nine-foot Kawai EX concert grand in an anechoic chamber, then added life to the raw samples with subtleties such as sympathetic string resonance and damper resonance. On the MP8 and MP8 II, you can dial in how much vibration you get from related strings. Hold down a low note and play a higher note in the low note's overtone series, and the low note resonates at the high note's pitch, just like on a real piano.

On the MP8 II, "Concert Grand I" is basically the same sample set, but Kawai did some tweaking to improve the sound of the *fortissimo* range, as well as the string and damper resonance. Key-release samples are new as of the MP8 II. Kawai also moved this best-in-the-machine sound to "button number one" so it's the first to come up when you power on — this wasn't the case on the original MP8.

So much of the impression a digital piano makes depends on the interaction of the keys and sounds — the all-important "finger-to-music connection." The MP8 II sounds multi-dimensional and feels lifelike, but the original MP8 had a very authentic, playable sound to begin with. Frankly, it was hard for my studio-ravaged ears to settle on one or the other, so I loaded up the MIDI and audio files I'd created for original MP8 review. I played the MP8 II with the same MIDI file, and you can hear new audio recordings of this — alongside those from the original MP8 — in the online version of this story at [www.keyboardmag.com/audition](http://www.keyboardmag.com/audition). As for the non-piano sounds, all seemed totally unchanged to my ears. What you're buying here is a quality machine that's been slightly evolved operationally.

**IN USE**

On the original MP8, if you wanted to save any parameter changes to a single sound, you had to do it in the context of creating and saving a polytimbral Setup. On the MP8 II, you can save these changes in Sound mode itself. MIDI control assignments still live at the Setup level, though.

You can also now adjust EQ and reverb depth globally, as opposed to for each sound in a Setup only. Let's


say you need to boost the bass overall, or add more room reverb to every sound — you now do this with a knob tweak rather than a Setup-creation process that takes several minutes. When you need to jump back out of the menu, a single button-push take the controls back to top-level "I just wanna play" mode.

For power MIDI users, you can now assign the mod wheel as your data entry "slider" for fast parameter changes. The MP8 II's keyboard doesn't sense aftertouch, but you can set the mod wheel to transmit it. This seems less critical than it did in my DX7 days; your mileage may vary, but I seldom use aftertouch on a stage piano. If I need expression or other realtime sound control, I use a wheel or pedal.

I played all 256 sounds through my Tannoy and Toa studio monitors, and I was a little disappointed that other than the tweaks I've already described, nothing else had changed in three years. You still get a usable assortment of electric pianos, B-3 and church organs, winds, strings, brass, basses, guitars, drums, and even a few punchy synth leads and lush pads. All the presets had good consistency, *i.e.* they sounded very similar through studio monitors, headphones, and my Barbeta and Gallien-Kruger keyboard amps.

Sometimes a stereo piano sound will be degraded by things like phase cancellation when you amp it in mono. For live use through a mono amp, the MP8 II offers separate patches of mono versions of its best piano sounds to avoid this trap.

**CONCLUSIONS**

It ain't much different from the MP8, but the MP8 II should definitely be on your radar if your main concern is a stellar grand piano sound with one of the most convincing actions in the business. Does it perfectly replicate the experience of playing an acoustic grand? Nothing does, but the MP8 II is at that *crème de la crème* level of digital pianos that, for convenience and tweakability, can be preferable to a real piano in the unforgiving world of stage performance. The other contenders in this stratosphere of no-compromise action and sound are the Yamaha CP300 (reviewed Oct. '06) and Roland RD-700GX (reviewed July '08). Though we've yet to get all three side-by-side [*Oh, but we will — keep your eye on [www.keyboardmag.tv](http://www.keyboardmag.tv) -Ed.*], I can say that the finger-to-music connection of the MP8 II will impress even the most demanding piano purists. It's also worth noting that of these "big three," the MP8 II has the lowest list price, though you certainly wouldn't know this from playing its acoustic piano sounds. 

**CLAIM CHECK**

Kawai's Alan Palmer says, "The design goal for the Kawai MP8 II was to create a professional stage piano with simply the finest piano touch and tone available in an electronic instrument. To that end, the MP8 II is outfitted with the AWA Pro II, the latest version of Kawai's acclaimed wooden-key action. As for tone, the MP8 II uses Kawai's Harmonic Imaging sound process, noted for its warmth and realistic qualities. We also added an improved damper resonance function and key-off sampling. A second goal of the MP8 II is to provide flexible controller functions for professional stage and studio use."

**VITAL STATS****KEYBOARD**

88 wooden keys, graded hammer action.

**POLYPHONY**

192 voices.

**DISPLAY**

16 character x 2 line backlit LCD.

**AUDIO OUTPUTS**

L/mono and R bal. XLR with ground lift, L/mono and R 1/4" unbal., 1/4" stereo headphone jack.

**MIDI CONNECTORS**

In, out, thru.

**USB**

B-type to computer.

**PEDAL INPUTS**

Switch and sweep/expression (both assignable), 1/4" TRS input for dual pedal.

**INCLUDED****ACCESSORIES**

Dual soft/damper pedal, music rack.

**DIMENSIONS/****WEIGHT**

57.25" W x 17.5" D X 7.5" H; 77 lbs.

# KAWAI

THE FUTURE OF THE PIANO