

Korg Trident - a classic 8-voice string synthesizer

For many years the Korg Trident, albeit impressive to look at, struck me as an uninspiring synthesizer. Chunky hardware, annoyingly chorused strings, very limited synthesizer possibilities. A synth for the museum? For strange nerds with strange taste? Well, my personal evaluation of the Trident has obviously undergone a complete change over the years ...



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Voilà: On giving it a second thought, the Korg Trident is actually - despite its chunky hardware, annoyingly chorused strings and quite limited synthesizer options - a vintage veteran *par excellence*, a luxury string synthesizer with strong character (and with charming limitations). In essence, one of the last veterans of the *old school* of Korg Synthesizers.

Old school? Look at the extremely well-organized panel, the traditional black rotary pots (à la Korg MS-20), complete with the obligatory small circuit symbol on the front (designating it as *much older school*), and the traditionally huge logo on the back. If you look closely at the Trident, you cannot help appreciating the timeless design of this vintage dinosaur.

The Korg Trident marks the end of a stylistic era in synth history which began in 1977 with the introduction of the Korg PS series ([PS-3100](#), PS-3300), followed in 1978 with the PS-3200, the MS series (MS-10 / [MS-20](#) / MS -50, as well as VC-10, SQ-10), among other instruments, and found its end in 1981/82 with the introduction of a new synthesizer line (Polysix / Mono/Poly / Trident MKII / Poly 61).



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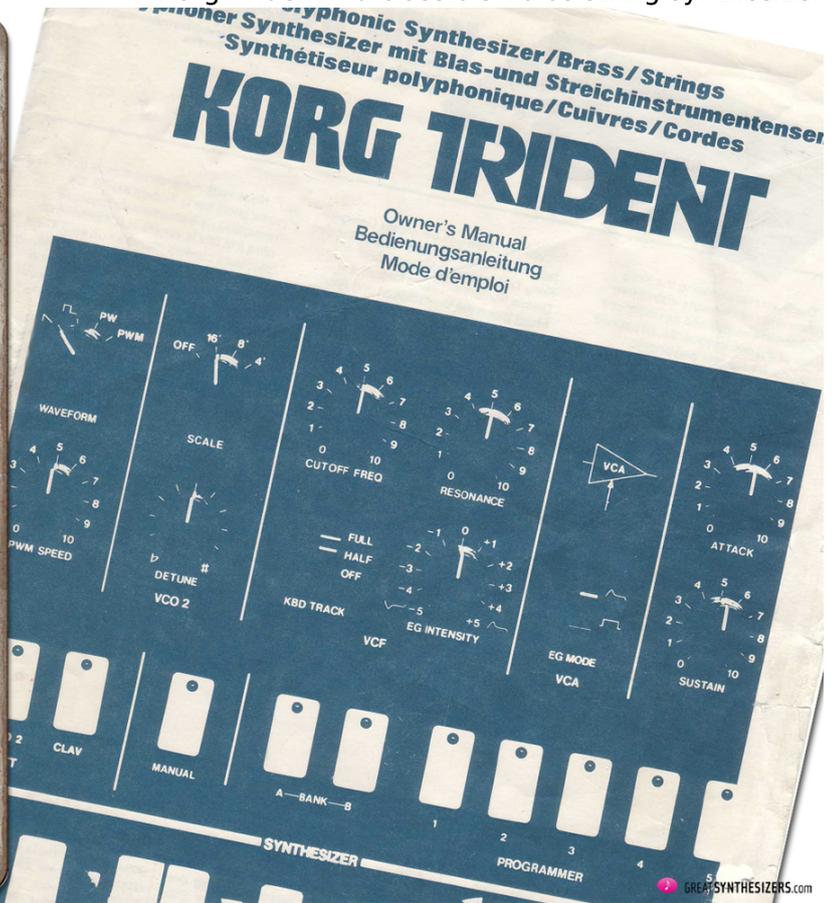
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[Trident MKII image by [soundgas.com](https://www.soundgas.com). Thanks a lot.]

A Great Mystery

The Trident was introduced to the public in late 1980 after over a year of *secret development*. Why they needed a year is beyond me (... the highly complex Prophet-5 was completed in 9 months, so ...). To top it off, the principle of a multi-keyboard with several sound sections was by then by no means new. But in any case, the gods seem to be involved, since the "trident" in Greek mythology also bore a scepter, a weapon of the sea god Poseidon. So there you are.

Leaving old-fashioned PR concepts aside, let's turn to an interesting parallel development. In 1980, Korg built a polyphonic synthesizer with SAMPLE technology. Unfortunately (well, actually: fortunately), an incorrect assessment of market needs led to this instrument being abandoned at that time in favour of the *Trident*.



“Almost at the same time as the development of the Trident, we were researching sampling technology. We made a four-voice polyphonic sampling synthesizer, but at that time we thought that this [... the Trident] would be easier to manufacture.”

(Mr. Mori in Mark Vail’s [“Vintage Synthesizers”](#), second edition, page 196)

As history has shown, Korg’s assessment of market needs could have been wiser. With a polyphonic sampler, the company would have been at the zenith of technological development in 1980. By contrast, the Trident - released more than 2 years after the [Sequential Prophet-5](#), and at around the same time as the [Roland Jupiter-8](#) - represented an *old concept with old technology* from day one.

Nevertheless, the Trident was indeed welcomed by some prominent musicians, as an addition to, or as a replacement for the keyboard fortresses that dominated the stages of the world in the early 80s. One famous Korg endorser was the long-time Trident user Rick Wakeman. The following video shows Wakeman and the Trident in action:

The Trident Concept

Our readers are most likely familiar with the Trident. Since the instrument is clearly structured, its individual sound sections are quickly explained. Let’s start at the outer left of the panel, where we find two important performance features:

Key Assign / Flanger

Key Assign fully corresponds to the idea of a multi-instrument: “Synthe”, “Brass” and “Strings” can be layered or split and assigned to either the upper or the lower end of the keyboard. What about mystic strings in the bass range, combined with a fiery brass lead sound in the upper region? Key assign is a valuable performance tool.

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Another notable extra: Assign Mode 2. In this mode, all release times are restricted to the very last note played, a feature similar to the Synthesizer *Solo Release* function, but this time effecting the entire Trident. Useful when playing the instrument monophonically / paraphonically.

The flanger, in turn, enables the Trident to come up with some exorbitantly powerful vintage sounds. Provided with its own LFO, this it is THE highlight of the instrument.



Synthesizer

The *Synthesizer* section offers 8 voices with 2 VCOs / 1 VCF / 1 VCA / 1 ADSR each. This very classic (and very limited) concept makes it obvious that the sound potential won't go far beyond *standard* polyphonic synthesizer sounds. Sawtooth, Pulse Width Modulation, that kind of bread-and-butter program. Nevertheless, the VCF (8 x SSM2044) sounds remarkably powerful. At high resonance settings, you easily get those classic silvery / vintage filter sweeps (controlled either manually, via envelope or external CV modulation).

Brass

The *Brass* section is even more limited, being restricted to one 8" / 16" brass sound with its own filter and envelope. That's it. Unfortunately, there is really just *one* filter. As to monophonic playing, the *Brass* sound is wonderful and fulfills its mission as *the* solo-synthesizer-part of the Trident. But with polyphonic playing, things get a little bit more difficult. No *Multi-Trigger* and no *Silent Note / Trigger Select* function can conceal the fact that there's only *one* filter.



Be that as it may, *Brass* produces some classic, cutting sawtooth lead lines typical of synthesizers of those days. Whereby the sound character - the sound character of the entire Trident, actually - is clearly *Japanese* and by no means *American*. Just compare: Oberheim, Sequential, ARP and Moog synthesizers with their organic and massive sound on the one hand, and Yamaha, Roland and Korg synthesizers with their more stable, slightly nasal and rather conservative sound on the other hand (... of course, of course, there are *always* exceptions to the rule).

Strings

Another *déjà-vue*: The *Strings* section offers exactly what you expect. Classic, chorused string sounds at 4", 8" and 16". The BOWING effect - imitating the characteristic *attack* at the beginning of a bowed note - provides (in Korg's words) "*extra realism for violin, cello and double bass sounds*". Don't know if this is true, but the Trident *Strings* are pleasant to play, they sound warm and satisfyingly *old* - which is a great honour, actually. *Old school* is now *new school*, as Rick Wakeman recently said.



Nice Extras

Back to key assignment (split or layer) and the wonderful flanger effect, both greatly useful to the musician. An additional advantage in the sound department: each section has its own On / Off switch (OUTPUT), with its own volume control. Which is practical and essential, since it's those hues and shades that often make the difference and determine the perfect mix of Synthe / Brass / Strings.

Solo Release is a special feature of the 8-voice synthesizer section. When activated, this ensures that only the last-played note is completely released. A feature for solos with non-diffuse character, for sound clarity.

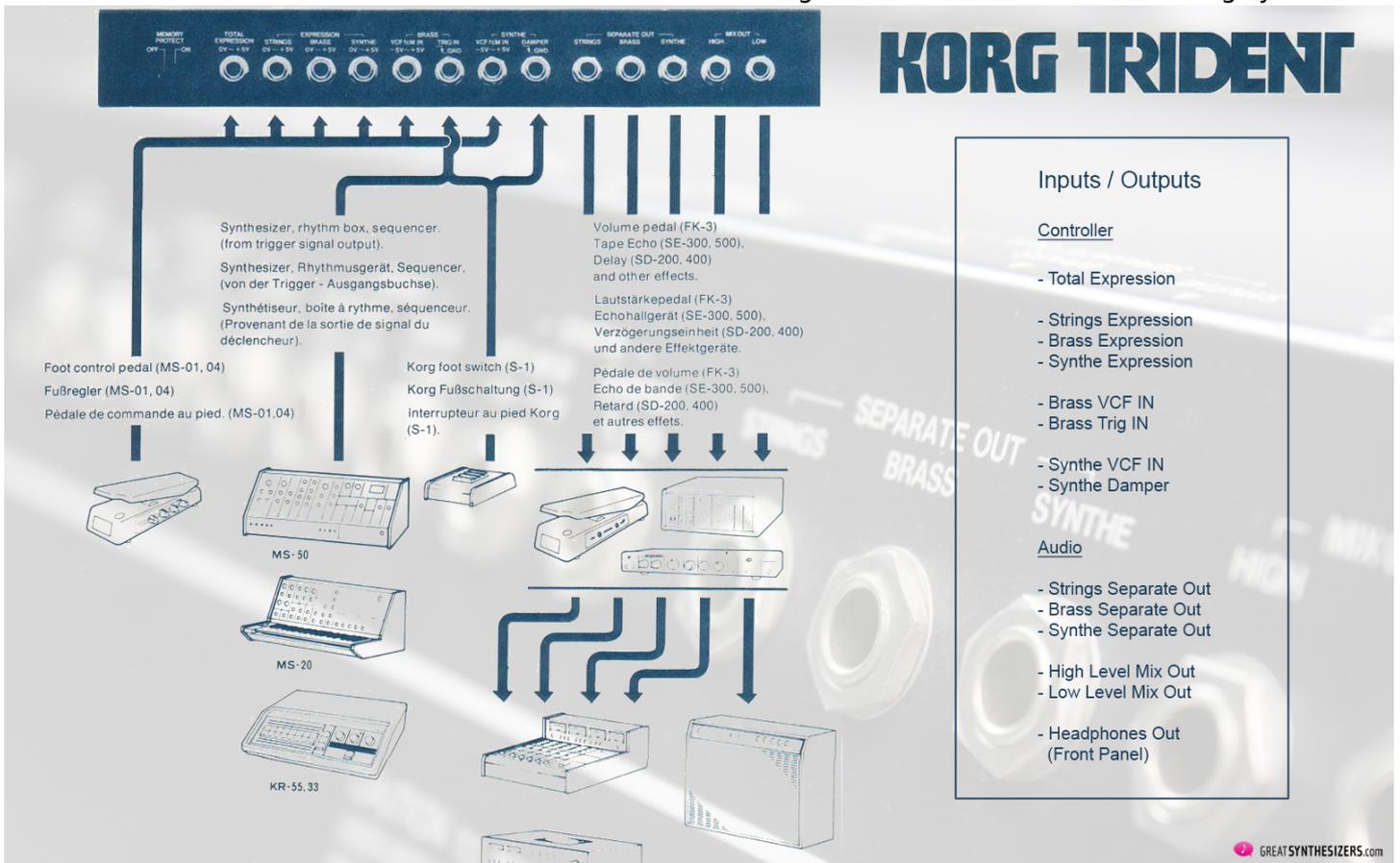
Then there's the global Vibrato-LFO with delay. It can be either automatically enabled or by joystick, the latter an exquisite performance tool, a contribution to the *liveliness* of the legendary Trident sound.



Another Trident highlight is the huge number of rear-side sockets. Few synthesizers - with the exception of the Moog Memorymoog and the ARP Quadra - come with such an impressive rear panel. In detail:

There are the audio paths. Synthe / Brass / Strings each have their own *Independent Output*. In addition, there are two MIX Outs (high / low level) and there's a PHONES out (the latter on the panel). With these various signal paths, individual synthesizer parts can be routed through external effect devices or to different channels of the mixing console. Synthe / Brass / Strings can thus be individually processed by means of timbre, level adjustment and stereo panorama positioning.

Then there are the modulation inputs. *Expression* (here, volume level) enables individual volume control of Synthe / Brass / Strings via foot pedal or any other external CV source, and there's a *Total Expression* jack, too, for overall volume control. In addition, we have various *Filter CV Inputs* and the *Trigger Input* for the Brass section. All these control options earmark the Trident as a strong performance synthesizer.



Weird Extras

Some aspects of the Trident make you smile. The Synthe department has 3 factory presets (Piano 1 / Piano 2 / Clavi (net?)) and the incredible number of 16 user memories. Hm, cross your heart ... why 16 memory spaces? The Synthe department is so minimal that even imaginative musicians will hardly be able to elicit more than 8 "decidedly different sounding" sounds from the Trident.

Now I'm rowing back a bit and my smile is gone. Sounds, once saved, are unalterable (or just in tiny, tiny bits). So with a bit of foresight, you will have 16 sounds in the memory, which probably differ only in the smallest nuances ... a result of the fact that later sound adjustment is simply not possible.

And again to the flanger: As awesome as this effect can be, it can only be assigned to ONE section at a time! Synthe with flanger *or* Brass with flanger *or* Strings with flanger, that's it. Only a fool would look for Synthe *and* Strings with flanger (for example). That just won't happen. (Admittedly, this could be done, of course, in a fiddly way with separate outputs and some external effect devices.)



Furthermore: Brass has a *Trigger Select* function which only triggers the envelope if (up to) 2, 4, 6 or 8 keys are simultaneously hit. An old hat, well known to many readers thanks to the General Envelope Generator (GEG) of the Korg PS series. Musically, this makes sense, of course, if you want to combine your own playing style with the targeted addition of brass tones. Here, for example, the result of *Trigger Select* setting "6": play 5 notes - only Synthe and Strings sound, again 5 notes - again Synthe and Strings, play 6 notes - whoops, suddenly Brass is there as well.

Should this function be activated and later forgotten (because of a "memory gap"), it can happen that the Brass department elusively slips away during playing. This is no defect, but a result of the playing style not being adapted to the Trident setting. Solution: Deactivate *Trigger Select* and everything will be fine - the Brass section will be back.

Last thoughts: While the OUTPUT (On/Off) and separate volume control per sound-department are excellent features, the possibility of *separate tuning* per unit would have been extremely useful. Of course, there is TOTAL TUNE - but only for the entire instrument. A detuning of all departments against each other would have been the icing on the cake.



Musical Specialities

Orchestral sounds and leadlines are what the Trident is all about. Synthe and Strings can give you goose bumps and create vintage flair at their finest, especially when used in stereo. And with a pinch of flanger effect, for example, even the solo sounds become outstanding musical components. Depending, obviously, on the player's skills*. Not all of us are Rick Wakeman.

[* A Trident **MIDI retrofit kit** would help a little, of course. Available at [CHD Elektroservis](https://www.chd-elektroservis.de/). A little tip.]

Well, that's it in Trident's sonic universe. There's obviously little basic potential here for experimental music. Useful features such as ring modulation, cross modulation, one or two high-frequency LFOs, etc. are missing. Nevertheless, the creative process can be deepened with a little imagination and with the help of external CV inputs (and eventually a modular system).



Discovering Simplicity

Discovering simplicity: A small allusion to Sten Nadolny's novel "The Discovery of Slowness". As with slowness, simplicity is not a daughter of our times. What distinguishes the Korg Trident - and this very knowledge required a few years of experience on my part - is the conceptual simplicity of the instrument.

This simplicity is reflected in the extremely clear structure of the Trident surface. The large lettering, the limited - but effective - features. Its crazy large panel with luxurious space for turning the knobs. That rare feeling of value which arises when touching the solid wooden housing ...

Every aspect of the Trident has an aura of vintage, of nostalgia, of the good old days. Nothing against modern times and their instruments, but making music on the Trident means relaxation, casual use of the elements, a relaxed approach to technology. Unlike today, where a thousand-and-one features vie for your attention, where small labels and small operating elements afford extreme concentration - if not the use a magnifying glass.



Simplicity also means that the LITTLE that is offered can be minutely exploited. The rich sound of 70s / 80s strings throughout five full octaves, for instance. Most string machines only have four. Even the ingenious ARP Quadra is limited to the 4 octave string sound à la OMNI II, strictly speaking. Not that the ARP Quadra doesn't have its own advantages ...

The Trident sound carpets / pad sounds are, taken on their own, spectacular, especially in the bass area, where many other string machines evaporate in a sort of nasal midrange.

Trident's bass is absolutely impressive, all the more so when the flanger is switched on. Which - incidentally - should be done with feeling, with a sense of fine tuning, since the enormous dynamic range of the flanger can lead to unwanted clipping effects. Recordings with a gentle beginning thus tend to overload as soon as the flanger gets into its own and the bass begins to "pop". Caution, as I say, is the ticket of the day.

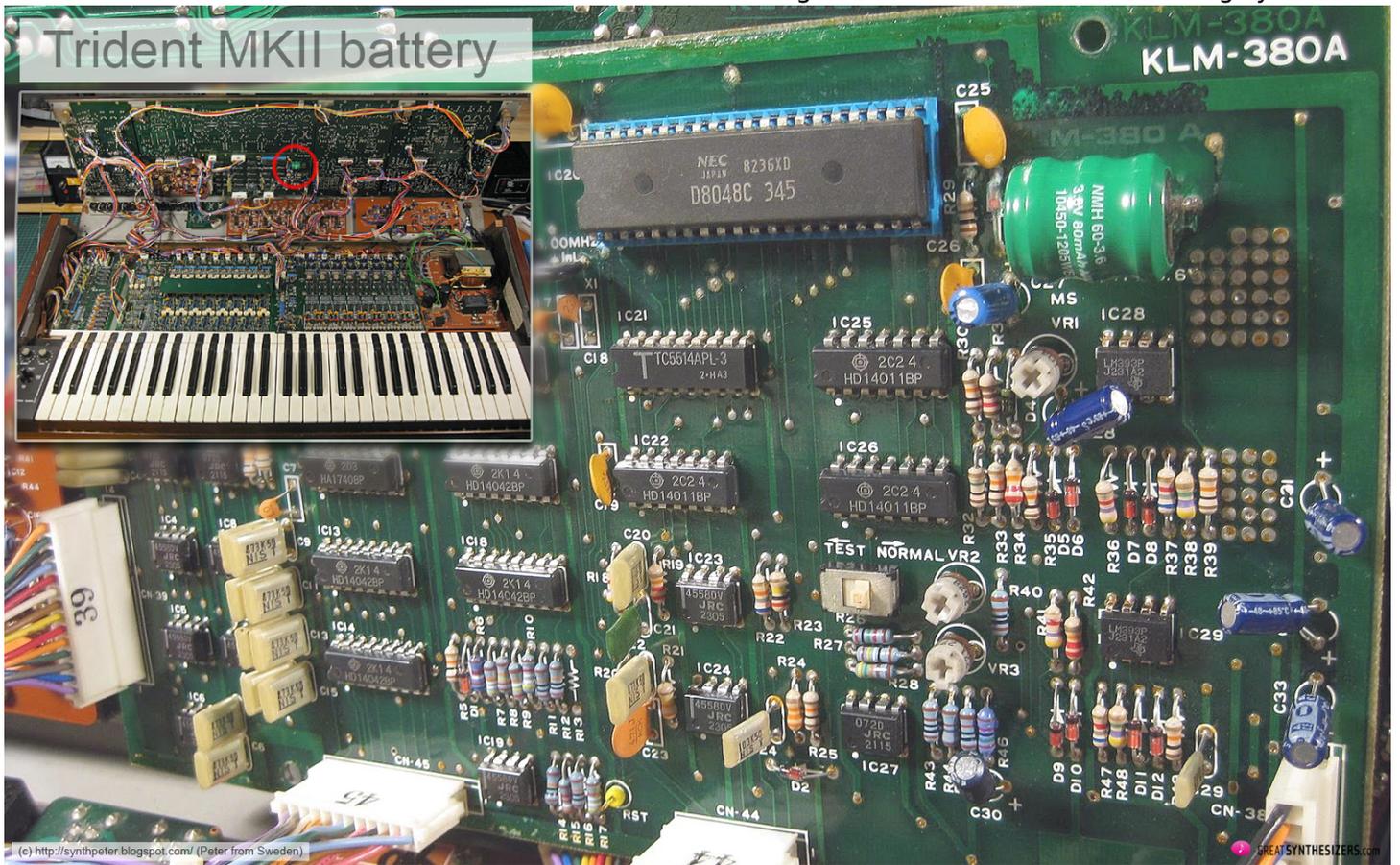


Trident MKII and the “Battery Leakage” issue

The optical changes in the MKII version were discussed above. In my personal opinion, this version is not half as beautiful as the original Trident. This, of course, is a matter of taste. But from a musical point of view, the Trident MKII admittedly has some advantages ...

The synthesizer section now offers a second envelope (for the VCA), the VCF keyboard tracking has been improved, the memory has been doubled to 32 locations, and saved sounds can now be modified. Another plus is the cassette interface (assuming there is someone out there who still prefers working with that antique system of data storage).

Technically speaking, there are even bigger differences between the original Trident and the Trident MKII, since the newer instrument has been rearranged internally - possibly a detriment.



The main problem is, as so often, the battery [thanks to Ben for pointing out the problem]. As with the Polysix or Poly-61, a leaky Trident MKII battery is a particular source of danger.

In the original Trident, the battery is placed on the synthesizer board (on the inside of the circuit panel - not immediately visible when you open the instrument). In the Trident MKII, however, the battery has been installed directly on the CPU board (!), which is right opposite the voice boards mounted on the bottom plate.

In the case of MKII battery leakage, the damage might be significant. Find more information on this topic in [this blog](#) ...

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Secondhand prices

Both instruments – the Trident and the Trident MKII – are a true rarity on the secondhand market. The current price range of the Trident MKII is relatively high, though. You’ll be thinking in terms of 5,000 to | 17

7,000+ Euros/USD or above.

But with a little luck, the original Trident is available for a mere 3,000 to 5,000+ Euros/USD. Quite cheap actually, since the Trident is a picture-perfect *plug&play* instrument. Or a *sit-down&play* instrument, if you prefer.

Conclusion

Clarity, simplicity and a very low stress factor with high (albeit somewhat one-sided) musical output are those aspects that may make the Korg Trident irresistible for some users.



The Trident is recommended not only to those with a nostalgic bent, but above all to those purists for whom such a *sit-down & play* instrument fulfills a musical need for simplicity - a simplicity welcome in the technologically overloaded home studio of today.

Let's listen again to the Korg PR department and take a refreshing dip into Poseidon's world of stormy seas, wind and waves: **"In our modern world it is the amazing three-part polyphonic synthesizer from Korg that gives the musician absolute control over the *sound waves*. The Trident. Generate your own *sound storms!*"**

Ah yes, that's what we wanted to say ...

Korg Trident - a classic 8-voice string synthesizer



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We have attached 30+ minutes of audio files. The first recordings are from LesIndes. In some of the other samples you will hear - in addition to the Trident - the Yamaha CP70 piano ("Mix 1"), the [Novation Summit](#) (lead line in "Mix 2") and Korgs MiniPops 3 Rhythm Box.

1. [Demo \(c\) LesIndes](#)
2. [Flanger 1 \(c\) LesIndes](#)
3. [Sequence \(c\) LesIndes](#)
4. [Mix 1: Yamaha CP70](#)
5. [Orchestral Solo](#)
6. [Filter Sweeps 1](#)
7. [Soft Chords 1](#)
8. [MiniPops 1](#)
9. [Flanger 2](#)
10. [Filter FX](#)
11. [Mix 2: Selector / Summit](#)
12. [Filter Sweeps 2](#)
13. [Soft Chords 2](#)

14. [MiniPops 2](#)

15. [Flanger 3](#)

Korg Trident

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[Vintage Synth Explorer](#)

[Synthesizer.at](#) (Robert Wittek) - with Audio-Workshop

Youtube:

“Farewell Trident” by William Salmela

“Trident MKI” by Bruno Fabrizio Sorba

“Trident Demo” by Don Solaris

Further info:

[Korg Trident MKII restoration](#) (battery leakage issue)

Comparison:

[Elka Synthex test report](#)

[Oberheim OB-8 test report](#)

[Roland Jupiter-8 test report](#)

[Moog Memorymoog test report](#)

[Sequential Prophet-5 test report](#)

[Yamaha CS-50/CS-60/CS-80 test report](#)

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[Korg Trident Photo XL](#) (4200×2400 px)

Update 2022 - thanks to Luis for the following hint: The Korg Trident is (strictly speaking) not only 8-voice polyphonic, but - with the appropriate settings - 16-voice polyphonic. Since each sound section can be assigned to one half of the keyboard, you get - as an example - a string machine with 8 voices to the left and a synthesizer with 8 voices to the right. Hence, in split-mode the Trident is a 16-voice - or, to be exact - 2×8-voice instrument.