There cannot be many followers of synth fashion that have not heard or even joined in the analogue vs digital debate. That debate will rumble on abated. It is just one of many debates that permeate the world of synthesisers. The Oberheim OB12 is another debate.

I cannot think of many synths that have caused a divide quite like the Oberheim OB12. It is truly a “Marmite” synth. You either love it or you hate it. Many will cite its origins, as a licensed product of the Italian Viscount company (primarily an organ manufacturer at the time) as reason enough to despise it. “It not a real Oberheim” they would say. That is true.

It was designed and manufactured without any input from Tom Oberheim and shares little if any heritage with Oberheim products that came before it. So, its a sonic outcast, the boy in class that doesn’t quite fit in, the boss at work you never liked. It dares to have the hallowed Oberheim name emblazoned across it.

But, when you get past the Oberheim name, or perhaps if you ignore it altogether, you have an outstanding synth, quite unlike any other. Of course it has its shortcoming and everyone has a wish list of missing functions, but great synths are great in spite of their shortcomings.

The OB12: the great pretender?

Is it really though?

To put the OB12 (or the “Blue Meanie”, as it affectionately called by some) in its historic context, it was produced in the year 2000 at a time when its contemporaries were the likes of the Access Virus, Korg Triton, Novation Nova II, Waldorf Micro Q and Yamaha CS2x.

With a few exceptions, the predominance of the knob/slider deficient synth, large fascia with a couple of sliders, some buttons and an LCD, was still in evidence harking back to the template created by the Yamaha DX7 in1983. Those ‘editing through a small LCD window” days were coming to an end and a welcome return to hands on synthesis, without the need for a sound programming technician, beckoned. The advent of the Access Virus, Korg MS2000 were evidence of this. The one knob per function brigade were back in town.

I owned an OB12 about 10 years ago but stupidly sold it after a year or so. Why, I don’t know because it is a fantastic synth. I will not join the Oberheim/Viscount argument. BMW makes Minis and Volkswagen makes Skodas. Are Minis and Skodas bad cars? No, they are just different – produced to fulfil different requirements.

What’s in a name anyway? I have just bought another OB12 and instantly regretted both my decision to sell it all those years ago and the wasted 10 years without it. I use a fair amount of plugins and have a selection of analog and digital synths. The OB12 sits somewhere in-between them all. It’s not perfect but it has earned its place in my setup. As many have said, the factory patches, while ok, do not reveal the potential of this synth. This is a synth to be tweaked and the plethora of knob/sliders, are a necessity on the road to innovative patches. In my experience, tweaking on a plugin is just not the same experience and does not yield the same results as actual hands on tweaking.

The architecture of the OB12 is fairly standard. It is VA (Virtual Analogue). The whole area of VA synths is another debate. Let’s avoid that one altogether. It is a software synth in a hardware controller. The OB12 is 12-note polyphonic but can have up to four timbres layered/split at once thus reducing polyphony to 3 notes. This does sound and can be restrictive. But there are great sounds to be had from one, two or three

timbres.

The OB12 can store 256 Timbres (single sounds) and the other 256 are Programs (multi sounds). The panel is extremely well and logically laid out. There is plenty of room for fingers to turn knobs and adjust sliders – all of which are clearly labeled. Each timbre has two oscillators with independent mixable waveforms and a Wave Control feature which further modifies the basic waveforms, two LFOs, two envelopes and two multimode filters.

The build quality is second to none. It's a heavy metal chassis with plastic end cheeks. Knobs and sliders have a slight wobble feel to them and the blue backlit LCD is very informative, going so far as to display envelopes in graphical format (why weren't all synths graced with this simple feature?). Perhaps unusually for a synth at this price point the keyboard is both velocity- and aftertouch-sensitive. In addition to the Pitch & Mod wheels, there is an assignable ribbon controller. There are the usual connections on the rear with the addition of a digital output and a second stereo AUX output for independent processing.

On its release in 2000 the OB12 had a retail price of £799 in the UK. Only two years later this had dropped to £499 – sadly, a reflection more of its unsaleability than its desirability. Presently they are selling on eBay in the UK for £400-500. But as more people catch onto the OB12s strengths, I can see this rising.

So, what makes the OB12 different?

Well, things like the ability to mix the oscillators waveforms as well as change the routing of the oscillators through the two independent multimode filters, its FM and Ring Mod capabilities and some basic but useable effects that can be routed in a variety of ways. All this coupled with a plethora of performance features, an arpeggiator and phrase recorder and the ability to Morph between programs open up new sonic vistas.

Each of the filters is a 12db (2 pole) filter. Filters routing can be parallel, split or serial, the latter resulting in a 24db (4 pole) filter. Hidden in the menu is the ability to change the Delta parameter, available in parallel and split mode. By changing the cutoff frequency of the second filter; by using bandpass mode for both filters and by widening their cutoff frequencies, two formants peak may be formed, creating vocal-like timbres.

But how does it sound?

If I had to use two words to describe it, I would say Menacing and Schizophrenic. Menacing because some of the sounds just jump out and assault your ears. Schizophrenic as it's a synth with two personalities; – sometimes warmly analog like and sometimes digitally chilly, sometimes brutal and sometimes a little too polite.

To my ears the waveforms and filters need little effort to produce earth shattering basses and pads. It's also capable of some of the tinkly delicate sound reminiscent of the Yamaha DX7 and even a PPG Wave at times. This is where the (almost) one knob/slider per functions comes to the fore. Small changes to settings do make subtle differences. I have never owned nor played an actual Oberheim (well, maybe 35 years ago in a synth retailers), so can't comment on its authenticity as an Oberheim.

I think it's probably fair to say it doesn't sound the same but does allude to the Oberheim sound. Certainly the waveforms and more importantly, the filters do have a distinct character that I have not heard in any other synth that I have owned.

Points to note

The 12 note polyphony can become irksome. But, to be honest, there are plenty of interesting sounds to be had using one or two timbres. I would even go so far as to say that the Factory Programs using 3 & 4 timbres can sometimes sound too ‘busy”. Personally, I would rather that the OB12 was 12 note/2 timbres synth with a minimum of 6 notes. That works for me.

Prospective owners need to understand that a Program consists of four Timbres (layers) and that editing a Timbre that appears in multiple Programs will affect all Programs using that Timbre. I find this a particularly annoying implementation of the architecture and one that could easily have been avoided by copying Timbres into Programs making them independent.

The effects are not the best but they do add to the character in a positive way. The Chorus, Delay and Reverb are stereo but enabling the Distortion switches the entire effects section to mono! On the plus side, the order and bus settings for the effects can be programmed.

Switching between programs can involve a delay – the processor is obviously struggling to keep up, which seems weird when you can Morph seamlessly between Programs in realtime.

The latest OS – V1.52 is highly recommended as it resolves many of the earlier bugs. However, there have been warnings of it failing to update properly and “bricking” the synth. So, update at your peril.

Conclusion

Yes, it would have been nice if the Wave Control feature was able to be modulated. The same with the FM feature. But, there is that wish list creeping in again and designers have to be practical about what’s in and what’s not lest the fascia become too cluttered and confused.

The OB12 is not the answer to all your sound creation dreams but it is a valuable tool.

Get past the Oberheim “baggage” and judge the OB12 on its merits. It is a unique and powerful synth. You must get hands on to reap the benefits and not rely on the factory patches – great though some are. Sometimes I tweak this synth for ages and get some weird but unusable patches. Sometimes I tweak for minutes and the most beautiful and amazing sound presents itself to me. Even though I understand its inner workings, I sometimes listen to a sounds and think “How the hell is it doing that?!” The OB12 has the ability to both frustrate and surprise me.

I like that.

1. DEMO 1
2. DEMO 2
3. JMJ Journey 1 Timbre
4. Eastwick 3 Timbres
5. DX Pluck O 1 Timbre
6. Crystal PPG 1 Timbre
7. Menace 2 Timbres
8. Maestro on C 4 Timbres
9. Cage of Air 2 Timbres
10. Arpeggio 2 Timbres
11. Arhythmic 3 Timbres

12. Ambient 1 3Timbres
13. Ambient 2 1 Timbre
14. The Insides 2 Timbres
15. SubMariner 2 Timbres
16. Octave Lead 2 Timbres
17. OB Fat Pad 1 Timbre

Oberheim (Viscount) OB12

Polyphonic Digital Synthesizer
12 Voices