OSCar Synthesizer – a unique fetish synth from the UK

Whoever knows of a vintage mono-synth that can produce more timbres than an OSCar, please raise your hand NOW … … … No one? Wonderful, then we already agree on this point. The clever ones would of course have argued that the OSCar is not (only) monophonic, but duophonic. Be that as it may: welcome to the unique British fetish synth, which remains one of the most unusual synthesizers in music history to this day.

The origins of the OSCar date back to 1977. Synth designer Chris Huggett and keyboardist **Adrian Wagner** decided to build an inexpensive synthesizer and founded the company Electronic Dream Plant (EDP) for this purpose. Huggett realized that the new instrument could be built entirely with digital technology, with the exception of the analogue filter. The **EDP Wasp** was born, and with the help of a London music shop (*Rod Argent's Keyboard Store* – financial support and distribution), the short triumph of the plastic synthesizer with membrane keyboard began in 1978.

While musicians around the globe were now using the Wasp (mainly in the studio, less frequently on stage), problems with sales and service of the Wasp were increasing. On the one hand, production costs were higher than expected. On the other hand, the cheaply built Wasp was simply replaced (rather than repaired) in the event of a technical defect, which is why the storage rooms at *Rod Argent's Keyboard Store* filled up with broken Wasps. In addition, competition was growing: inexpensive synthesizers from Japan and the USA (such as the Korg MS-10, Roland SH-09, and Moog Prodigy) flooded the markets, ultimately leading to the decline of Electronic Dream Plant.*

Collector's set: Two EDP Wasps, dual power supply, Kenton Pro-2000 MIDI-CV interface with Wasp port, two LINK cables, spare Wasp knobs and the original Wasp manual with sound sheets.

[* Other EDP products such as the Spider Sequencer, Gnat Synthesizer, Wasp Deluxe and Caterpillar Keyboard were unable to remedy the situation and turn the tide. Regardless, the EDP Wasp is considered one of the great milestones in history, as it enabled a broad audience to purchase their first 'own' synthesizer like no other instrument before it. It was affordable, portable, easy to use and completely self-sufficient with battery operation and a loudspeaker.

It should also be mentioned that the Wasp synthesizer, like all EDP products, had a digital (!) interface. Many years before the introduction of MIDI, the Wasp was already capable of digital communication with a sequencer (Spider), a master keyboard (Caterpillar) and with other EDP synthesizers. For demonstration purposes, 50 Wasps were connected in series via their 7-pin LINK sockets and played together.]

The less-than-impressive keyboard of the OSCar is said to originate from the Wasp Deluxe.

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After the demise of Electronic Dream Plant in 1982, Chris Huggett did not give up. He started a new project and, with the support of sound programmer Paul Wiffen (who now makes films) and designer Anthony Harrison-Griffin (who had already designed the EDP Gnat), developed another predominantly digital synthesizer, this time with a dual (analogue) filter. The instrument was characterized by its memory capacity, sequencer, arpeggiator, duophony and the special ability to create your own waveforms (additive sound shaping).

With financial support from his parents, Huggett founded the Oxford Synthesiser Company and finally launched the **OSC OSCar** in 1983. Once again, London-based music retailer Rod Argent's Keyboard Store took over distribution (and was, according to literature, the only shop where the OSCar could be purchased directly/on site). The hybrid synthesizer sounded fantastic and, despite its high price (which was on par with the polyphonic Roland Juno-6), became a cult instrument.

The fact that the OSCar is ‘unique’ in many respects is already evident in the philosophy underlying the instrument:

> *“The philosophy behind the design has been to retain the fine resolution and powerful sound of analogue synthesis in a virtually “all digital” microprocessor-based system.*
>
> *The digital design eliminates the drift in parameters and the continual “setting up” required in analogue systems. Tuning is quartz crystal derived and is very stable and accurate (no need for “auto-tune”); pre-programmed voices remain exactly as they were set originally.*
>
> *The use of a microprocessor allows many complex functions (many of which would not otherwise be possible), to be called up at the touch of a button. Facilities like the arpeggiator, the sequencer and waveform creation are all built in and easy to use.”*
>
> (OSCar user manual, introduction 1.1)

Well, the ‘easy to use’ part is debatable (especially since the OSCar is known for its cryptic operation in some areas), but the rest is correct: the hybrid philosophy of the OSCar is unique because, unlike any other monophonic instrument, it enables musical design processes, sound creations and sound experiments that go far (!) beyond the horizon of conventional (analogue) synthesizers.

It is somewhat surprising to note at this point that the OSCar was intended to be a ‘storable Minimoog’. Although there was already such a synthesizer on the market – the Moog The Source, released in 1981 – it clearly missed its target. It is pure irony that The Source was now being cannibalized to create the OSCar in its housing. [The accompanying photos show the restored prototype of the OSCar.]

The photo probably shows the prototype of the OSCar, which appeared a few years ago. The housing comes from a Moog Source ...

The photo probably shows the prototype of the OSCar, which appeared a few years ago. The housing comes from a Moog Source ...

OSCar appearance

In contrast to the aluminium/wood housing of the OSCar prototype (aka Moog The Source), the series devices were primarily made of plastic and rubber. The design and choice of materials for the OSCar are so unusual that it can truly be described as an original fetish synth. The thick side panels house the power connection and power switch on the left, and the trigger connection / cassette interface and audio output on the right. On the back, there is MIDI, which – unsurprisingly – was only integrated into the design at a later stage.

One small advantage of the rubber-like material is that it makes the OSCar lightweight. One major disadvantage is that it deforms over the years/decades. The boundaries between the module areas become crumbly, often stick out and can break, the rubber ends towards the keyboard lose their shape (sometimes touching the keyboard) and, in some cases, the thick right-hand side panel jams the high C key – see photo. In addition, the entire plastic surface of the OSCar can develop a warped or wavy appearance …

A well-used OSCar with uneven casing, scratches and partially faded lettering. When played, the top C key rubs against the right-hand end-cheek.

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… which means, in plain language, that some of the OSCars that still exist today are not exactly a feast for the eyes. All kinds of deformations, uneven surfaces, scratched-off lettering, broken rubber parts… you have to be patient if you want to find a ‘nice’ OSCar. And now, finally, to the …

Voice structure

The VCO-VCF-VCA layout of the OSCar is essentially classic. This makes it easy for musicians to immediately find their way around the instrument, as at first glance the synthesizer hardly seems to differ from instruments such as Moog, ARP, Oberheim, Sequential, Roland, Yamaha, Korg, etc. Superficially, the OSCar has:

- **2 digital oscillators** (TRI, SAW, SQU, Var PULSE, PWM)

- **2** combined **analogue filters** (LP, BP, HP)
- **2 ADSR envelopes** (classic for filter and amp)
- A **flexible main LFO** (TRI, SAW, SQU, Random)
- **Noise** (continuously mixable with oscillators)

This alone allows for a wide variety of sounds to be created. However, what sets the OSCar apart from other synthesizers …

… are the additional extras of sound design, some of which are only made possible by the hybrid concept (as we already learned in the ‘Philosophy’ section on the OSCar):

- **2 additional LFOs** responsible **for the PWM** of oscillator 1 / oscillator 2
  (very dense sounds possible, but no access to these LFOs)
- **5 additional factory waveforms** for the oscillators
  (Full Organ, Harpsichord, Strong Lead, Double Pulse, Triple Pulse)
- **5 additional user waveforms** for the oscillators
  (combination of harmonics and storage of waveforms)
- **Precise tune and transpose functions** in conjunction with the keyboard
  (independently adjustable for both oscillators)
- **Numerous glide settings** (portamento, glissando)
- **Storable pitch bend/mod wheel settings** per sound
- **Numerous env repeat options**, plus **filter envelope delay function**
- **Step sequencer** with input of notes/rests, legato, loop points, program change and more; can be stored separately and synchronized via trigger or MIDI
- **Arpeggiator** whose notes can be recorded and stored directly with the sound; can also be synchronized via trigger or MIDI

Sonical characteristics

First and foremost, we should mention the OSCar filter. Or rather, the filters. Since we ourselves have not yet fully understood how they interact, we will refer to Matthias Becker's explanation here:

> A multimode filter with LOWPASS, BANDPASS and HIGHPASS modes – each with and without keyboard tracking – is available for post-processing the raw audio material. The filter section of the OSCar actually consists of two filters, each with a slope of 12 dB/octave, which can be switched either in series or in parallel. In LOWPASS and HIGHPASS mode (serial), this results in a filter slope of 24 dB (SEPARATION = 0), while in BANDPASS mode (parallel), it is only 12 dB.
>
> The peak frequencies of both filters are influenced simultaneously by the CUTOFF control and the filter modulation, but they can be separated using the SEPARATION control. In LOWPASS and HIGHPASS mode, increasing the SEPARATION value reduces the filter slope (up to 12 dB when the SEPARATION knob is turned up fully). In BANDPASS mode, the position of the SEPARATION knob determines the bandwidth of the filter. At higher Q values, two peaks are clearly audible, especially in BANDPASS mode. The SEPARATION function offers sound shaping possibilities that go far beyond those of a normal filter. In BANDPASS mode, for example, it is possible to simulate very convincing vocal sounds.
>
> (translation from: Matthias Becker, Synthesizer von gestern (VOL 2), page 134)

In this context, we should also mention the VOLUME knob, which has a second function for the **FILTER** (Over)**DRIVE**. This can be adjusted continuously (by pressing the STORE button simultaneously) and, at higher values, produces an overdriven sound – resulting in the most outstanding sound impressions and the **wild, untamed, aggressive character** of the OSCar, which can be heard in many variations in the attached 40+ minutes of sound samples, among other things.

The OSCar's filter(s) are definitely unique and cannot be found in any other synthesizer in history – not even close – in this quality. They can create incredible liveliness, sounds and sound progressions that no other instrument is capable of producing. It is pure irony that the predominantly digital synthesizer can sometimes sound much more analogue than many a thoroughbred analogue synth itself, thanks to its filters. While the explanation for the **convincing analogue sound** can be found in the **filter section** …

… the reason for the equally **impressive digital sounds** can be found in the **oscillator section**, with its special waveforms, additive synthesis and mega-precise tuning. The ability to program your own waveforms is a unique feature among mono synthesizers that only the OSCar has to offer. By defining harmonics and their volume(s), users can create their own ‘waves’ and use these waveforms – which can of course be reproduced at will – as the basis for ever-changing sounds.

Precise tuning is no less important for digital sound behavior. At the FINE Tune zero point, the oscillators sound absolutely brilliant, without a hint of beat. In combination with the unique filter design, this sometimes goes so far that the OSCar can sound even more convincing digitally than many digital synthesizers themselves. A somewhat surreal thought, of course, but nevertheless: the digital character of the OSCar (synthetic waveforms plus razor-sharp tuning) is amplified by the monstrous filter into sonic realms that many digital synthesizers can only dream of in the best of cases.

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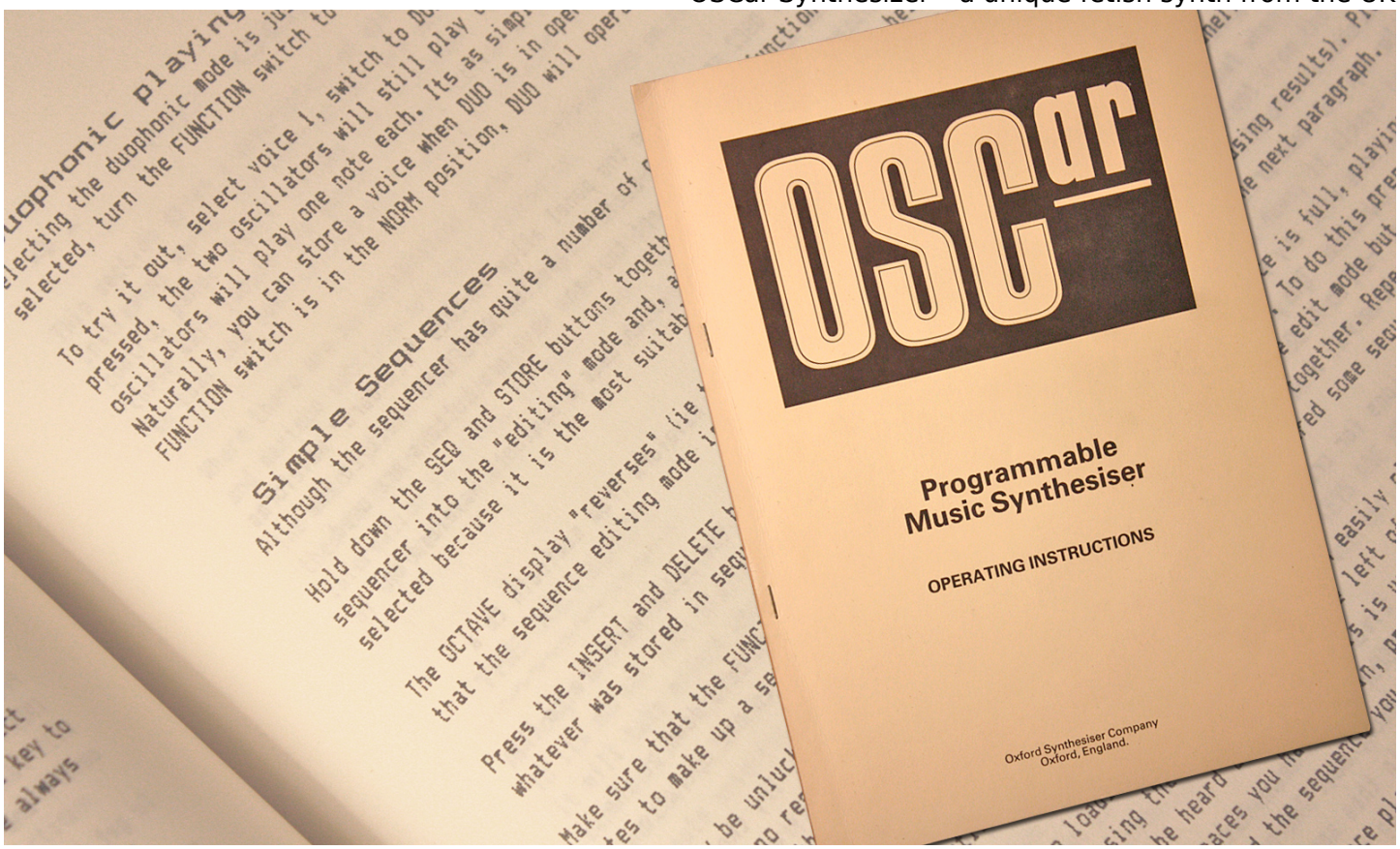
The strange – but ingenious – combination of analogue and digital technology means that this synthesizer can produce a wealth of timbres unlike any other mono synthesizer from the vintage era. In overdrive mode, the OSCar can come very close to a Minimoog (which was its original goal) and produce basses and leads of the finest quality. In addition, there are sequencer sounds and solo sounds of all shades, strange digital-analogue (or analogue-digital) mutations that simply defy description.

How fortunate that there are up to 36 memory slots for all the sounds. The sounds are accessed and saved – what an ingenious idea – via the keyboard keys. The OSCar can also store 22 sequences. If you run out of space – which is likely to happen relatively quickly – there is a cassette interface that can be used to transfer entire libraries of sounds. Musicians of Stevie Wonder's artistic (and financial) stature naturally didn't bother with this and simply sampled masses of OSCar sounds into their Synclavier.

The many OSCar realities …

While not all of the OSCar's strengths in the musical realm have been mentioned yet – experimental sounds involving LFO, glide, envelope delay-time and trigger options, for example – we will now turn our attention to the multi-layered realities of the OSCar. These make it difficult to assess the instrument as a whole. Should one recommend purchasing an OSCar in 2025? Considering the somewhat 'delicate' areas of the synthesizer, it is not easy to make a clear statement. Hence the following notes and insights – anyone interested can then make their own final judgement on the OSCar…

Let's start with the controls. The basic sound design on the OSCar is very straightforward and relatively effortless. But when you get into the details, things get complicated. Even the extra waveforms don't appear by name, so you need to consult the user manual (hopefully included) to avoid working blindly. And waveforms are still the simplest example; when it comes to additive synthesis and arpeggiator/sequencer programming, things get quite complex. This is where the five OCTAVE LEDs play an important role, as their illumination (in terms of number and direction) serves as a form of communication.



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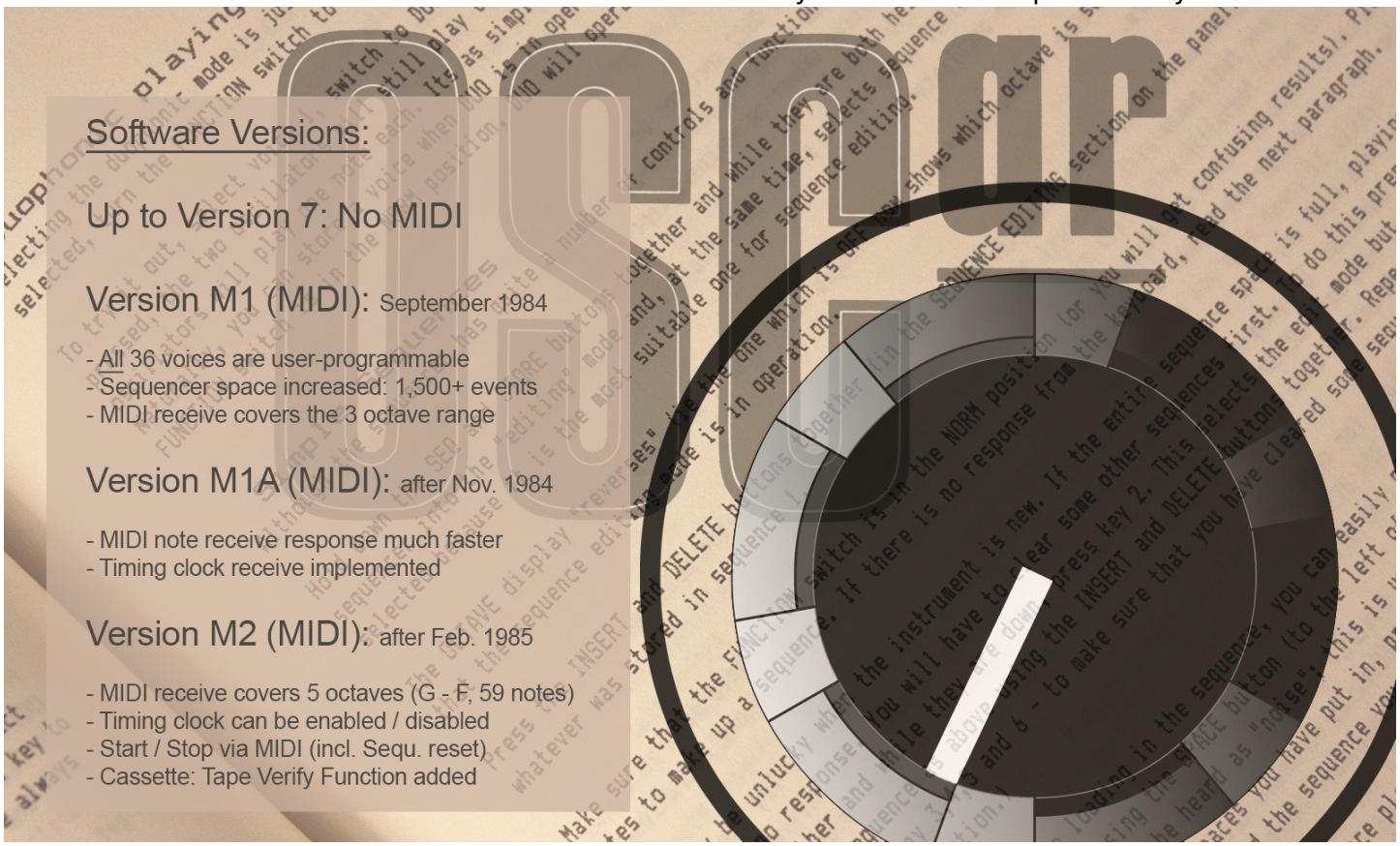
Consequently, without regular practice (and the aforementioned manual), you will quickly get lost when working in detail on the OSCar. The simple solution: skip the particularly complex things and indulge in the superficial possibilities, because these alone are often enough to make a musician happy. In addition, you simply have to accept the OSCar's keyboard, which is too light for our taste, as well as the aforementioned peculiarities of the rubber covers that often come loose, etc.

Which brings us to the OSCar's service requirements. The knobs will surely need to be replaced at some point (if not, constant value fluctuations will make programming impossible sooner or later). The battery will need to be replaced at some point, which will inevitably result in the loss of all sounds, sequencer data and possibly also user waveforms. The cassette interface sends its regards at this point. Global servicing is necessary from time to time, as the OSCar can sometimes go completely haywire – failing to start correctly, suddenly switching itself off, and so on.



And this brings us to the downside of hybrid technology (which is otherwise so ingenious). The OSCar needs care... and its owner sometimes needs particularly strong nerves. Technical surprises (let's stay positive) that would never happen with a Minimoog, Korg MS-20, Roland SH-09 (etc.) are inevitable with the OSCar. The only solutions we know of are to have the instrument serviced by a technician from time to time and to play/use the OSCar regularly (this charges the battery and keeps the knobs intact).

From a musical point of view, there are few points of criticism. What has always bothered us a little is the somewhat tentative attack time of the OSCar envelopes. A crisp, precise 'zapp' is missing. This is particularly noticeable in MIDI mode, as you have to bring the OSCar track forward so that the synthesizer fits in with the timing of the other tracks/drums in the overall context (at least there is a solution for this). Furthermore, using the pitch wheel is not very comfortable, as the high rubber side panel gets in the way and there is simply not enough space for your hand to operate it.

Final note from the studio environment: Connecting and disconnecting MIDI cables on the OSCar should be done with particular care. The simple reason for this is that the retrofitted metal MIDI strip is only inserted into the plastic chassis at the rear and is definitely not completely stable. Just like all the hardware on the fetish synth OSCar, it is unique, but also only trustworthy to a limited extent.

Buying an OSCar

Since there were only about 1,000 OSCars built between 1983 and 1986, the situation on the used market is naturally somewhat tense. To put it simply, you don’t come across the OSCar in classified ads every day. It is more often found on the posh platforms with their posh prices. The OSCar offers on Reverb range from around 4,500 USD/Euros to 8,000 USD/Euros (although significantly higher and completely surreal offers can certainly be found as well).

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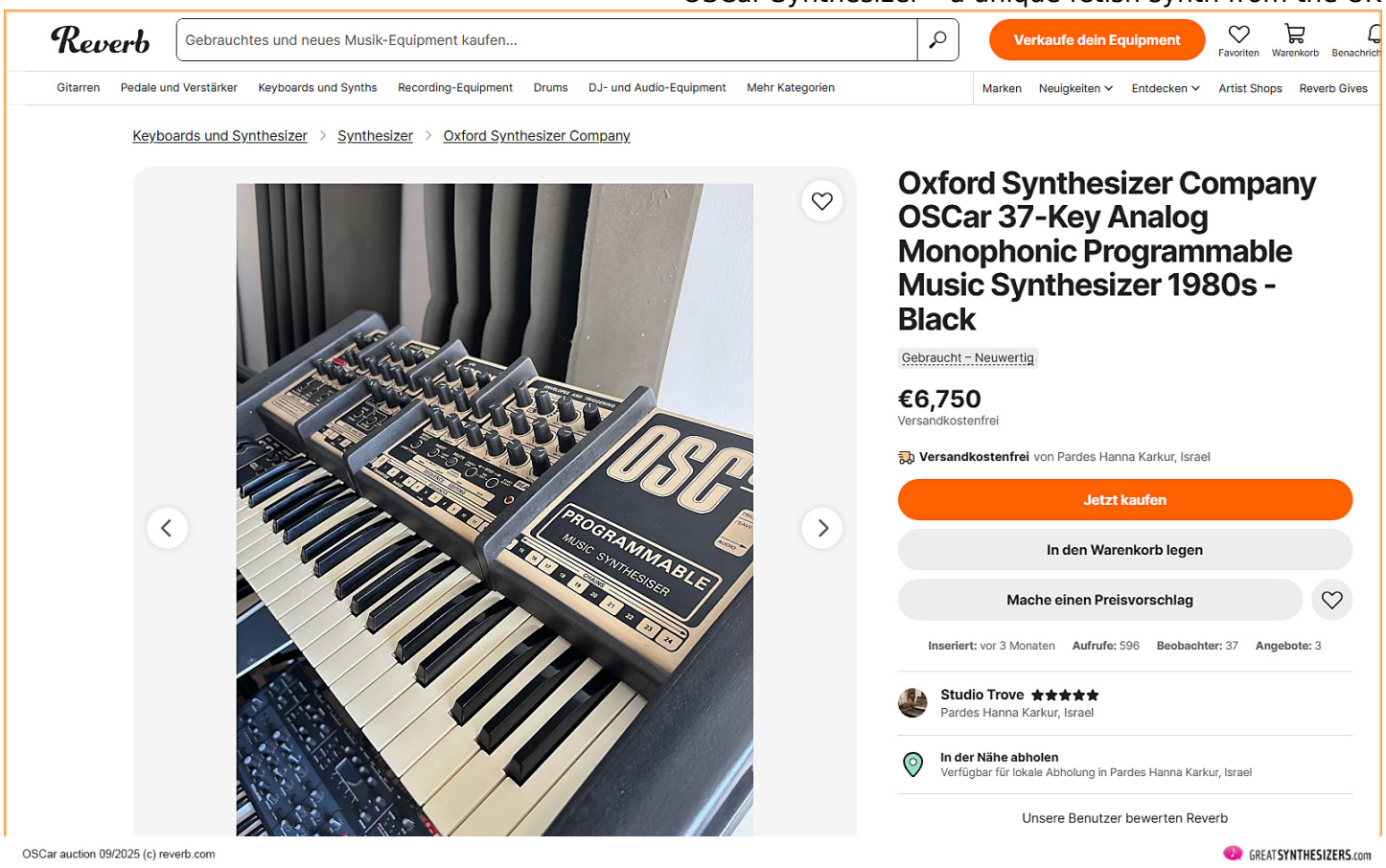

Considering the enormous musical output that an OSCar is capable of, we would consider a price range of about 6,000 USD / Euros to be quite realistic. Provided that the OSCar in question is in good visual condition – and ideally also technically overhauled. A model with MIDI version M2 would still be highly recommended, one of the later OSCar models. Those who want to invest significantly less than 6K can wait for the PolyOSCar from Behringer and will consequently be satisfied with those *'sounds similar to …'* results. However, the price/performance ratio of the products from the aforementioned company is generally so good that any criticism (in whatever form) is often unnecessary. *Sounds similar* … is then alright.

All in all

From a musical and creative perspective, the OSCar is an irreplaceable instrument. Sound design in the studio without the cult synth from the UK? Unthinkable! In any case, the sound design would certainly be incomplete. No wonder that many top musicians around the globe started using the OSCar shortly after its release… and still use it frequently today. There is simply no substitute for the OSCar's strange hybrid concept, which – it must be said with admiration – enables enormous sonic richness and musical flexibility.

Whether one should purchase an OSCar in 2025, we do not know … it seems impossible to give clear advice. Technically, there are many question marks surrounding the OSCar, the number of very well-preserved (and therefore expensive) models on the second-hand market is low, and modern alternatives such as Behringer PolyOSCar or the recently announced PWM OSCar Rebirth are not expected (based on experience) to actually match the sound of the original.

In any case, it is undisputed that the hybrid sounds of the OSCar are among the most outstanding, unique and characterful sounds that the history of electronic instruments has ever produced. From the perspective of a sound designer and pro studio musician, purchasing an OSCar is definitely worthwhile … provided your best friend is a skilled technician who can service and maintain the instrument every now and then.

Over 40 minutes of sound samples are included. Pure OSCar, unless otherwise stated. Given the sonic diversity of this fetish synth from the UK, it’s no wonder that no other instrument sounds quite like it…

1. Sample & Hold
2. Two Arpeggios
3. Just Mad 1
4. Just Mad 2
5. OSCar with CS-60
6. OSCar with JD-800
7. OSCar with Selector
8. OSCar with OB12 (1)
9. OSCar with OB12 (2)
10. Stereo Sweeps
11. Digital Nature
12. Simple Solo
13. Floating 1
14. Floating 2
15. Collage 1
16. Collage 2
17. Collage 3
18. Collage 4
19. Vocal and Lead

Oxford Synthesiser Company OSCar

1983 – 1986

Mono/duophonic hybrid synthesizer with MIDI, arpeggiator, sequencer, program memories and extra additive waveform synthesis

Size: approx. 73 x 37 x 12 cm
Weight: approx. 8 kg

Links:
OSCar article on SoundOnSound (interview with Paul Wiffen)
OSCar Zone at Virtual Music (specialist for OSCar service / repair)

PWM (Mantis, OSCar Rebirth)

Download / Open:
OSCar Foto XL (front), 4000 x 2800 px
OSCar Foto XL (back), 4000 x 2800 px

Youtube:
“OSCar vs PEAK” by Alex Ball

“OSCar Synthesizer I The New Romance” by Alex Ball

“Novation // OSCar Giveaway” by Novation (from 2015)