

JD is a promise. Above all, the *JD-XA* is a promise. You don't have to think in terms of Oberheim's classic OB-Xa to suspect that Roland's JD-XA has a lot of muscles and energy behind it. Whether this is unconditionally true or not – we'll see!

In the shadow of the famous JD-800 synthesizer (and JD-990 synth rack module), JD-XA represents an interesting conglomeration of different Roland instruments. And it may be, if only unintentionally and not in the common sense, a milestone in Roland's synthesizer history.

But let's go one step at a time. Here's the Roland JD-XA review ...



Colourful buttons and short keys: the hardware

JD-XA hardware has many interesting features. Let's begin with the positive. The knobs and faders are good (to exceptionally good) quality. Especially in comparison to the JD-Xi we find the pots here worlds better. Nothing wiggles. And the red-illuminated anthrazite knobs with their silver caps are class, pure class.

But then you're in for a couple of surprises. Let's start with the plastic surface. It reflects extremely strongly (which can be good or not – that's a matter of taste), and maintains its shiny newness for – at the most – one hour. The plastic attracts dust as soon as it sees the light of day. And fingerprints are there forever, of course. So, JD-XA goes into a sort of optical wilt while you're watching ...

Update 01/2016: Synthgraphics.com now offers extra – much nicer! – JD-XA panel overlays with a matte surface.

Update 01/2022: Sadly, the JD-XA panel overlays are not available any more.



Which means: one or two days after going into operation, JD-XA looks as if it has been in the studio for months, if not years. (Hint: the shiny appearance of the JD-XA is best photographed on the first day, for obvious reasons mentioned above).

And there are other little surprises. You can't fool an old (experienced) keyboarder: this keyboard is slightly different. All of those keys have been shortened by 1 centimeter, something you're painfully aware of as soon as you play it.

That may sound ridiculous (*one* centimeter – is that all?) ... well, we've compared the key lengths of various instruments. And here are the results ...



Our test instruments were the Yamaha CP-70B grand piano, the JD-800 synthesizer and ... the JD-XA!

Piano

white keys: 15 cm

black keys: 10 cm

Roland JD-800

white keys: 14 cm

black keys: 9 cm

Roland JD-XA

white keys: 13 cm

black keys: 8 cm



... which doesn't say much at all. *One* centimeter (or *two*, compared with an acoustic piano) - is that such a big deal? Bigger than you think! The player's fingers are constantly touching the instrument's casing when playing the black keys - really irritating. Too short, simply too short.

In addition, velocity sensitivity is imbalanced. We established this on the basis of the well-known JD piano-sample (those lanky piano sounds that wrote pop-history). On the one hand the JD-800, on the other the JD-XA. The JD-800 keyboard allows for relatively precise musical expression, which isn't necessarily true with the JD-XA. If touched too lightly, the sound just disappears. If played too hard, it remains at a medium volume level, or pops up in unexpected accents.



Listen to the attached soundfile "FantaPiano" where unintentional accenting is a give-away for imbalanced keyboard velocity.

Also - and we end our keyboard-thoughts at this point - a 4-octave keyboard range is just too small for a grown-up synthesizer (considering all the inner potential of the JD-XA). Performing those huge Roland padsounds requires an external masterkeyboard, which can't be what this is all about.

As so often, it's the little stuff that has the big effects. Take, for instance, the lettering of the in/outputs ...



Tucked away in an internal hollow space at the back, the in/outputs simply cannot be detected easily. Gone are the days when manufacturers put that lettering on the upper surface of the synthesizer, so that it was even possible to change connections from the front.

Now let's talk about the weight of the JD-XA, which says something about its probable over-all quality. Its really (really) easy to pick up this synthesizer in its keyboard rack (just crane your neck a little and stick in those cables), since the JD-XA weighs next to nothing. A modest 6,5 kg (without power supply)!



The power supply is - you guessed it - external. Congratulations to those of you who can handle tiny electrical connections. In our opinion, a 2000+ Euros keyboard (a pro-instrument, so to speak), should boast an internal PSU with a standard power cable.

Last but not least, let's look at the user's manual. Instructions in 8 languages, black-and-white pictures of poor quality and on thin paper, neither well layed-out nor informative (endless rows of lists and tables). It's a crying shame!



Graphic: excerpt from the JD-XA user manual, (c) Roland Corporation

Not informative? An example: the explanation "**[Unison] button: Selects unison. [...]**" (see graphic) is an insult to the intelligence of an experienced synth user. And it's absolutely no help to the novice, since there's no explanation as to what "unison" means (which definitely was the question behind the question in the first place).

The "Parameter Guide" (again endless rows of lists and tables) has been relegated to online (PDF), as have the "MIDI Implementation Charts".

Which leaves us speechless ... (and without answers to a lot of questions) ...



Analog and Digital: The Philosophy

Having gotten all that stuff about hardware deficiencies and poor user service off our chest, back to the sunny side of things. The JD-XA has enormous creative potential (in the good Roland tradition, based on technical know-how) ... and YES - the synth *sounds* good!

JD-XA is a "Crossover Synthesizer" (hence the X in the name), a mixture of ANALOG and DIGITAL. To put it more clearly: the JD-XA is a mixture of JD-800 (patron and supplier of certain samples), JP-8000 (4-octave keyboard, step / phrase sequencer), Integra (sound engine - SuperNATURAL sound generation) and a new analog part, a complete innovation.



Sound Generator Section - a rundown:

- maximum polyphony

- **Analog** sound engine: **4 PARTs, 1 voice each**
- **Digital** sound engine: **4 PARTs, max. 64 voices**

- voice structure

- **Analog:**
 - 2 OSCs + AUX
 - 1 Filter
 - 1 AMP
 - 1 Pitch ENV
 - 1 Filter ENV
 - 1 AMP ENV
 - 2 LFOs (for effects, etc.)
 - 1 MOD LFO (for vibrato)
- **Digital:**
 - 3 "Partials", each with:
 - 3 OSC
 - 3 Filter
 - 3 AMP
 - Envelopes for each section, and LFOs

Anyone wishing to study the complete list of JD-XA features (waveforms, filter types, etc.), should take a look at the manufacturer's site:

www.roland.com/products/jd-xa/specifications



Roland explains the JD-XA analog/digital philosophy thus:

"The JD-XA's engines can be used independently or interactively, providing an incredibly flexible platform for sound design, studio work, and live performance. Use the analog and digital parts side by side, stack them up for total sonic devastation, or shape digital waveforms via the analog filters to create sounds never heard before. With the JD-XA, you can forget about analog or digital — just close your eyes, imagine how the future sounds, and start creating music."

(source: www.roland.com/products/jd-xa/features)

Sound of the future? A noble idea, and very inspiring indeed!



JD-XA performance: the Highlights – and the *Downlights*

Roland's latest synthesizer flagship is full of unique features and impressive technical goodies – you get a lot for your money! But looking closer at the instrument's highlights, we discover a couple of shortcomings as well ...

Sequencer and arpeggiator are two of the JD-XA's highlights:

Sequencer

- STEP-REC or REAL TIME-REC
- pattern-length: 16, 32, 48 or 64 steps
- 16 tracks (!)

"The pattern sequencer lets you record keyboard performance and knob operations, and play them back repeatedly."

(Roland JD-XA user manual, page 8)



Again, in REALTIME mode the controller movements are recorded with the assigned sequence, which of course is awesome! The assigned sequences in turn are also saved as part of the program. This is excellent!

And, programming patterns in STEP mode is real fun! Adjust the desired pattern length, press REC(ord) and off you go! Many of the attached sound files have been created super fast, thanks to the JD-XA step sequencer.

BUT speaking of sound examples: listening to them carefully you might realize that the patterns hardly move up and down. There's only a little transposing, leaving a somewhat *boring* musical impression the first few minutes ... This is because transposition of the pattern sequencer via the keyboard is NOT possible. Shame on Roland (they made the same mistake with their superb JP-8000 step/phrase sequencer way back in the 1990s).



So, transposing sequences in realtime is only possible using the pitch bender. Up a fifth, down an octave (for example) – that's it. And you're stuck to this poor solution! Maybe Roland could improve things here with a software update (?) ...

Ok, pattern transposition in realtime is *not* possible. What about independent pattern lengths? Ah, *there's* the knob, let's see ... you can choose between 16, 32, 48 and 64 steps. Nothing in between. No *creative* possibilities here, no chance to do some minimal stuff in realtime (performing patterns of completely different and asymmetric lengths, let's say 13 – 31 – 52 and 63 steps in a constantly changing loop).



However, there are *some* creative features in the sequencer section. Steps can be muted in realtime (allowing for rhythmic variations), quantizing is possible (on/off), then there's a shuffle function, and SMF (standard MIDI files) can be loaded into the JD-XA sequencer.

Arpeggiator

The arpeggiator offers 64 templates/patterns. When creating your own pattern its possible to program note numbers (number of steps being played) and velocity values.

Pitch-Bender und Wheels

The JD-XA offers the classic Roland pitch/mod bender PLUS an additional pair of wheels (again: pitch and modulation). This is superb! Modulations (vibrati) can be set to permanent effect, which is far better than having to push the pitch/mod bender throughout your playing!

Both wheels (wheel 1 / wheel 2) are programmable, which is again a smart move towards in-depth sound performance.



Keyword “LFO”: there are two LFOs in the synth section and another one in the pitch/mod wheel section. The latter is called MODULATION LFO, mostly used for vibrato effects. And, believe it or not, this LFO has a secret.

The secret of the MODULATION LFO

First, I really don’t understand why the JD-XA’s vibrato speed has a constant (basic) setting of 72. Such fast vibrati hardly exist in the real world. It sounds as if the violin player is suffering from a bad stomachache. But, of course, you can change that (and help the violin player) ...

“The state specified by the MODULATION LFO setting is applied when you hold down the [Shift] button and move the pitch bend / modulation lever away from yourself.”

(Roland JD-XA user manual, page10)



I did this once. It worked (and I set MODULATION LFO speed to 50, which comes a lot closer to a “natural sounding” vibrato). The next day I tried again. And it did *not* work.

Why? Well, the manual reveals that any changes concerning the MODULATION LFO can only be done by activating the synth’s LFO section *first*. Turn, for example, the LFO Rate knob, so the JD-XA knows you wanna change LFO settings, *then* hold down the [Shift] button and move the pitch bend / modulation lever away from yourself: now you have access to the MODULATION LFO.



SOUND

In a nutshell: the JD-XA sounds **very good**. Surprisingly enough, it’s the DIGITAL part that blows you away. The ANALOG part is *nice*, but not all that exciting. Again in a nutshell: those JD-XA samples are fantastic – strings and choirs of this quality are seldom heard. The SuperNATURAL sound, so to speak.

You *could* buy an additional Roland Integra just for the purpose of playing good samples (if that’s all you want), but the JD-XA has the singular advantage of direct access to the sound components. Open/close the filter, change attack time, reduce decay, program a 32-step bassline, add two ANALOG and another DIGITAL sound part, change the effects ... THIS is the creative JD-XA! It’s fun, and the sounds are definitely impressive!



The effects are of standard quality, not really over-the-top, but alright. The analog sound engine has its own (!) output, which is quite superb since you can send the DIGITAL and ANALOG audio signals separately to the mixer (or to additional, external sound processing units).

Last but not least, the JD-XA includes a vocoder! And drum loops can be programmed similar to a TR-808 (the corresponding scale label dates back to 1983), again expanding the instrument’s sound potential.

Nevertheless, there are two shortcomings ...



First, some sounds come with a little noise in the audio path. Listen to the attached files – you might pick up that noise in some of the recordings (try “Pad 2”, for example). While part of the noise comes from the JD-XA audio section, the internal effects contribute some noise as well.

Second, the instrument’s ANALOG sound part is a bit of a disappointment. Good old virtual-analog JP-8000 sounded better (in our personal opinion)! Somehow the JD-XA’s analog filter is not as effective as we had expected. The various filter modes (LP 1 / 2 / 3) all sound quite the same (even HP / BP), and filter resonance is overly aggressive*.

[*... although that same filter / filter resonance produces extremely lovely overtones, we have to admit.]



All in all

The Roland JD-XA Crossover-Synthesizer supplies you with inspiring high-quality sounds, resulting for the most part from the SuperNATURAL Synthese in the DIGITAL part of the instrument. And direct access to all those elements of sound gives you a superior musical synthesizer with far-reaching performance possibilities. Analog patterns, vital drum-loops, live-generated vocoder sessions, crazy sync-sounds and soft pad sounds qualify the JD-XA as an extremely versatile instrument.

On the other hand, we can’t ignore detractive sound elements (noise in the audio path, at least with our test model), problems with some aspect of the hardware (too short 4-octave keyboard, shortened keys, imbalanced keyboard velocity, external PSU), a purely thought-out and insufficient user’s manual, and disadvantages in performance (step sequencer without transpose-function, etc) and synth programming.



So, all in all, the JD-XA is a great synthesizer in a musical sense (thanks especially to those unbelievably high-quality samples) with some not-to-be-ignored weaknesses (that inadvertently result in a weakened final performance).

We have attached 35 minutes of audio-files. Everything JD-XA, no exceptions, except soundfile “SyncSound” (boasting an additional GRP A8 stereo sequence).

Enjoy listening.

1. [DEMO 1](#)
2. [DEMO 2](#)
3. [Vocals](#)
4. [Pad 1](#)
5. [Pad 2](#)
6. [Organ](#)
7. [Octaves](#)
8. [Arpeggio](#)
9. [Massive](#)
10. [Fanta Piano](#)
11. [Sync Sound](#)
12. [Sequence 1](#)
13. [Sequence 2](#)
14. [Polyphonic 1](#)
15. [Polyphonic 2](#)

Roland JD-XA

Polyphonic Analog/Digital Synthesizer
max. 64 Voices

Website Manufacturer:
www.roland.com

Link / Comparison:
[Roland JD-800 Review](#)