Another one of those “best synths ever made”! Have there been too many “best of” analog synths? Comparing the SH-5 with other instruments simply leads to the conclusion that this particular machine is in many ways unbeatable.

It’s the peak of the Roland SH-series, so to speak. The “best of that bunch”, as Martin Newcomb (Museum Of Synthesizer Technology) says.

The SH-series, that’s the SH-1, SH-2, SH-3(A), SH-5, SH-7, SH-09, later on even the SH-101 that offers a totally different design. And don’t forget those early preset-synths SH-1000 und SH-2000. Latest instruments (virtual analog) with nostalgic SH-names (SH-32…) might not have too much in common with the classics SH-5, SH-7 or SH-09.

And of these the SH-5 might be the best of all. I owned the SH-1 (lovely synth, not too many features), SH-09 (even more cut-down, but sounds wonderful!), SH-101 (great little sequencer!) and others.

SH-5’s predecessor SH-7 offers vast modulation possibilities, but concerning its filter quality there are pros and cons as well among musicians.

In 1975 Roland was …

- … not a tremendously serious name on the synthesizer-market. Moog and ARP dominated the field and Oberheim was starting to come into its own. Korg was little known, although Kitaro already made loads of music with his all-time-favourite Korg 700S (maybe Korg’s team used all the money developing the PS-series?). Yamaha, too, was little known for its synthesizers. SY-1 and SY-2 had no chance on a synth-market dominated by Minimoog- and ARP-instruments.
- … making the SH-5. In order to be attractive, Roland had to feature its instruments with special modules. SH-3 e.g. offers a five-stage oscillator (and a really dull filter, what a shame!). Its successor SH-5 was even better-designed.

The instrument’s design

The SH-5 comes in a solid case. This makes the instrument with its cover really heavy. But that lovely case is the reason that many SH-5 are in excellent cosmetic condition these days. Massive wood – no comparison to ARP-2600’s scrimpy pseudo-case. Take off the cover, and the instrument is ready to play. The power cord even has its own compartment on the backside (with a little door). True mid-70s vintage-style.

The keyboard is a nightmare. Sadly that’s a feature of many Roland vintage synthesizers, such as SH-1/2/3/5/7/09 and Jupiter-4, VP-330 (first version) etc. No pleasant feeling at all, and double-trigger usually is really a problem. At that time – 1975 – Yamaha, Korg and Moog were offering keyboards of much higher quality.

And yet – overall, the design of the instrument is brilliant! The control panel sits at a perfect angle in front of the musician (as with the Minimoog). It offers good orientation – you never get lost on the SH-5.

Features

Well, they’re really ok for an anlog synth:

- 2 VCOs

- 2 LFOs
- S/H
- ring modulator
- noise
- mixer
- multi-VCF
- band pass filter
- VCA
- one and a half ENVs

That’s all packed in a sort of half-modular concept. Well, and there are heaps of connections. Those controllers (pitch bend, etc.) next to the keyboard are not bad either.

Band Pass Filter

Talking about being unique! One of the best sounding filters ever produced. Overwhelming power, aggressive sounds and “pure analog”. The BP filter can be faded in and out. Most of the SH-5 soundfiles we attached use this simple feature – listen to them!

Beside the band pass filter there’s also the instrument’s …

Multi Mode Filter

Really unusual design considering this is a Roland! Do you know any other SH with more than a LPF? At the most there’s usually a additional manual HPF …

The multi mode filter offers LPF, BPF and HPF. Resonance is extremely brilliant, giving the sound a lot of musical depth.

To sum it up: what the SH-5 offers is a switchable LP/BP/HP-filter with a separate band pass filter in parallel. Not too bad, hm?

That means this synthesizer goes far beyond all other SH-instruments when it comes to sound quality and -variety. Although the SH-series generally sounds superb. We have to admit the small SH-09 e.g. produces enormous musical textures, not versatile, but surprisingly powerful.

By the way: VCF-IN is offered on the backside. Just connect a Midi-CV-interface or use your analog sequencer to control filter frequency. What a shame the separate band pass filter offers no CV-IN! That would make it perfect.

Ringmodulator and Noise

These two modules are quite important for those crazy fx-sounds. Roland’s rather usual RM can hardly be compared with Yamaha’s state-of-the-art- ring modulator of the polyphonic CS synthesizers. But still, it’s flexibly designed with its small source-matrix. Lovely, really…

And you get pink and white noise too (although switchable, not continuously available as on the ARP-2600).

Mixer

Each of the five audio sources can be mixed individually: VCO1, VCO2, RM, NOISE and AUDIO-IN (Ext-IN). That's very useful. Think of a hard-synced VCO-sound coupled with a shimmer of ring modulation… But mixing audio sources isn't all it can do: the SH-5 offers a switch-matrix to run each source – either through the VCF, VCF and BPF, through the BPF alone, or directly via the VCA.

So you have 5 audio sources with 4 different routing-possibilities.

Sound

This is a dangerous synth: those who play it usually want to keep it! That powerful band pass filter, especially, produces pronounced sounds no other analog synth is capable off.

The SH-5 is your favourite instrument if you like:

- Powerful basses [this is always mentioned first, why?]
- Percussive sequencer-sounds
- Arpeggio-like-sounds
- Experimental RM/FX-sounds

Don't look for the SH-5 if you prefer:

- Naturally sounding lead voices (keep an eye out for the polyphonic Yamaha CS instruments)
- String sounds (my SH-5, at any rate, has no clue as how to create them)

The Roland SH-5 today

Estimating the value of the SH-5 isn't easy. Sound character and some features are totally unique, and how can that be priced? If you really want one you might be willing to pay up to 3900 Euros now, in 2018.

Well, there is no substitute for this machine, so its price is theoretically open-end. I am exaggerating, of course. There "is" a limit, there *should* be one, at least. Street prices range somewhere between 3000 and 3500 Euros.

SH-5 synthesizers usually come in very good cosmetic condition (thanks to that lovely case-design). Double trigger is a problem with every SH-synth, but cleaning the key's inside helps. Apart from the low-quality keyboard, the SH-5 is ingeniously designed and well-equipped.

Listen to the sound files and decide what you're willing to pay …

1. Bass LIVE
2. Ring Mod FX 1
3. Ring Mod FX 2
4. BandPass Lead
5. BandPass Sequence
6. Rhythm with ARP Avatar / Sequential Pro-One
7. Mix 1 (with various synthesizers)
8. Mix 2 (with various synthesizers)
9. Mix 3 (with various synthesizers)

10. Mix 4 (with various synthesizers)
11. Mix 5 (with various synthesizers)
12. BandPass / HighPass Sequence
13. BandPass Solo with Yamaha CS-60
14. FX with Yamaha CS-60
15. LFO FX
16. Soft Solo
17. S/H to VCF I (2026)
18. S/H to VCF II (2026)

Roland SH-5

Monophonic Analog Synthesizer

Link:
Vintage Synth Explorer