

Roland VP-330 – figurehead of the Vocoder Hype

When it comes to iconic instruments in music electronics, Roland’s VP-330 has to be at the forefront. Its design is aesthetically pleasing, its sound memorable and timeless. Although only in production for just over a year, the VOCODER PLUS has left a lasting mark on history – and continues to do so to this day ...



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The “Multi-Keyboard” Concept

What sets the VP-330 apart from almost all its competitors is the simple fact that Roland delivered more than just a **VOCODER** with this instrument back in 1979. Designed as a multi-keyboard, the musician (voice off-camera: the musician) also has a preset **HUMAN VOICE** section and **STRINGS** at his disposal.

The fact that these are fixed presets that can essentially only be switched on and off should be familiar to everyone. But the concept makes it clear: if you think it’s silly to fiddle with a microphone (or if you’d rather keep your vocal talents a secret), you have a completely independent instrument in front of you when it comes to choral and string sounds.



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As the vocoder section is technically a fixed filter bank, the VP-330 is not only suitable for reproducing vocal sounds (if that's what you want), but also for filtering audio material of all kinds. Synthesiser sounds, drum loops and the like can be looped in and their timbre changed quickly and with character.

If the inevitable microphone is still within reach, the musician (voice: the musician) can experiment with moving air in a variety of ways. Cheerful experiments, as we have already mentioned in our test report [GRP V22 Vocoder – Voices From Outer Space](#).

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A reduced instrument, but with some extra extras

As the VP-330 has no access to the individual filters, you have to accept the vocoder section as it is. As already mentioned, only the smallest adjustments (Attack / Release / Tone) are allowed for the presets. But what can we say? The vocoder section sounds great and the presets deliver sounds of the finest quality, with a sonical density *par excellence*.

Roland wouldn't be Roland if there wasn't a bundle of bonus material. Stereo chorus (ensemble), vibrato LFO, manual, external or auto bend and not to forget: The 4-octave keyboard with split function. All in the proven quality of the traditional Japanese company, which means "excellent hardware" of an all-round reliable instrument.



Costs, price comparison ... and two revisions

According to the literature, the VP-330, which was available in 1979 / 1980, cost GBP 1,315. Of course, that's not saying much, but as a comparison we found the Oberheim OB-1, which was available for GBP 1,240 in the same period. The Minimoog – an old favourite in those days – cost just over £1,000 and was soon as expensive as the VP-330, the price of which was reduced in 1980. That's just for orientation. In any case, the VP-330 cannot be categorised as particularly “cheap”.

Nevertheless, the vocoder hype was in full swing in 1979 and the instrument's success in the first few months was apparently great enough to persuade Roland to release a second revision. While the VP-330 MK1 was characterised by large toggle switches and the beige-coloured “lumberjack keyboard à la Jupiter-4”, the VP-330 MK2 had the more elegant touch buttons and slimmer keyboard of the subsequent Jupiter-8.



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In addition, there are of course some significant differences in the electronics: chorus, human voice, filter, vibrato – everything has been diligently changed and adapted. But in reality, the details (which chorus module here, which there, etc.) seem strangely irrelevant. Both versions of the VP-330 sound excellent. Clearly different in nuance, that's true, but a final judgement seems impossible – more on that later.

VP-330 structure and some performance details

The 3 sections **Vocoder** – **Human Voice** – **Strings** have already been mentioned. The individual sections and functions are clearly recognisable in the following images and should be self-explanatory ...



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The only thing that needs to be briefly mentioned regarding ATTACK is the annoying single-trigger situation. As known from many multi-keyboards of the 70s and 80s, the attack time is only available in full length during playing if “all” keyboard keys are released beforehand. It therefore requires a disciplined playing style to repeatedly and “consciously” bring about the attack of chorus pads or string chords.



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The performance department is by no means self-explanatory, so a few comments are in order here too. To the quick eye, the PITCH SHIFT slider may seem like a cheap pitch bend replacement. But the opposite is the case. The slider is the ideal solution for a vocal synthesiser / vocoder. The tool is surprisingly flexible and its control range can be set by more than 12 semitones via PITCH SET.

The positive: The PITCH SHIFT slider remains in its position. Moved all the way to the left, you can transpose the overall VP-330 sound down by (over) an octave (and back again at any time - depending on the musical application - including every position in between). Of course, this only works in MANUAL mode. If you set it to AUTO, the slider has no function; this is where the TIME control comes into play. It determines how quickly the automatic pitch bending takes place - always from the bottom.



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In practice, flexibly changing the pitch is a marvellous thing. Per SLIDER: The 8-foot male voices of the Human Voice section become rattling 16-foot male voices with a swing into the DOWN position. Admittedly, the sound is close to the limits of what is bearable, but ultimately it has a blaring, gnarly VINTAGE character that is second to none.

Using the AUTO function: add a lot of reverb to the string sound, play a solo in the highest register of the keyboard, activate AUTO and voilà: KITARO laughs from the depths of the VP-330. Unmistakable, the slightly schmaltzy but very penetrating and at the same time lovely solo voice of the Vocoder Plus with humanised bending “from below”.



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The fact that PITCH SET covers more than one octave is very important for two reasons. Firstly, the issue of “calibration” is eliminated. Because who hasn’t experienced it: pitch benders on many vintage synthesisers don’t have an exact interval, they “just don’t reach” the octave, or the spread is too wide and you should stop just before hitting the bender (which doesn’t work in practice). The sound becomes shaky, imprecise, the performance listless. At this point, calibration would be the only solution ...

With the VP-330, this problem cannot arise in the first place. Thanks to the larger PITCH SET range, you have enough “air” to always set the octave correctly – assuming you have a good ear. What’s more – and this is the second point – you could deliberately utilise the maximum control range, slide “below” the octave using the PITCH SHIFT control, then move the slider back a little and stalk the desired interval from below during the performance. Then stay there – wherever you want – as the slider has no return spring. The stepless gliding also enables effects similar to a theremin ...



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There are not too many comments on the connections. Of course, no microphone needs to be connected to MICROPHONE, as already mentioned. Synthesisers, drum computers etc. can be used as modulator signals. EXT SYNTH IN allows you to replace the internal sound generator, the carrier, with an external synthesiser sound (which then controls the pitch) using the vocoder function. A clear, powerful signal with plenty of harmonics is recommended (Roland's SH-2 synthesiser is an example).

VOCODER HOLD (connection for a PS-2 pedal or similar) allows the vocoder signal to be sustained for as long as the pedal remains depressed. Finally, the PITCH input is - in addition to the Manual and Auto inputs described above - the third option for triggering the modulation of the overall pitch. In this case by foot trigger, which allows more flexibility during the performance (both hands remain free for playing).



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A quick word about the keyboard. The SPLIT function turns the VP-330 into an enormously flexible sound generator. Vocoder, human voice and strings can be assigned to the lower, upper or both halves of the keyboard as required. In plain language: string accompaniment on the left with vocal session and choir support on the right, first example. Or choir accompaniment on the left and string solo on the right, as a further example. Or a continuous choir (MALE at 8 feet is available on both sides) with an equally continuous “pinch” of strings in the background and an additional vocoder effect on the right ...

This “pinch” of a sound module should be explained in more detail. Roland has cleverly integrated a small mixer section in which all sound ranges can be fine-tuned. Which, by the way, is urgently needed, because the dense strings in particular can quickly damage the fine choral sound. A good tuning of the sound ratios, also with the “direct” microphone signal and the vocoder sound (which is controlled separately by MIC LEVEL), ultimately creates the final - and very flexible - VP-330 sound.



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SOUND

The sound is iconic. Not just good and solid, but epochal – style-defining! The VP-330 sound embodies character, warmth and sound density at its finest. It comes with a myriad of small background noises that are an integral part of the overall aura and significantly enhance the vintage charm of the instrument.

As an indication of the high-quality sound, the list of musicians who used the VP-330 at the time is also worth mentioning – often for many years, some even to this day: Laurie Anderson, Tony Banks, Vince Clarke, Kitaro, Mike Oldfield, Ryūichi Sakamoto, Tomita, Vangelis and many more. Queen used the vocoder, as did Michael Jackson's band ...



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One of the main reasons for the VP-330's enduring popularity is probably the flexible sound architecture described above. Some musicians use the instrument primarily or even exclusively as a string synthesiser. Some will bring their perfect (analogue) choir sounds into the studio with the VP-330 Human Voices (and leave it at that).

You don't *have* to use the vocoder part, you don't *have* to speak, sing or perform experimental vocal performances. But you *can!* An electronic keyboard instrument could hardly be easier to use than the VP-330. The "sum" of all the flexibility and all the friendliness has probably led to the hype surrounding the VP-330 and continues to do so today.



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VP-330 MK1 versus MK2

It's common knowledge: Both VP-330 versions have their pros and cons. But that's not the way it should be put. Above all, both versions have their pros. A VP-330 is a VP-330, but there are still differences, significant ones at that. We comment on this – as always from our subjective point of view, based on our observations when dealing with both candidates. The details do not “have” to apply to the respective VP-330 model, but can at least provide a direction as to where the respective strengths of MK1 / MK2 lie and what might need to be considered when selecting / purchasing a VP-330.

In terms of **HARDWARE**, the **VP-330 MK2 is our clear favourite**. The smooth-running, modern keyboard and the elegant, colourful touch buttons (with LED) make the late version of the VP-330 a visual beauty. And then there are a few interesting technical details: the pots of the MK2 performance section are firmly screwed to the housing, which is not the case with the MK1 version. Ergo: The pots on the left of the keyboard are all slightly wobbly on the VP-330 MK1, but not on the MK2 model. As I said, we are talking about our specimens.



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Furthermore: The physically very high waterfall keyboard of the MK1 version sits directly on the bottom of the instrument (without “air”), together with the metal frame (and cable harnesses), while the slimmer keyboard of the MK2 model rests on wooden blocks – which is much more convenient in terms of servicing (and also offers extra space underneath the keyboard). This certainly applies to all MK1 and MK2 models.

There are also differences in the pot caps: Slightly larger, rounded at the top and with a silver inlay (in the style of Jupiter-4 / Promars / SH-2 etc.) on the VP-330 MK1 versus flatter, thinner pot caps characterised by a simple white line (in the style of Jupiter-8, Juno-60 etc.) on the MK2 model. Admittedly, in this case we find the MK1’s pot caps more attractive: more solid and tapered towards the top, they fit the fingers perfectly. But of course this is just a (small) detail on the side.

In terms of **SOUND**, our choice would be twofold ...



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VP-330 MK1 impresses with its slightly more aggressive basic sound and the SAD modules in the chorus (aka Holy Grail of Ensemble Sound). **The choirs sound more direct, rougher and even more vintage on the MK1 model.** However, so do the strings, and in this respect the MK2 model seems to be the better choice. Due to the less aggressive character, **the strings of the MK2 model are particularly airy, with a noble, silvery touch.**

So, as a rule of thumb, you could mentally combine the appearance of the instruments with the respective basic sound: **Rustic hardware and a more aggressive sound alias VP-330 MK1 versus more elegant hardware and a slightly more refined sound alias VP-330 MK2.** Which direction you lean in naturally depends on your personal taste.

If we may – only theoretically – take sides, it is not possible to soften the more aggressive sound of the MK1 version, while the softer sound of the MK2 version could at least be made harder by adding external effects if required. From this point of view, the VP-330 MK2 seems to offer a little more flexibility, even if its character doesn't quite match the dominance of the VP-330 MK1.



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Roland VP-03 and Behringer VC340

For the sake of completeness, two current clones of the VP-330 should be mentioned. One from Roland (part of the Boutique series), the other from Behringer. The [Roland VP-03](#) comes without its own keyboard (MIDI is of course available), but with a few extras such as ribbon pads and a step sequencer. We can't say any more about it, although we would like to point out that the instrument seems a little expensive considering the rather poor hardware.

The [Behringer VC340](#) comes with a keyboard and – as usual with Behringer – is conceptually as close as possible to the original. In this respect, the company is to be commended, as the respective role models – be it the Pro-One, the Kobl Expander, the Mono/Poly etc. – in many cases remain “relatively” unchanged on the outside. – remain “relatively” unchanged on the outside in many cases. Visually, of course, they have been slightly reduced in size, equipped with digital interfaces or other useful features and possibly as a rack and not as a keyboard version ... but the basic conceptual idea of the respective instrument from 40+ years ago remains largely intact thanks to the fidelity to the original – and that's positive!



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Regarding the sound of the VP-330 clones, please refer to the countless YouTube videos about the VP-03 and VC340. We have nothing to say about this, especially as our personal motto “Only the original is the original” clearly stands in the way of any judgement of modern replicas. Let us therefore conclude with the topic of MIDI and a brief summary ...

MIDI-Retrofit and Street Value

Built in 1979 or 1980, the VP-330 naturally does not yet have MIDI. But a remedy is available: [Kenton Electronics](#) offers an appropriate [MIDI Interface](#) with which the VP-330 can be retrofitted. We did this MIDI upgrade on the VP-330 MK1, and even though the interface doesn't “do” much (MIDI note on/off and pitch bend / pitch shift is just about everything), we don't regret the step for a second.



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Layering digital sounds with the analogue choir and string sounds of the VP-330 is now one of the absolute highlights in the studio. In addition, MIDification opens up the wonderful world of sequencer control, which opens up completely new possibilities with the VOCODER PLUS. Another MIDI retrofit option besides Kenton is the [VP330-KBD Interface from CHD Elektroservis](#).

On the other hand, MIDI is clearly not a must. Vocoding via microphone can only take place live anyway, the VP-330 also offers such a simple (as well as effective) layout, it also has such a degree of surprising sound combinations at the ready that real-time performances of all shades are the be-all and end-all of the instrument. Therefore, the MIDI upgrade of the VP-330 can at best be seen as an extension to the already very (!) user-friendly concept of the Roland classic.



Roland VP-330 MKI Vocoder Plus 49-Key Synthesizer 1979 - Black

Gebraucht – Gut

€ 3.850

€ 2.950 24% Preissturz

+ € 100 Versand

Jetzt kaufen

In den Warenkorb legen

Mache einen Preisvorschlag

Beobachten

Inseriert: vor einem Jahr Aufrufe: 856 Beobachter: 41 Angebote: 2

Basslab Shop ★★★★★
Copenhagen, Dänemark



Beschreibung

Vintage Stringer and Vocoder analog from Roland.
All serviced and re-caped.

(c) Reverb.com | 01/2024

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Roland VP-330 MKII Vocoder Plus 49-Key Synthesizer 1980s - Black

Gebraucht – Hervorragend

€ 4.287,19

€ 3.045,81 29% Preissturz

Nur zur Abholung

Jetzt kaufen

In den Warenkorb legen

Beobachten

Inseriert: vor 9 Monaten Aufrufe: 499 Beobachter: 42

Providence Sound and Vision ★★★★★
Los Angeles, CA, Vereinigte Staaten von Amerika

Seltener Fund
Diese sieht man nicht oft



Beschreibung

From the collection and studio of Producer/Writer Emile Heynie this Roland VP-330 MK2 Vocoder has been in the mix of hits Emile has worked on for the past eight years. Before listing, we thoroughly cleaned and tested

(c) Reverb.com | 01/2024

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Roland VP-330 MKI Vocoder Plus 49-Key Synthesizer 1979 - Black

Gebraucht – Sehr gut

€ 2.410

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Zu diesem Inserat

Very nice Roland VP-330 with Midi

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On the second-hand market, the VP-330 is relatively common. Its price is around 3,000 Euros / USD, which doesn't seem overpriced to us in view of its musically rich output. On the contrary, if you look at the excellent Roland hardware from 1979 / 1980, the price can almost be described as a bargain – or at least as “very fair”.

To sum it up ...

The VP-330 VOCODER PLUS is a timeless instrument. Timeless in sound, timeless in design. As a figurehead of the Vocoder-Hype, it has influenced generations of musicians, it has become a legend. One probable reason is the concept: The VP-330 allows convincing vocoder effects as well as simultaneous and/or completely independent use as a string- or vocal-synthesiser. Thanks to its simple design, the VOCODER PLUS is not only a friendly, but above all an easy instrument. Easy in terms of musical practice, easy in terms of the minimal need for servicing and repairs.



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The sound of the Roland VP-330 is as unique as it is inimitable, as distinctive as it is penetrating – full of warmth, life and character, pure VINTAGE. However, that’s a benefit and hazard at the same time: You can’t get out of it – **a VP-330 always sounds like a VP-330.**

This latter aspect should be taken into consideration when purchasing a VP-330. *“Is your love for that VP-Sound strong enough to last for many years / decades?”* Think of it ...

30+ minutes of sound samples are included. Both VP-330 MK1 and MK2 are used – solo, in combination with other synthesizers (and drum computers), but also for filtering that external gear. As the distinctive sound of the VOCODER PLUS is so memorable, the instrument should be easily recognisable in any of the sound samples attached ...

1. [String-Chorus Mix 1 \(VP-330 MK1\)](#)
2. [String-Chorus Mix 2 \(VP-330 MK1\)](#)
3. [String-Chorus Mix 3 \(VP-330 MK2\)](#)
4. [Experimental Original \(VP330 MK2\)](#)
5. [Experimental Reduced \(VP330 MK2\)](#)
6. [Solo \(VP330 MK1\)](#)
7. [Gregorian \(VP330 MK2\)](#)
8. [Manual Bend \(VP330 MK2\)](#)
9. [Auto Bend \(VP330 MK2\)](#)
10. [Yamaha CS60 \(VP330 MK1\)](#)

11. [Roland JD800 \(VP330 MK1\)](#)
12. [Roland TR808 \(VP330 MK1\)](#)
13. [Phaser PH 830 1 \(VP330 MK2\)](#)
14. [Phaser PH 830 2 \(VP330 MK2\)](#)
15. [Siel KIWI 1 \(VP330 MK1\)](#)
16. [Siel KIWI 2 \(VP330 MK1\)](#)

Roland VP-330 Vocoder Plus

**Analog multi-keyboard with 49 keys,
Vocoder, Human Voice and Strings
(1979/1980)**

See also:

[GRP V22 Vocoder Review](#)

MIDI Retrofit:

[Kenton Electronics](#) (UK)

[CHD Elektroservis](#) (Czech Republic)

Open / Download:

[Roland VP-330 Vocoder Front](#) (4000 x 2400 px)

[Roland VP-330 Vocoder Back](#) (4000 x 2400 px)

Youtube Videos:

The Roland VP-330 (by [Dr. Mix](#))

The Roland VP-330 (by [Alex Ball](#))