



Kawai reckons that the MP4, priced at £1,099 will fit into your car, into your budget and fill the stage with quality sounds. John Bates can't help but agree

OVER THE last five years, Kawai has made two small but significant inroads into the rarefied niche market of digital pianos designed primarily for use on stage. These were the MP9000 and its successor, the MP9500. Both instruments were highly praised by the press, including *Keyboard Player*. Neither of these instruments was cheap (quality never is) and since they were designed with the professional player in mind, it was probably assumed that a professional road crew would be in attendance. Both instruments were substantial and, once flight-cased, were not the sort of keyboard that could be tossed easily into the average hatchback at the end of the night.

A stage piano that delivered the sounds but could be carried easily by one person was certainly a gap in the Kawai product range and,

moreover, one that had been plugged many times by other manufacturers. Not any longer. The MP4 is Kawai's solution to a player's desire for a slim piano for serious use on stage.

Like its predecessors, the MP4 is in reality two keyboards inside one body. The first keyboard is the player of on-board sounds within the instrument. The second keyboard is a hands-on sound editor of its own sounds but also a very shrewd 'mother keyboard' and one that can control external synths in great detail and with great compatibility. However, it is the internal sounds that will be the first point of contact and thus most likely define its profile to the listener.

The MP4 manages to combine a sleek metal body with a slim profile. Finished in brushed steel, it is substantial in terms of feeling solid under the fingers on an 'x' stand but is also light enough to be

carried in a gig bag over the shoulder. All the controls are set into the angled part of the panel. Editing controls and controllers are to the left of the central display whilst internal sound banks are to the right.

The keyboard is a full 88-note velocity-sensing with piano weighting. It will also transmit aftertouch to external synths. The action is good, using the latest evolution of hammer action simulation with a very slightly stiffer action, giving a fraction more resistance than before. Whilst sacrificing the complete wooden keys of the larger models, it holds its own as highly responsive key action. Kawai manufactures its own keyboard actions, unlike some digital keyboard manufacturers who utilise (but omit to acknowledge) bespoke keyboard actions made by companies such as Fatar.

The pitchbend and modulation wheels have been relocated to the

upper panel. Oddly enough, I expected this to be a problem as the usual position is immediately to the left of the lowest key. However, in practice this proved not to be the case and I found my left hand easily moving over them without having to 're-program' my natural reactions. The MP4 comes with a sustain pedal which may well be all that a stage performer would need and there are additional pedals available to control expression and various other peripherals.

The internal sounds are arranged in eight banks controlled by 16 buttons set in horizontally parallel rows of eight. The top row calls up the 'family'; the bottom row determines the tone variation of the upper bank selected. The instrument defaults to this 'sound' mode on powering up.

The opening sound is a full concert grand piano. This is a superb classical piano, sampled from the doyen of Kawai's acoustic division, the EX concert piano. Both this sound and its variation, which is almost identical, are super all-round piano sounds, the sort that you would use where a full solo piano accompaniment is required and they both have an acoustic setting for a decent-sized room.

The Studio Grand piano is a tighter-sounding instrument that removes the room acoustics. Its variation emphasizes the middle range of the piano and is probably suited to backing accompaniment without cutting through an ensemble texture in the upper ranges.

Mellow Grand is a lush ballad style sound whilst the Rock Piano is the hard-edged sound it should be although it sacrifices some of the depth in the lower regions in order that the typical left-hand work of this genre will cut through.

Second in practical usage to acoustic instruments will be its range of electric pianos. Nowadays, a player needs a wide selection of these since the sometime outdated early Hohner, Fender and Wurlitzer sounds are used just as much as the 'drippy' chorused 'DX' electric sound. The electric piano sounds on the MP4 fulfil these requirements with a goodly selection of a dozen or so sounds, covering the aforementioned brands faithfully and offering subtle variations around the basic timbres. The only slightly weak sound I felt was the Electric Grand, a sound title that is

The acoustic pianos are stunning

always understood to be a simulation of the Yamaha CP80. This version was just a bit skinny in tone and a bit too brittle.

My one little gripe here is that the sound programmers have, more often than not, dialled in a tremolo effect onto the preset electric piano sounds. For the life of me I cannot figure out why. This effect, although certainly present on electro-acoustic pianos, is not really used that often and I feel it just gets in the way of otherwise decent sounds. Thanks to the programmability of the MP4 it is easy to remove this effect, but nevertheless it might put off some buyers initially.

The Clavinet is faithful to the Hohner D6 and feels good under the fingers and we also have a synth variation. Percussive instruments like vibes and marimba are well served and the Harpsichord has a lovely clean, bright tone.

There are two full banks of organs. Concentrating on the drawbar sounds, these offer a very reasonable set of sounds that will suffice quite well for chord backing with even the odd solo sound being quite useful. Rotary speaker effect fast/slow is controlled on these with the foot pedal. I wasn't bowled over by any of these in particular but if this sound area is going to feature heavily in your set then you probably would have another instrument in mind dedicated to just that sound, given that this action is not the same as an organ.

The four string sections are also quite acceptable, providing the sorts of sounds that will fit well into any backing track but pulling short of

detailed specific tones such as pizzicato and hard bowing. The same is true of the brass sounds; good general tones but no single instrument solo parts. Completing the range of on-board sounds are a good range of pad sounds and a selection of bass sounds.

To sum up the built-in sounds: the acoustic pianos are stunning, the electric pianos excellent (when tremolo is taken out) and the other sounds are highly competent that will fill out any texture very well.

As one would expect, any of these sounds can be split across the keyboard with a completely variable split point and also the sounds can be layered. Balancing the volumes between the sounds brings us to the 'zone' controls. These are four vertical sliders that initially balance two on-board sounds. However, they have many more functions than this. This is made clear on closer examination. For a start, there are four controls. Although the left hand Zone slider is allotted to a single internal sound, it is apparent that there is much more to these.

The 'other side' of the MP4 is its almost complete mastery of MIDI in a live situation. The sliders can either control the internal sounds or external MIDI instruments and all four can be set in any combination of internal and external. The degree of control is simply staggering. Quite apart from dividing up the keyboard into four key zones, which can overlap if necessary, they control the varying volume between the zones, and can be used to set up and control almost any peripheral of an internal or external sound.

Returning to the buttons that called up the internal sounds, these also work in a Set-up mode. A Set-up is literally what it says. A complete registration but one that includes all the MIDI settings for external synths as well as any internal sound edits you have made. For example, if you used a rack-mounted synth and similar sampler as part of your stage set-up, then the MP4 Set-up will recall the channels you use to access the external sounds, the program number to call up the sounds, any fine tuning to a wide number of MIDI controlled peripherals, and any keyboard areas you have designated to those sounds. This includes detailed parameters, such as a choice of monophonic note priority modes when working with, say, an external Mini-Moog lead sound.

To obtain such a degree of control over external instruments with the ability to store each nuance beneath one preset button is hard to find on a controller keyboard. Kawai gives you 64 Set-ups on this instrument and this, coupled with the ability to assign realtime controls to its sliders and knobs, make it one of the best controller keyboards for live performance on the market today.

We haven't finished yet. All internal sounds can be edited by a set of four multi-function knobs. These settings are also stored as a 'set-up'. In this way, it is very simple to edit and tweak the internal sounds to suit the individual. However, when one realises that within one set-up, the MP4 can call up both internal and external sounds and give the user complete hands-on control 'on the fly' of up to four sounds in any combination of internal and external, one realises that the MP4 is an incredible serious MIDI controller concealed under the its first impression as a first-rate provider of piano sounds.

It is easy to almost overlook

some of the more standard functions on the MP4 such as variable touch sensitivity, a wide range of over 20 completely editable effects, a set of different tuning temperaments as well as overall volume controls. If you really want to plumb the full depths of this instrument's MIDI control and edit functions you could always download the manual from Kawai's website (www.kawai.de/service/mp4_e.pdf) and read it very slowly and carefully.

The MP4 has additional niceties like the ability to lock certain controls so that they are not altered should they be jarred in performance, and the ability to not only stop and start external sequencers but also synchronise them up to the internal metronome. All these are praiseworthy and smack of excellent research and design in response to market testing and advice from professional players.

Although I personally mistrust computers on stage, I have witnessed a growing trend for players to take a laptop onto stage, linked via MIDI or a USB port (the

MP4 has both) where the computer uses a brace of software 'virtual' synths linked to the keyboard. With a little time, trouble and preparation the combination of a computer configured in that way plus this keyboard is positively awesome. The whole world of sounds contained in one gig bag as opposed to a Wakeman-like rig of racks, lights and multiple keyboards on frame scaffolding gets my vote every time.

The heart of the MP4 is centred on a very fine piano action keyboard and a good set of acoustic and electric pianos. The rich icing on this product is its awesome ability as both an editor of its own effects and sounds and as a mighty controller keyboard par excellence. Don't leave home without it!

CONTACT

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SPEC CHECK



Action: 88 weighted keys, AHA4 action with AR technology

Polyphony: 96 notes

Sound Technology: Harmonic Imaging II

Internal Sounds: 64 in total: 8 x Piano, 12 x E.Piano, 2 x Clavinet, Vibraphone, Marimba, 13 x Drawbar Organ, 2 x Church Organ, Harpsichord, 4 x Strings, 4 x Brass, 8 x Vocal/Pad, 8 x Bass

Reverb Types: 7 Types: Plate, Hall 1, Hall 2, Stage 1, Stage 2, Room 1, Room 2

Effect Types: 20 Types: Chorus, Flanger, Celeste, Ensemble, Delay 1-4, Auto Pan 1-2, Tremolo 1-2, Phaser 1-2, Rotary 1-2, Auto Wah, Pedal Wah, Enhancer, Overdrive

Display: 2 x 16 Character LCD, backlight

Panel Controls: Pitch Bend, Modulation, Master Volume, Zone Volume (x4), Zone Edit Select (x4), Zone On/Off (x4), Real Time Edit Knobs (x4), Knob Mode Switch (x4), SW On/Off, EFX On/Off, Reverb On/Off, Menu Up, Menu Down, Value Up, Value Down, Sound Modus, Setup Modes, (System Modes), Sound /Setup Select (8x2), Store, Transpose, Metronome

Jacks: Quarter inch Line Out (L/Mono,R or 2 x Mono), Headphone, Damper/Soft Pedal, Footswitch (assignable), Expression (assignable), MIDI In/Out/Thru, USB, AC IN, Power On/Off

Parameters for internal zones: Sound, Volume, Zone Hi, Zone Lo, Velocity Switch (Off, Soft, Loud),

Velocity Switch Level, Velocity Compression, Velocity Offset, Damper (On/Off), FSW (On/Off), EXP (On/Off), Mod Wheel (On/Off), Bender (On/Off), Bender Range (0-7), Pan, Zone Transpose (± 36), Fine Tuning, Virtual Voicing (Mellow, Bright, Dynamic, Normal), Stretch Tuning, Temperament, FSW CC#, EXP CC#, Attack, Decay, Release, Cutoff, EQ

Parameters for external MIDI zones: Sound Nr., Volume, Bankselect (MSB/LSB), MIDI CH, Zone Hi, Zone Lo, Velocity Switch (Off, Soft, Loud), Velocity Switch Level, Velocity Compression, Velocity Offset, Damper (On/Off), FSW (On/Off), EXP (On/Off), Mod Wheel (On/Off), Bender (On/Off), Bender Range (0-12), Pan, Transpose (± 36), Fine Tuning, Knobs A-D (On/Off/CC#), TX Channel, TX Program, TX Bank, TX Volume, Attack, Decay, Release, Cutoff

System Parameters: Master Tuning, Volume/Action, Line Out Mode, Local On/Off, System Channel, Touch Curve (Normal, Light, Light+, Heavy, Heavy+, USER), LCD Contrast, LED Brightness, MIDI Multi Modus, RCV CH 1-16 Play/Mute, Dump, Reset

Dimensions: 136 x 34 x 17 cm; 53 x 13 x 7 ins. (approx.)

Weight: 20.5 kg; 45 lbs

Accessories: F-1r Damper Pedal and Music Rack

Optional Accessories: F-1 Footswitch, F-2r Double Pedal, V-20X Expression Pedal