

Retro Family Tree

⚡ After the challenge of UK-Japanese collaboration Akai, it was time for E-mu to sharpen the sampler knives. Jonathan Miller charts the 90s comeback of the Californian giants. . .

THERE'S NO DOUBTING that, from the introduction of their legendary Emulator sampler in 1981 to the 1988 discontinuation of its flagship successor, the Emulator II, E-mu Systems ruled the sampling roost with their innovative, cost-effective, professional products. Then the unthinkable happened: a winning combination of British design ingenuity and Japanese manufacturing know-how saw Akai Professional kick ass with the hitherto unimaginable 16-voice, 16-bit, 32Mb S1000. Not only was this exciting 1988-vintage 3U rack something to behold, the beast was stereo too!

Needless to say, E-mu lost their footing in the lucrative European sampling market almost overnight (not helped by the baffling foreign exchange mechanism temporarily setting UK pricing of their products astronomically higher than that in the US). Hardly a company for resting on its laurels, E-mu hit back with the mid-priced, stereo, 16-bit, 8Mb Emax II, a keyboard which sold reasonably well Stateside, despite lacking in the memory department. Yet for the first time in eight years, the Californians looked set to play catch-up for a while.

Library lore

Since its early entry into the sampling arena, E-mu had recognised the benefits of producing and marketing a large sampling library catering to the needs of users with neither time nor inclination to create their own. At the time of Akai's S1000 launch, E-mu's library was second to none. Unfortunately, their then flagship Emulator III was second only to a luxury executive car in price! A cunning plan was needed to get that library out to the masses at a price to die for. This plan swiftly materialised in 1989 in the form of the Proteus, a 32-voice digital synth module, packed with 4Mb of easily tweakable E-mu presets, courtesy of the Emulator III, all for the tidy sum of £629.

A winner? You bet! With 50,000 units sold in its five-year production lifespan (plus 20,000 Proteus 2/Orchestral and Proteus 3/World derivatives) E-mu had the necessary working capital to resume their sampling quest in earnest (helped in no small part when the company was bought out by Creative Labs – of Sound-Blaster soundcards fame – in 1993).

IV on the floor

E-mu re-entered the sampling fray with a vengeance at the 1994 AES convention in San Francisco, upping the ante with the introduction of the 3U, 128-voice, 18-bit, 128Mb (via user-installable SIMMs) Emulator IV (EIV) replete with 128 digital resonant filters, resampling options, all manner of modulation routings and compatibility with E-mu IIIX and Akai S1000/S1100 sound libraries. Other features included an ASCII keyboard input (easing navigation strain), dual SCSI connectors (for connecting external hard disks and CD-ROMs) and 'socketry' galore (including stereo sample inputs, eight polyphonic outputs, AES/EBU digital in/out, balanced XLR main outputs

budget-conscious (£1,199) sampling solution in the shape of the 2U, 32-voice (16-voice stereo), 16-bit, 32Mb ESI32 made a welcome landing in late 1994. Roughly representing 75% of E-mu's Emulator III at 25% of the cost, the ESI32 personified the well-worn 'more bang for the buck' maxim, finally beating arch rivals Akai – whose comparable S2800 cost £1,999 – at their own game.

Though the ESI32 is now discontinued, with dealers shifting the last batches at ludicrously low prices, E-mu are still producing several ESI32 upgrades, thereby taking the unit almost into the realm of its similarly styled 1998 successor, the ESI4000 (namely, a S/PDIF digital I/O board, a SCSI board and a Turbo kit,

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and three expansion slots). Make no mistake: this was (and still is) high-end sampling, albeit at a price (\$5,995/£4,695 at launch for the factory 8Mb version).

True to form, E-mu were to unleash no fewer than seven different Emulator IV models, the second of which, the e64, arrived within a year and was essentially a 64-voice, 64Mb version of its forefather with the then-not unreasonable price tag of £2,650. Having touted several years' worth of rack samplers, 1996's E4K 'Performance Sampling Keyboard' (available in both 64- and 128-voice versions with onboard 270Mb hard disk and MIDI file-compatible sequencer) saw E-mu return to their roots, with a one-stop instrument aimed fairly and squarely at the gigging pro. Last out the EIV starting gate was the mighty, upmarket E4X Turbo in 1997 (replete with a whopping onboard 1Gb hard disk and 18-bit effects board) and the comparatively lightweight e6400, an e64 replacement of sorts.

As is their way, E-mu produced numerous upgrades allowing most EIV series samplers to keep up with the Joneses, many of which are still available.

I spy ESI

But what of those of a fiscally challenged disposition to whom E-mu had catered with the Proteus range? No worries; a

featuring new soft- and hardware updates including six additional outs, 18 new filters, new DSP functions and twin 24-bit stereo effects processors).

The ESI4000 was launched in three versions, starting at £1,199 for the 64-voice, 4Mb base model with 64 digital six-pole filters (of 19 different types), rising to £1,699 for the twin 24-bit stereo effects processor, S/PDIF digital I/O and Zip drive-endowed Turbo Zip version. The £1,499 Turbo dropped the Zip in favour of a bog standard floppy drive. However, all were discontinued last year with the introduction of E-mu's most affordable offering to date, the £749 ESI2000 (again with optional Turbo upgrade). Besides an obvious change of colour scheme, the welcome price drop is the only real difference between it and its predecessors.

Ultimate Emulator?

Conversely, E-mu have always been renowned for their state-of-the-art products; but such luxuries always come at a price. While soldiering on in the fiercely competitive budget sampling marketplace, E-mu continue to innovate with their latest and greatest designs; the appropriately titled Emulator Ultra family packs three times the processing speed of the already formidable (discontinued) Emulator IVs. And so with the September

FAMOUS USERS

With their plentiful supply of RAM, E-mu's current crop of samplers have been a big hit with the Hollywood soundtracking fraternity where producers and directors often demand an almost exact replica of the music they're going to finally get before committing to the outrageous expense of recording a full orchestra; most of the big players have several E-mus in their vast studios. Closer to home, virtually anyone who's anyone in the vast plains of electronica samples with E-mu; here are a few recent *FM* interviewees: Nitin Sawhney (e6400), Plaid (EIV), Mouse On Mars (e5000) and Hacienda (e6400 and ESI4000).

📍 Nitin Sawhney



No. 10: E-mu samplers 1999-2000

Emulator IV

The fourth and last family of E-mu samplers to directly bear the renowned Emulator moniker, with a lineage stretching way back to 1981. Seven models were manufactured between 1994 (EIV) and 1997 (E4X Turbo and e6400). Others in the range not mentioned elsewhere are the 3U, 64-voice, 4Mb E4X,

with XLR-based AES/EBU digital interface. Today's second-hand pricing varies wildly, according to model and specification, though most have held their value well. Recent online examples include a 34Mb E64 for £850; a 72Mb, 4Gb internal hard disk-endowed E4K for £1,000 and a 128Mb e6400 for £1,000.



ESI32

A respectable £1,199 at its 1994 launch, the ESI32 represented E-mu's first genuinely low-cost sampler. Needless to say, its feature-packed (32-voice, 32Mb) diminutive 2U frame was a hit with the masses – all the more so with E-mu's generous lifespan enhancing upgrade policy – while posing something of a marketing headache to rivals Akai. Having said that, even 128Mb is beginning to look a tad passé nowadays. Still, given that ESI32s are changing hands for as little as £200, mustn't grumble.

ESI4000

Next out of the E-mu stable (also in 1998) came the ESI4000, an updated ESI32 of sorts starting at £1,199, overcoming its predecessor's shortcomings in one fell swoop by virtue of its 64-voice, 4Mb (expandable to 128) status. With three different models on the market, second-hand pricing predictably varies; I spotted a 32Mb example with an Iomega Zip drive and disks for the not unreasonable sum of £300.



E-Ultra

Other than the e4 Platinum flagship, five models complete the Ultra line-up, ranging from the 64-voice, 4Mb e5000 (£1,299 on its 1999 launch, currently sold for around £1,080) and rising to the 64-voice, 16Mb e6400 (find it new for around £1,899) and the E-Synth Ultra (all the features of the e6400 plus an additional 16Mb of internal sound ROM) also being discounted (to around £1,399). Second-hand prices vary, but a rough guide is £800 for e5000, £900 for E-Synth, £1,000 for e6400 and £1,280 for E4XT.

ESI2000

Last year's £749 budget sampler is effectively an ESI4000 replacement in all but colour and price. An all-in-one upgrade package, the Turbo Board, provides three additional stereo outputs, S/PDIF I/O and two 24-bit stereo effects processors for £259. That dealers are currently knocking them out for £499 (or 'Turbo-charged' for £699) makes this little beast an absolute bargain. Or is this cost-cutting exercise merely a reflection of the impending death of hardware samplers? Time will tell...



Thanks to Rob Keeble of The Emulator Archive (www.emulatorarchive.com) for vintage image sourcing and assistance

2000 introduction of the awesome E4 Platinum – featuring E-mu's new RFX32 32-bit effects processor/mixer card, 128-voice polyphony, 128Mb RAM, 16 analogue outputs, 16 ADAT outputs, six analogue inputs, eight ADAT inputs, two SCSI ports, 20 CD-ROMs and a 20Gb IDE internal hard drive – we finally complete our E-mu sampling journey. Or do we? Clearly, the original mass-market sampler

manufacturer still means business, but can that business survive in the new (recording) world order of software samplers (potentially running at mind-boggling speeds on the likes of Apple's recently introduced top-of-the-range dual 800MHz G4 Power Mac currently being touted as the fastest desktop computer in the world with speeds of up to 11.6 gigaflops)? In case you're

wondering, a gigaflop represents the ability to execute at least one billion floating-point operations per second. Try beating that! Yes, the times they are changing but E-mu look set to change with them, discounting their hardware samplers to try and shift more, while rumours abound of a possible E-mu virtual software sampler. Then it's a whole different ball game. **FM**

NEXT MONTH

In next month's Retro family tree, Professor Miller will be charting the history of the ARP series.