

Retro Family Tree

✧ Roland's Juno synths are among the most sought-after in our second-hand pages. Retro mentalist Jonathan Miller explores their colourful history to find out exactly why. . .

FAMOUS USERS

Despite the Junos' oft ill-perceived 'budget' status, they've been used on some big-time record productions, most notably George Michael's *I Want Your Sex* (where a Juno-106 provides several parts). Enya too is a keen proponent of the Juno sound; *Caribbean Blue* is an excellent example of the Juno-60's addictive arpeggiator in action. Meanwhile, those of you lucky enough to own a limited edition triple-CD copy of ambient technomeister Banco de Gaia's *Last Train To Lhasa* album (myself included) are in for a veritable Juno treat: check out the 35-minute epic *Kinjacou* remix to hear a Juno-6 put through its analogue paces (it provides the spacy drones underpinning the track). Joey Beltram is the guy who brought the sound of the nasty Alpha-Juno to the masses, *Mentasm* being the track that spawned a legion of imitators with its distinct, and in 1992, original 'Hoover-esque' noise. Other famous Juno users include Duran Duran's Nick Rhodes, Erasure's Vince Clarke and Howard Jones.



Vince Clarke

ROLAND IS A name familiar to keyboard players and synth dabblers alike. And rightly so, the Japanese company's distinctive logo has graced more than a lion's share of product casings since its inception (initially as an R&D outfit). Perhaps more surprising for that era of performance virtuosos is company founder Ikutaru Kakesashi's dedication to producing products with which non-musicians like himself could create music; that Roland's long since discontinued TR-909 drum machine and TB-303 bassline module continue to set dance genres alight to this day is, of course, testament to Kakesashi's vision.

Accessible product manufacture demands an accessible name, right? Or so reasoned Kakesashi. It's for this reason he named his company after one of King Arthur's knights of the round table. Bet you didn't know that now, did you? This was a time in Roland's history when it always gave its products accessible names; the now legendary Jupiters and Junos were the order of the day in early-80s synthville, conjuring up fantastic images by appellation alone. [*What he's saying readers is that they had great names – Ed*]. The Jupiters – particularly 1981's Jupiter-8 programmable analogue polysynth – might well be mighty but it's Roland's more wallet-friendly Juno brethren we're visiting here...

I have a dream

In our age of commonplace 128-voice samplers and all-singing, all-dancing digital workstations it's easy to forget that, once upon a time, synths could only play one note at a time. Polyphony – never mind multitimbrality – was but a dream for keyboard players the world over. Making that dream reality came at a price: the world's first truly programmable polysynth, Sequential Circuits' five-voice Prophet 5, cost \$4,495 (£2,845) on its 1978 launch (fellow Americans Moog and Oberheim's earlier cumbersome efforts, the PolyMoog and 4-Voice, cost even more). Hardly the stuff bedroom dreams are made of.

Roland entered the polyphonic fray that same year with the more sensibly priced (£1,810) four-voice Jupiter 4. That it was once written off as being "Pretty much of a preset synth on the cusp of

organ synthesizer" didn't stop fledgling Sheffield electropoppers The Human League putting it to good use. Nor was Roland in any way offended, going on to launch its aforementioned Jupiter-8 flagship to the hefty tune of £3,999, fine for the likes of Duran Duran's Nick Rhodes, but what of the more fiscally challenged musical masses out there? Here too Roland had an ace up its sleeve...

That's magic!

As was the case with its Jupiter forefathers, Roland again looked to the heavenly heights of ancient Rome when naming the instrument that was to forever change the fortunes of many a budding popstar. That instrument was 1982's Juno-6, a six-voice, analogue polysynth with digitally controlled oscillators (DCOs) making for a more stable performance, tuning-wise. While arguably not as warm sounding as the hitherto traditional voltage controlled oscillators

While the Juno-6 is not as fat sounding as the 16-VCO Jupiter-8, it still excels at those classic analogue synth strings and punchy bass patches which are so beloved of today's dance fraternity.

Unfortunately, interfacing the Juno-6 to the outside world in its virgin form is a big no no. On the plus side, there is a handy onboard arpeggiator, clock-synca-ble to vintage pre-MIDI drum machines like the Roland TR-808. Kenton Electronics offer a factory-fitted MIDI retrofit for £359, but that's more than twice the current second-hand asking price of a Juno-6. Go figure (or go buy the MIDI-endowed Juno-106 instead).

Total recall

Roland might have conquered the low-end polysynth market, but it wasn't about to rest on its laurels which was a good job as the competition was to increase. Korg was the first with 1982's similarly specified Polysix, replete with

✧ "With its chunky wooden ends, metal chassy and colourful control surface, the Juno-6 certainly has the looks" ✧

(VCOs) deployed on the Jupiter-8, the Juno's success was sealed in an instant by its magical sub-£1,000 pricing. Despite its non-programmable status, it sold like hot cakes.

So what did its many admirers get for their hard earned readies? Well, to partly paraphrase a certain celebrity British magician, not a lot. But they certainly liked it! With its two chunky wooden end cheeks, all-metal chassis (housing a non-sensitive, five-octave keyboard) and colourful control surface – strictly real-time, mind you – the Juno-6 certainly has the looks. But has it got the brains, or even the sounds? On the strength of that undemanding control surface one might be swayed otherwise. One DCO per voice doesn't exactly inspire confidence, but looks can be deceiving. A square wave-only sub-oscillator is on hand to help out and Roland had the foresight to include a simple chorus control that beefs up the sound no end. (Don't laugh; onboard digital effects were unheard of until the introduction of Roland's D-50 digital polysynth in 1987).

32 patch memories and an £899 price tag. Roland then countered with the £800 Juno-60 which is identical to the Juno-6 in all respects bar its very welcome 56 memories and proprietary digital communications bus (DCB) interface, a cumbersome multipin affair implemented on Roland's then new MSQ-700 and JSQ-60 digital sequencers.

No doubt Juno-6 owners were miffed at the apparent obsolescence of their dream machine so soon after purchase but that's the price you often pay for first bite at the technological cherry. While combined sales of the Juno-60 and -6 matched the Polysix's respectable 30,000 total unit-for-unit, a new threat looming on the horizon soon cut short this figure.

MIDI's arrival later that year revolutionised the musical instrument world; gear from rival manufacturers could now be connected. Sequential Circuits was first off the MIDI starting blocks with its six-voice Prophet 600 programmable analogue polysynth in late 1982; the six-voice JX-3P constituted Roland's reply, a

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radical instrument for 1983 by virtue of its 'knobless' control panel.

Let's get ready to MIDI

The Juno family finally joined the MIDI masses in 1984 with the all-new, six-voice Juno-106 programmable analogue polysynth, replete with 128 patch memories. A cosmetically restyled plastic casing lightened the load from 12- to 10kg, possibly demeaning the beast in the process (an observation not reflected in the £880 asking price, unfortunately). An equally colourful, though slightly shrunken, real-time control surface accesses what is, to all intents and purposes, a 'MIDI Juno-60'. Missing is the delightful Juno arpeggiator and handy hold function of yore, the addition of portamento offering little compensation. Regardless, some feel the '106 has an inexplicably thinner sound than its predecessors anyway; those magical MIDI sockets are a must, however.

Roland's (relatively) long-lasting Juno saga ended with 1986's simultaneously launched Alpha-Juno 1 and Alpha-Juno 2 six-voice polysynths, closing an analogue synth manufacturing chapter stretching back to 1976's SH-7 monosynth. The Alpha-Juno instruments' sleek appearance is a sign of the times: out with their predecessors' hands-on, sound-sculpting sliders, in with dreaded digital parameter access control.

Despite new additions like the Alpha-Juno 2's five-octave, touch-sensitive keyboard, Roland was clearly flogging a dead horse here. Yamaha's 160,000 unit-shifting DX7 16-voice digital polysynth had already turned the synth market on its head back in 1983 with the sparkling sounds of FM (frequency modulation) synthesis. The DX7 outsold Roland's entire Juno family in one fell swoop, and there was little Kakesashi & Co. could do about it until the introduction of its own digital wonder in 1987's hugely-successful 16-voice Roland D-50.

The analogue renaissance that spawned virtual analogue synths like the Clavia Nord Lead and Roland's own JP-8000 was still a long way off. Today any Juno is worth considering although those with sliders are far more desirable.

[Next month more crazy Miller trivia on Oberheim's OB range]. **FM**



JUNO-6

Here Roland kick-started its popular Juno family back in 1982, smashing the sub-£1,000 analogue polysynth price barrier for the first time. Its DCOs caused considerable confusion in a resolutely analogue synth world; perhaps that explains why Roland emblazoned Polyphonic Synthesizer across its front panel. Yours today for around £150.

JUNO-60

Hot on the heels of the Juno-6 came this self-dubbed Programmable Polyphonic Synthesizer. Why thanks, Roland, nothing like stating the obvious! Retailing for £800 in 1982, this cost less than its identical, non-programmable 'elder' sibling. Now that's progress for you (or more likely competition from Korg's programmable Polysix played a part). Between £250 and £350 (if MIDI retrofitted) second-hand.



JUNO-106

Though 40,000 of these 'MIDI Junos' were sold in their two-year (1984-86) production run – with Roland main man Ikutaru Kakesashi proclaiming it to be the company's best selling synth (until the D-50's timely arrival, that is) – analogue synths were no longer able to compete in the turning digital tide. Often seen changing hands for £350 today. (A 'home synth' version with built-in speakers, the HS-60, can be picked up for less).



Alpha-Juno-1

Official sales figures for what was to be the Juno polysynth family's 'twin' epitaph are unavailable. Despite the non-sensitive nature of its four-octave keyboard, this programmable/preset effort – 64 of its 128 patches are available to the user – can receive velocity information via MIDI, perhaps suggesting Roland viewed it more as an expander than a performance instrument (indeed, the MKS-50 1U rackmount derivative was released soon after); £575 new, around £200 second-hand.

Alpha-Juno-2

Big brother to the Alpha-Juno-1, identical in all respects bar its £799 price tag, five-octave, touch-sensitive keyboard and slot for optional patch storage cartridges (expensive at the time, but certainly more preferable to the antiquated cassette-based back-up option offered by the Juno-60 and Juno-106). The optional, slider-laden programmer, the PG-300, remains a sought-after prize among Alpha-Juno owners, ironically fetching more on the second-hand market than the synths it's designed to complement!

