

Viscount Legend '70s Compact

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Reviewing a stage piano is something of a poisoned chalice, as every stage keyboard player I know has strongly held views about the requirements and expected qualities. Perhaps that's why there are so many 'stage pianos' on the market today, with manufacturers like Yamaha, Roland, Nord, Korg, Kawai, Kurzweil and others offering numerous models, usually with versatile multi-instrument sound capabilities. And for the purists, there's always the gorgeous Rhodes Mk8, of course which we reviewed in *SOS* January 2022!

However, what makes the Italian manufacturer Viscount's new stage piano range particularly unusual is that it can be personalised and customised through the installation of as many (or as few) bespoke, high-quality sound-generating modules as needed. Before we get into the details of those sound-generating modules, though, let's look at the core instrument itself.

Stage Pianos

Viscount's Legend branding depicts a range of modern realisations of classic vintage instruments. The Legend Organs

Stage Piano

With its innovative modular approach to sound engines, this powerful stage keyboard should suit the needs of most performers!

range evokes Hammond's timeless tonewheel console instruments in five alternative forms, while the Legend '70s Pianos pay homage to the eternal Rhodes and Wurlitzer stage instruments.

There are three variants in the Legend '70s portfolio. The model supplied for this review is the Compact, fitted with a 73-note Fatar TP100LR hammer-action keybed. This instrument nominally weighs a very manageable 16.2kg (half the weight of the Rhodes Mk8) and measures 1120mm wide, by 180mm high and 475mm deep.

The Artist version has a full 88-note Fatar TP100LR key-bed, weighing a couple of kilos more at 18.8kg, which is the same as my reliable old Nord Stage 88 Classic. Its height and depth dimensions are the same as the Compact model, but the extended keyboard pushes its width out to 1330mm.

Topping the model trio is the Artist-W, which also has an 88-note keyboard, but a bespoke, graded hammer-action design with wooden keys. Despite its more complex construction, I was surprised this only adds a further kilo over the standard Artist instrument, weighing in at 19.5kg, which is still very manageable and far lighter than the Rhodes Mk8. The Artist and Artist-W models share the same overall dimensions.

The keybeds in all three Legend '70s stage pianos use triple-sensor technology for the velocity sensing, and touch sensitivity can be adjusted through five settings from 'very light' up to 'very hard', which should cater for the preferences of most players. There is also a fixed-velocity mode (with adjustable MIDI note value) for applications that don't require touch sensitivity. The



left-hand cheek panel of all three models also carries pitch-bend and modulation wheels, with the pitch-bend at the front and the modulation behind it. It's an unusual arrangement, but Viscount didn't have any alternatives, really, and I found the arrangement workable.

When it came to unpacking the instrument, I had to call on some assistance, as the sturdy cardboard packaging has extraordinarily wide flaps. While these undoubtedly provide good protection during shipping, they make it impossible to lean over and lift the instrument directly out of the box. Instead, I found it best to stand the box on its end and shuffle the (now vertical) keyboard out — with assistance to prevent the whole thing toppling over!

Included with the instrument is a simple sustain pedal (although half-damper or triple pedals can be used, if preferred), an IEC mains cable, a hefty user manual (70 pages in English and the same again in Italian), plus a simple but stylish metal music rest. Available as optional extras are a dedicated and pleasingly sturdy metal stand, and protective soft-bags for schlepping the instrument (and stand) around.

The Legend '70s piano has a distinctly vintage style, with black wooden side-cheeks and panels, highlighted with aluminium strips. When placed on the dedicated stand, its four angled aluminium legs enhance the retro styling of the whole ensemble very nicely. From

a purely practical perspective, the piano's wide, flat top is really handy as it allows a synth, laptop, mixer, or whatever else to be placed directly upon it without wobbling or rolling off!

Connections

Rear-panel connectivity is the same for all models. Four audio outputs are presented on quarter-inch sockets, but although the manual says "mono quarter-inch jacks should be used for all connections", these are, in fact, impedance-balanced outputs — so TRS cables can be used to advantage when connecting to balanced inputs on consoles or interfaces. Standard unbalanced TS instrument cables will work perfectly well with amps and DI boxes too, of course.

The two primary outputs are labelled Audio Out Main, and provide a stereo signal from a built-in reverb processor. Two further outputs are labelled Aux 1 and Aux 2 and sounds can be routed to these as required from individual modules and/or the instrument's two internal effects engines as set up through the main control panel configuration menu.

Additionally, there's a quarter-inch stereo headphone output on the front left-hand side of the keyboard below the keys, and a 3.5mm unbalanced mini-jack input in the middle of the rear panel for connection of a smartphone or MP3 player to play backing tracks directly through the instrument's Main

Viscount Legend '70s Compact

£1540

PROS

- Plays well and sounds great.
- Performance aids such as Songs and Lists to change sounds quickly.
- Unique modular concept allows customisation and expandability.
- Stylish retro looks.
- Software editor allows easier and deeper parameter editing.

CONS

- In the context of a stage piano, none.

SUMMARY

A novel, but high-quality stage piano with optional sound-generation modules.

outputs. It's worth noting, though, that the replay level must be adjusted on the music player itself — it is not affected by the instrument's master volume control and there is no volume setting for this signal path.

A grounded IEC mains inlet accepts 100-240 V AC, and the external controller facilities include connections for a dual-switch input to nudge the current program up or down, a sustain pedal, two assignable footswitches, and two assignable foot controllers. These pedal, switch and controller inputs can all be configured individually for different switch actions, wiring polarities and pot ranges. >>





» MIDI In and Out are provided on standard 5-pin DIN sockets, as well as via a USB-B port — the latter providing a 'To Host' connection for a computer or tablet. Stereo audio (44.1kHz only) can also be replayed from the computer over this USB link and is routed through the Main outputs just like the mini-jack input. However, while performance MIDI can be recorded in the computer, there is no facility to record the instrument's audio signal over USB. A second USB socket (a Type-A 'To Device' port) accepts a flash drive for saving and load instrument settings and programs, as well as loading firmware updates for both the main instrument and individual modules.

Performance Controls

Moving back around to the player's side of the piano, a near-vertical panel carrying all the user controls runs across the entire width of the keyboard above the keys. This is subdivided into a one fixed and several removable modules, and all three Legend '70s models ship with the main control panel (fixed) in the leftmost position, the Electric Piano module second, and the Sound Collection module in the third slot. The Artist and Artist-W (88-note) variants have three further blanked slots available for installing additional optional modules, while the Compact version has two vacant slots.

The main panel's controls start with the master output volume control, three vertical sliders to adjust a three-band EQ (the EQ parameters are fully customisable), and the stereo reverb controls (program, dry/wet mix, on/off), all of which modify the signals routed to the Main stereo outputs. Included reverberation programs cover the usual list of large and small rooms, small, medium and large halls, two different Stages, medium and large plates, two springs and two "tape reverb" effects; and the quality is pretty good. The two tape options are unexpected, but I found they worked really well with the EPs when seeking a vintage sound character.

■ The rear panel sports a pair of Main stereo outs, plus two assignable Aux outputs and an auxiliary mini-jack input. External control can be via the two footswitch inputs, sustain pedal input, two foot controller jack sockets and a program up/down footswitch. MIDI In and Out are present, while the USB-A and USB-B sockets cater for thumb drives and a computer connection.

Next along are controls for two internal effects engines, labelled FX1 and FX2. The facilities include selector and on/off buttons for each engine, as well as amount and rate controls. A rotary switch selects the required program from tremolo, chorus, flanger, phaser, wah, amp, delay and 'others' (such as compression, EQ, and more). Modulation parameters in the two engines can be synchronised either to an internal or an external MIDI Clock, or they can run independently.

The final portion of this main panel is given over to a small monochrome OLED screen and the associated menu navigation dial, buttons and configuration controls. Despite the small size, the screen is actually very readable, and the screen space is used well. This panel probably looks more complicated than it really is, as all operations are logical and the menu screen provides clear options and feedback on the configuration and program editing processes.

Most things can be edited from the control panel, but Viscount also offer a free, downloadable Legend '70s Editor. This runs on Windows, Mac OS and iOS, and it makes configuring the keyboard and editing parameters very much easier and faster! Oddly, though, the instrument and module firmware cannot be upgraded from the app; firmware has to be copied to a thumb drive, plugged into the USB-A port, and initiated through the keyboard's menu system.

From a performance perspective, the Legend '70s offers a total of 256 individual program memories arranged as 16 banks (A to P) of 16 programs (1 to 16) — although programs can also be named to aid recognition. The selected program is displayed on the OLED screen, which shows the program location (for example B.02) and name (Epiano+Strings, say) along with little graphical blocks indicating the contributing sound

modules. As shipped, 224 of those program locations contain factory presets, the vast majority of which are genuinely useful and sound, to my ears, very good indeed. They certainly make great starting points for tweaking to meet personal preferences!

Programs can be selected sequentially up and down either by turning the control dial, or pressing a suitable dual footswitch. However, a more practical option for gigging players is to use a feature called Song Mode, in which each programmed Song loads four different programs into the four Set buttons on the main panel for instant recall. You could, for example, assign the first location with a program used for the intro of a performance piece (I mean song, of course, but that term could get confusing here!), another for the verses, a third for choruses, and a fourth for the solo break.

Even more usefully, up to 40 Songs can be stored together to make a List, and you can have up to nine Lists, which makes accessing pre-arranged sounds for different setlists a breeze. Naturally, there are facilities to edit Lists and move Songs and programs around, as required. Expanding this idea further, the Software Editor adds an option to create Live Sets, which are displayed on the computer screen as a table grid of 24 selected programs which can then be recalled directly as required.

Modular Options

The current sound module range comprises: Electric Piano, Acoustic Piano, Clavi, Sound Collection, Synth-8, and External Control (see boxes for more details). Some of these modules employ physical modelling while others are sample-based, but the Synth-8 is a real analogue hardware synthesizer! Regardless of the underlying technology, all of the modules appear to be well-built »

Modules

E.Piano: This standard module is the sonic heart of the whole instrument, using Viscount's 'Advanced Physical Modelling' technology to provide five different variations of Rhodes pianos, two Wurlitizers, plus a 'CP-inspired' acoustic stage piano, the required sound being selected on a rotary switch. The module includes panel LEDs to indicate the volume, selected piano model, whether the keyboard split and transpose functions are active, and whether the output is routed to either of the effects engines. Rotary controls adjust the volume, bass and treble EQ, intensity and speed of a dedicated tremolo effect, and buttons activate the module output, the tremolo effect, and a virtual amplifier effect. There are 13 different amp models available, recreating all the classic combinations (such as Suitcase76, WR200, Twin, and so on). However, these are selected using the menu system rather than from the module panel and so are not easily changed during a gig.

From the software editor, additional parameters become available for customisation, including things like hammer type, tine positions, tone-bar decay and resonance, note release and pedal noises, and far more besides. If you have a specific Rhodes sound in mind, you can create it here, although the stock programmed variants offer a very typical range and all sound great to me.

A.Piano: Viscount have used their 'High-Definition Sampling' (HDS) technology to capture eight classic acoustic piano types, described in the usual coy terms of 'US grand', 'US stage', 'German grand', 'US studio', 'JP grand', 'German concert', 'JP studio', 'Honky-tonk' and (accessible via the



software editor) 'JP concert' and 'American grand'. Damper resonance and pedal noises are included in the samples for more realism, and panel controls allow the dynamic touch response (± 5 steps) and Brilliance to be adjusted, along with the volume, module on/off status, and instrument selection. LEDs indicate split and transpose modes, plus routing to FX1/2.

Clavi: This optional module recreates the Hohner D6 and E7 Clavinets using physical modelling. The standard volume, on/off button and status LEDs are provided on the panel, along with buttons to select one of the two Clavinet models, and to adjust the tone generation (Brilliant, Treble, Medium, Soft,



Damper Muting, and pickup selections). The sound quality and controllability is very good, and the factory presets partner a variety of effects settings to good effect.

Sound Collection: The second of the standard-fit modules provides over 100 different instrumental sounds, all captured using Viscount's 'HDS' technology again. It's not immediately obvious, but any two sounds can be selected and played simultaneously (with 128-note polyphony), which extends the versatility of this module even further, allowing, for example, an acoustic bass sound in a low keyboard split, and a pad to be layered with an electric piano over the rest of the keyboard. After selecting which voice is being adjusted, the required sound is accessed primarily through a rotary switch to choose a sound group, and then the required sound sample is recalled with a second dial and numerical display. There are 11 pads, 11 strings (acoustic, synth, and string machine), 11 choirs, 17 brass, 16 keys (pianos, DX, harpsichord, accordions, and so on), 15 organs (Hammond and transistor emulations, and pipe organs), 12 bass, and 16 'other' (mostly guitars and tuned percussion). The samples are all good quality and work well in context.

Synth-8: The most recently added module is an eight-voice analogue synth, each voice having two oscillators with selectable waveforms, noise, ring-mod, detune, and hard-sync functions. A familiar-sounding multi-mode analogue filter is included with adjustable slopes, plus two ADSR envelopes, two LFOs, an arpeggiator, and a Unison mode that can emulate a stack of up to 32 detuned oscillators. This module ships with 128 factory-programmed presets, which is just as well since real-time access to adjust the parameters is through just four assignable knobs. A 7x4 table printed on the panel details the available functions, with the currently active row being indicated by LEDs and selected with up/down buttons. It's not quite as clumsy as it looks, and selected parameters can also be assigned to foot controllers, if desired, for real-time control — but, in general, sounds must be created in advance and stored as individual programs.

External Control: This module effectively makes the Legend '70s a MIDI master keyboard, allowing remote control of external sound engines over standard 5-pin DIN MIDI or via USB (using the 'To Host' port). In addition to a dedicated volume control, the panel provides four real-time controller knobs, one with an associated function selector, while the others adjust pre-assigned CC values.



» and sound very good indeed — and not just for a stage piano.

For this review I was supplied with the Compact model instrument fitted with the standard Electric Piano and Sound Collection modules. Also pre-installed were the Clavi and Acoustic Piano modules, and the Synth-8 module was included in its box; I substituted this for the Clavi during the review period.

Installing or swapping modules is straightforward: the aluminium strip along the top of the control panel is unscrewed along with a couple of screws that hold the module (or blanking plate) in place. The new panel is connected to a short ribbon cable, much like a modular synth,

and once connected and secured, and the top rail refitted, the instrument can be powered up. The control section is then instructed to search for the new module, to recognise its location and functions, and then it's business as usual.

Individual sound modules can be configured to respond either to a global MIDI channel, or to different MIDI channels (for example E.Piano on Channel 2, A.Piano on Channel 6, Synth-8 on Channel 7, and so on). This allows an additional keyboard or a MIDI

sequencer to play sounds from modules independently, if desired.

Every module has its own on/off (mute) button and a volume control, and its output signal can be routed either to the Main stereo outputs (via the master reverb and EQ) or to one or other of the two Aux outputs, via one (or both) of the internal effects engines, if required.

The two mono effects engines can be used completely independently, or they can be combined in series or in parallel, and multiple modules can be routed through the same effects engines if necessary, too. Signal routing is set up from the configuration menu — so it isn't something you'd want to change during a gig! — but there's huge scope to send different sound modules through different effects and, if required, to different physical outputs, providing enormous flexibility on stage. To help show how each module is configured in a particular program, LEDs indicate when the signal is routed to either of the FX engines, and also if the transpose or keyboard split modes are active for that module.

Naturally, each program stores myriad settings and parameters allowing radically different sounds, signal routing, and effect setups. The front-panel editing system is logical, with separate menu pages for different parameter subsets, and it is pretty comprehensive. For example, the Common section covers things like keyboard splits, assigning which sounds apply to which section, and the note ranges covered by each sound module. Footswitch and foot-controller types and assignments can also be configured here, with lots of options, and the Effects page accesses the audio signal path routing along with dozens of parameters for each of the different effects.

Impressively, each effect type has several alternative bases (such as 4-, 6-, 8- or 12-stage phasers, four different types of chorus and flanger, three different wahs...) with adjustable parameters for the usual things like feedback, delay, EQ, modulation rate, depth and sync, L/R phase-shifts (for fake stereo effects), dry/wet balance, and so on. However, using the software editor makes it quicker and easier to access and alter parameters, and in many cases a greater range of parameters is available than through the instrument's menus. So, if you want to tweak something, the parameter is in there to do it!

Each module has a similarly comprehensive array of adjustable parameters, although the specifics obviously vary considerably with the different modules. Again, there are far more options available from the software editor than through the keyboard's panel. For example, the E.Piano module has options for the signal routing, detuning, transposition, velocity sensitivity (± 5 steps

relative to the keyboard's overall setting), pitch-bend and mod-wheel actions, tremolo effect settings, amp model settings, and more. For those who like to customise and fine-tune their instruments, there's plenty of scope here!

In Use

My overall impression of the Viscount Legend '70s stage piano is that it feels good to play, with a nice interaction between the keyboard and the generated sounds. This makes performances involving and rewarding, which is always a good start. The Fatar keybed isn't the quietest I've ever played, but that's only going to be a minor irritant during home practice; on stage it is completely irrelevant. (I'm told the Artist-W model's graded wooden keyboard is much better in this respect.)

I really like the look of the Legend '70s on its dedicated stand, and the control panel layout is clear and logical. Everything feels solid and capable of surviving life on the road, although only time will tell on that one. Having the master reverb and EQ separate from the two effects engines works well, and is similar to how things work on the Nord Stage I normally use. Most of the controls you'd want to access during a gig are right in front of you, although one small niggle is that accessing the transpose function involves some menu diving and is a little more involved than on many keyboards I play.

Turning to the sound modules themselves, I think Viscount have done a great job. The electric pianos all sound excellent and all the classic tones are available straight out of the box. But the depth of tweakability is impressive too, if you have particular sounds in mind. Partnering the E.Piano module with the Sound Collection module is inspired, and it provides the perfect companion for pads, layers, splits, solos and more. For many gigging players, this combination will be all they need.

That said, most will also need acoustic pianos and while there are a handful in the Sound Collection listing, they don't really stand up to solo work. The A.Piano module offers a much higher quality and a far greater range of acoustic pianos, and most seem to work well in the context of stage performances of different genres. I wouldn't dispute that some of the well-known virtual piano instruments running on a computer sound

better when analysed in a studio control room, but the offerings here do sound very good, are very practical, and are tweakable to suit preferential palates.

As an organ player, I found the Hammond-esque options in the Sound Module are rather restricted compared with those in the Nord Stage. There are nine options which cover the most commonly used sounds, but they can't be manipulated in real time as they are fixed samples. The Leslie speed can be controlled with the modulation wheel on the side cheek, though, with fully down giving the slow chorale speed, fully up the fast tremelo, and the middle region instigating a stop (brake) mode. Given Viscount's Legend Organs, a dedicated organ module would be within their powers, although the weighted keyboard doesn't really lend itself to organ playing techniques. I'd get around the problem by placing my Hammond XK1c on top of the Legend '70s — a perfect combination!

The Synth-8 module was unexpected and is a surprisingly comprehensive polysynth, especially given its compact size. I'd have to say that the factory presets don't really show its talents off as well as they could, and with just four assignable controls it's certainly not the easiest synth to program! The software app makes the job easier, again, and with a little perseverance I found it possible to create some impressive and really useful sounds.

Viscount appear to be continuing the development of this instrument with firmware updates and potentially new modules, so what is already a great instrument could become even better in the future! One thing I'd like to add to the R&D wishlist is a new module that could host third-party VST instruments directly — thus negating the need for a laptop on stage!

Overall, though, the Viscount Legend '70s is well-made, uniquely configurable, highly versatile, looks great on stage, is involving and rewarding to play, and it sounds good too. The last point is highly subjective, of course, but this is definitely an instrument to try out in person if you're looking for a new stage piano. **■■■**

£ Viscount Legend '70s Compact £1540, Artist £1727, Artist W £2000. A.Piano module £277, all other modules £144 each. Prices include VAT.

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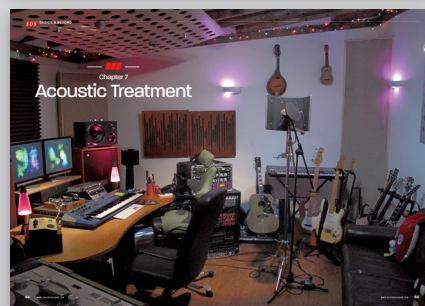
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