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In our ongoing series on Synthesizer basics, we've covered the hows and whys of the way they essentially make sound, and even some fancy tricks you can do with them. One of the questions I often get however, is "what kind of synth should I buy?" You want to buy one, but haven't a clue exactly what will best suit your needs. The best way to address this (oddly enough) is to figure out what your needs are! Maybe you're a pianist looking to branch out, or a guitarist looking to add some crazy Radiohead-ish sounds to your latest song. Maybe you are a singer-songwriter looking to write complete compositions, or you want a totally retro setup. As someone who does a fair bit of buying and selling of instruments, I see a good variety of both new and old gear, so let's look at some of the most common applications and features of synths available both today AND yesterday.

Many people are going to want something fairly versatile. Something that does lots of things reasonably well without breaking the bank. Most of the major manufacturers offer a reasonably priced 'budget' synth that aims for this market. They usually have a 61 note keyboard, are touch-sensitive (keys respond dynamically) and are MIDI capable so you can hook them up to your computer for basic sequencing. They come loaded with a good variety of sounds. Pianos, organs, strings, brass, drums, some 'electronic' sounds - the works. These make a great first synth for many people because they give a good broad overview of what synths can be capable of without overloading on advanced features. If you play in a band that plays a wide variety of songs, this might be the one for you.

If you are looking for a few more features, say, a built-in MIDI sequencer for recording, then a workstation synth might be more to your liking. These are often a company's flagship instrument and tend to be loaded with extras for the semi-pro to pro. Things like multiple audio outputs for pro recording purposes, digital sampling, a floppy or hard drive, and lots of audio FX for sound processing. Very often they are available in different sizes. Many companies offer the standard 61 note version, a 76 note version, and a weighted-action 88 key version for those players who really want to keep the range and 'feel' of a piano. Be prepared to save up a bit more for these as they tend to be top-of-the-line units with features galore. 88 key models especially tend to be expensive. If you own a home studio or are just fairly serious about recording your music and need the extra features that pros want, you may want to consider taking the jump up to this next level.

If you want a machine like either of the ones above but would like it a little cheaper, consider getting an older one on the second-hand market. Good deals on used synths of this type can often be found because many people like to stay up-to-date with technology and sell their model from last year (or 10 years!) While the price depreciation isn't QUITE as dramatic as say, the second-hand computer market, it is often substantial enough to warrant a second look. Machines of the workstation variety have been around since the late 80's, and, depending upon your taste for sounds, you may find something that suits you just fine for substantially less than what is currently available new. Here is something to consider as well - the 'realism' of synth sounds over the past decade or so has increased dramatically. If modern realism in sound is not necessary, especially in the piano department, or if you just really want to muck around experimenting with sound and being creative on a budget, I would recommend something like this.

But what if you are really into retro sounds and want to add a touch of 'street cred' to your new recording with some electronic blips and bleeps or that "string synth through a bank of flangers" sound? Well, then you probably want to check out an analog synthesizer from the days of yore. Synths from the 70s to the mid-80s have that distinctive sound so common to many recordings these days. These synths give you lots of opportunity for hands-on twiddling and tailoring sounds on the fly. Prices vary widely, and don't expect things like built-in FX, touch sensitivity, a realistic piano sound, or even MIDI. This is stuff to get your hands dirty with, learning the basics of sound design and voltage-control so that you can find interesting ways to interface things together. Of course, many companies that made these machines are still around today, in some cases reissuing technology that was in its heyday 25 years ago. Additionally, other companies (including many European ones) today produce what are called Virtual Analog machines - digital synths that effectively reproduce the old analog sounds but also include some newer features.

Though purists will scoff!

Next time around, using your computer as a virtual synth!

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