

Nord Stage EX 88 | £2,599

Clavia's Nord Stage has been voted best Stage Piano at the M.I.P.A's for the last three years. **Dan 'JD73' Goldman** checks out the latest EX version...



ON THE DVD

WHAT IS IT?

An expanded version of the Nord Stage doubling the onboard sample memory, adding a mono piano mode, new sounds and some cosmetic changes

CONTACT

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HIGHLIGHTS

- 1 Little or no menu diving required for most functions – grab a dial and play
- 2 Authentic-sounding sampled emulations of organs, pianos and electric keys and a decent synth
- 3 Three different sizes available, all with very playable actions

When I first tried out the original Nord Stage in 2006 I knew I had to have one. The package

of portable semi-weighted or weighted keyboards, packed with realistic sampled vintage keyboards and pianos, organs and a decent synth, coupled with versatile effects was very impressive and I still use mine as my main gig 'board today. But, almost three years on from its release, does the EX model bring anything new?

Straight out of the box, the EX looks very similar. The main noticeable difference is instead of the original Stage's multi-coloured front panel livery, the EX version has an altogether more grey and black affair. Blue backgrounds are no more, along with the bright yellows around the volume knobs and for section labels.

Unfortunately, in practice, it's actually much harder on the eyes, as each formerly distinct section of the Nords front panel now blends into one – a nightmare in dark lighting.

Other cosmetic changes include a new rear 'Stage' logo, a smaller front panel 'Nord Stage' logo and there are also some new additions in the piano section. The first is the addition of a 'cemb' option (labeled in addition to Clavinet on the Clavinet button). This currently accesses the two new Italian

harpsichord sounds, which sound incredibly good, though whose usefulness remains to be seen.

The second change allows the clavinet soft EQ option to double as a mono piano mode switch. Many Stage owners complained of summing issues when playing a stereo piano sample through one output, so the new button now solves that issue, collapsing the stereo image down to mono with no noticeable phasing problems.

To sum up then and to avoid any confusion, the only major internal change between the current Stage and the EX is the added memory (an extra 128MB so more sounds can be stored onboard) and this mono piano mode. All other changes are purely cosmetic, including the newly-added front panel labelling for the rear-panel sockets, which should really have been there from day one!

There are still three models in the series. The 88-note weighted model (tested here), the 76-note weighted

The Effects Section

The effects in the Stage EX really bring the dry sounds to life (but they still sound great dry nonetheless) and are very easy to use on the fly, with no menu diving at all – perfect for live performance tweaking.

Ring mod, tremolo, stereo pan, wah-wah (controllable from an external pedal) and two autowah's are included along with two flangers, two choruses two phasers

and a rotary cab emulator. There's also a great analogue sounding delay with tap tempo. All these effects sound really natural and musical.

If this isn't enough, there's a versatile vintage amp simulator, great sounding overdrive, a 3-band EQ that can radically or subtly alter any sound and a simple but useful compressor for smoothing things out. The onboard reverb is one of

the best I've heard onboard a synth and it's great for both short and long reverbs, or just a little ambience.

The only real shame is there's no external input for routing external equipment through the effects or the synth's filters and that the delay doesn't allow pitch bends on the delay tails when changing the delay time as with tape/analogue delay units/pedals.





model and finally the 76 compact (which uses semi-weighted waterfall keys in an even more compact and super-giggable form factor). I feel the compact strikes the best balance – it's cheaper and lighter and I just can't get my head round playing clav and organs from a weighted board.

I find the Compact's keys are great, even for controlled and dynamic piano/

dedicated zone buttons and split lights. This is an area where the stage still excels.

Sound-wise, the Stage is perhaps still the best sounding organ and piano/electric piano emulator out there. The electric pianos are dynamic and authentic to the original Rhodes and Wurli's they are sampled from, the pianos are very realistic (the new

soundset as well in this upgrade. This would make this instrument truly complete and allow it to really wrestle with the likes of the Motif and M3.

Make no mistake, the Stage is still hard to beat, the new sounds are great and the extra sample memory is a bonus but this upgrade could have been so much more comprehensive and exciting. For existing Stage

owners, there is little reason to upgrade and for new owners the updates will mostly go unnoticed anyway.

Let's hope Clavia choose to

bring out a Nord Stage 2 soon, with the features that Stage owners have wanted for so long. That said the excellent EX is still worthy of true pro status, despite the minor upgrade. **FM**

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electric piano playing. This is not to say the weighted action versions aren't decent – they are some of the nicest, most realistic and non-fatiguing hammer actions available.

Either way it's a compromise though – you'll either end up playing organs and clav and synths with a weighted action, or electric pianos and pianos on a semi-weighted organ type board. I prefer the latter.

One of my favourite things about the Stage is its clever split and layer capabilities. You can have a synth bass, a Rhodes and a Clav, with independent effects, accessed from the Stage's keyboard and then (via a MIDI keyboard) have an organ with a synth lead/rhodes at the top, all with no menu diving using just the

Studio Grand mk2 Yamaha is particularly impressive and very playable) the synth has a slightly compromised interface (lack of dedicated envelope controls) but still sounds as good as a Nord Lead, and the effects (see the Effects Section box on the previous page) are worthy of being packaged in their own standalone unit! It's worth noting all the new sounds are available to old Stage models as well, which is great.

For those of you new to the Stage concept, it's still one of the best gigging boards out there. It's lightweight enough (even the 88 weighs only 41lbs), durable, reliable and sounds great. However, I wish Clavia could have added the user sample upload from the Wave and the Mellotron

FutureMusic VERDICT

BUILD

VALUE

EASE OF USE

VERSATILITY

RESULTS

The EX is a subtle upgrade but it's still a great workhorse and its sounds are still some of the best.

SPECS

General: Master Level Control, Wooden Pitch Stick, Modulation Wheel, 21 x 6 Program Locations, 2 Live Buffers, 2 Individual Panel Setups, 3 Morph sources

Effects

Unit One: Ring Modulator, Tremolo, Pan, Wah 1, Wah 2, AutoWah

Unit Two: 2 Flangers, 2 Phasers, 2 Choruses Delay – includes Ping Pong and Tap-Tempo

Amplifier/Speaker

Simulation: 3 types of Speaker simulations, 3-band Equalizer and Overdrive

Rotary Speaker: selectable Speed and Overdrive

Master Effects:

Compressor, Reverb – 5 Algorithms

Keyboard: Hammer Action Weighted Keys, Aftertouch, Supports 3 split zones with visual LED indication

Connections: 4 Assignable Audio Outputs, Stereo Headphone Output, Sustain Pedal, Rotor Pedal, Organ Swell Pedal, Control Pedal, MIDI In, MIDI Out, USB

Dimensions

1297x 121x 334mm

Weight

18.5kg

ALTERNATIVES



Korg M3-88

£2,149

Korg weighted workstation synth with 88 keys, sounds from the Oasys, second-generation karma, touchscreen, sampling and sequencer. A great sounding and feature-packed keyboard.

korg.com



Yamaha Motif XS8

£2,309

88-note weighted board with intelligent arpeggiators, sampling, colour screen and sequencer. Yamaha's flagship. Sounds the biz.

yamahasynth.com



Roland Fantom G8

£2,120

Fully-featured weighted workstation with SRX expansion options, large sequencer, mouse connectivity, sampling and trigger pads. A beast of a synth!

roland.com

