



ON THE DVD

WHAT IS IT?

A powerhouse studio-in-a-box from Roland

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HIGHLIGHTS

- 1 You really can see a project through from inception to mix
- 2 Intuitively designed
- 3 Huge range of options



Roland MV-8800 Production Studio | £1,699

It's hailed as a recording studio in a box. *Jono Buchanan* falls for the all-in-one hardware solution

Taking delivery of my Roland VS-880 multi-tracker back in 1996 is something I'll never forget. At a time when ADAT ruled the school, I was coming round to the idea that I needed to buy one of these blue boxes – which looked for all

the world like a trumped-up VCR player – when suddenly, for about the same cash, Roland released this 8-track digital wonder, complete with dual-effects processors and a built-in hard drive. It seemed like Christmas had come early and it became the

centrepiece for my burgeoning studio set-up for the next few years. Roland have such a proud recording, synthesis, sampling and effects processing tradition that it's no wonder their subsequent digital multi-trackers have spawned more features, culminating in the then-flagship MV-8000 production studio in 2004. (See FM153.)

Four years later and Roland are at it again, and the fruit of their labours offers a staggering range of functions under one roof.

A pattern forming

The top panel gives a pretty good indication of some of the joys that lie beneath. If you allow your eye to wander over the fascia you'll be immediately struck by three things: a set of 16 Akai MPC-style pads in the bottom left-hand quarter, a collection of eight short-throw faders and a recessed, angled colour screen whose output can be sent to a VGA monitor via rear-panel connection.

It's a layout that screams 'play me!' and after a short boot-up time, that's



A number of sample-edit tools are waiting for you if you want to take a more hands-on approach

exactly what you'll find yourself doing. The 8800 earns its tag of 'Production Studio' by having a shot at pretty much every stage of the recording process, with sequencing, synthesis, sampling, audio recording, effects processing, mastering and CD-writing all available 'in-house'.

In terms of song creation, the MV-8800 is split into two primary modes: 'Pattern' and 'Song'. Pattern comes first and tends to be looped phrases of a few bars in length. Plenty of these ship with the MV-8800 itself, but the freedom to create your own will appeal most. Notes can be input into patterns in a number of ways, the most enjoyable of which is to bash your sequence out on the velocity-sensitive pads. If you're using one of the library drum kits for example, the individual hits are mapped to each pad, so all very straightforward.

Alternatively, you can input notes from a MIDI keyboard, or individually in step time. The library of sounds is one of the major updates from the MV-8000, as the 8800 ships with source

How it all adds up

When reviewing products like this, giving a mark for 'Value For Money' is difficult and it's worth a breakdown here to justify my reasoning.

The sampler section is fully spec'd, featuring some of Roland's clever Variphase technology, all feeding into a 40GB hard drive, so let's, for argument's sake, call that £800. The effects

processors also measure up well, with the flagship multi-effects processor flanked by more straightforward reverb and delay/chorus models.

So at least £400 there. Then there's an eight-track audio recorder, mastering plug-ins and a CD-recorder.

These are harder to put a price on, but when you factor in that the 8800

will also let you data transfer over USB and has some real-time control elements, there's no doubt that £1,699 in total is an excellent price.

It is, however, a price that puts it in direct competition with computer-based audio solutions, which are perhaps a little more expandable and can offer non-musical functions too.

material from a number of Roland drum machines, including the TRs 808 and 909. Alongside these you'll find a collection of pianos, guitars, effects, basses and the like – so you're making music right out of the box.

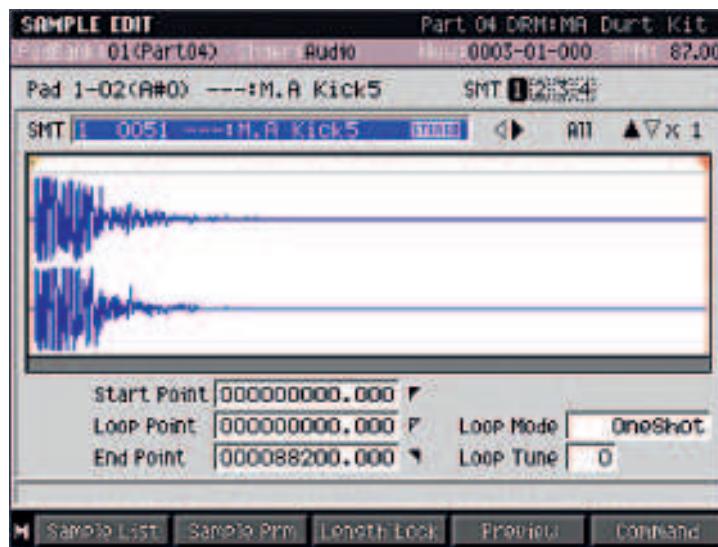
This library is pre-installed for you, but the 8800 also ships with CD-ROMs of additional content, and I'm sure a further support library will grow over the coming months. The quality of the

Sample mania

Perhaps that's just laziness on my part – after all, the MV-8800's second primary function is as a sampler. To make a recording, simply attach your chosen sound source to one set of inputs on the unit's rear – both quarter-inch TRS inputs and phono ins are available here (DJs take note). Roland provide their own library of sampled phrases and loops, and the 'recycled' nature of these means that you can shift a pattern or song's tempo and they will BPM-match automatically, meaning the creative process of pattern-building

flows even more smoothly. A number of sample-edit tools are ready and waiting for you too, if you want to take a more hands-on approach to time-stretching and pitch-shifting, for instance. It's also possible to sample

sounds provided is excellent, but whilst I know it would dramatically inflate the unit's cost I'd love to see Roland implement a fuller, XV-style sound module into the 8800 for an even greater range of possibilities.



Waveform display and mouse socket make light work of sample editing

SPECS

Sampler:

44.1kHz, 16-bit recording, 64-voice polyphonic, 16 instruments, nine audio tracks

RAM:

128MB, expandable to 512MB

Simultaneous Effects:

Multi-FX (MFX): 1, Chorus (two types); 1, Reverb (four types); 1, Mastering Tool Kit (in Mastering Mode); 1

Sequencer:

Song Mode: 128 MIDI tracks, eight audio tracks, one pattern track, tempo track, one mute control track

Pattern Mode:

64 MIDI Tracks, one audio track, one mute control track

Tempo Range:

5-300bpm
Recording methods:
Realtime, step time (MIDI), Audio Recording

Signal Processing:

A/D conversion: 24-bits, 64-times oversampling;

D/A conversion: 24-bits, 128 times oversampling

Display: Graphic 320 x 240 dots backlit LCD colour screen

Pads: 16 Pads, velocity/aftertouch sensitive

CD-R/RW Drive:

Built-in, CD-DA, CD-ROM, CD-R, CD-RW

Internal Hard Drive:

40GB
Connectors: AC power inlet, MIDI In, Out x 2, Mouse connector (with supplied mouse), VGA Monitor Out, USB Port, Footswitch, Digital out (Coaxial), Stereo Master out, Phones out, Stereo TRS Mic/Line inputs, Phono Stereo inputs

Import compatibility:

From CD-ROM/from Mac and PC via USB: Audio CD, wav/aiff, ACIDized file, S700, Akai MPC2000, S1000/3000, Roland MV-8000 Patch/Project

Export:

Internal: To audio CD
External (to Mac/PC via USB): Wav/Aiff, ACIDized file, Akai MPC2000, Roland MV-8000 Patch/Project

Dimensions:

480 x 482 x 136mm

Weight:

9.0kg



Multi Function pads

One of the main things I like about the 8800 is its ergonomic design.

When you consider that the sheer number of things it lets you do would normally be covered by a range of hard or software packages (each with its own user-interface), it's impressive that Roland

have managed to make the majority of the 8800's features so readily accessible.

The touch-pads typify this approach. They're velocity and after-touch sensitive for a start, and assigning and editing the samples themselves is also made very straightforward.

A dedicated 'Quick Edit' button to the left of the pads brings up a comprehensive page of levels, pan and synthesis information for any pad's contents, while a second press of this button takes you to Sample Edit mode, where you can trim a sound or set up its loop points...



through the effects processors, so you can commit to specific effects treatments early on if you so desire. Samples and audio recordings can also be imported via a dedicated button with a selection of audio formats supported. Perhaps in an aggressive move to go after some of Akai's MPC devotees, MPC samples are among these.

Sing a song

Once your source material is gathered you're ready to switch into Song Mode. One neat feature immediately strikes you – the screen changes colour. Pattern mode is a pleasing purple, whilst Song mode is blue, so you never lose track of where you are. Songs allow you to work with a range of different types of data.

For starters you can import those patterns you've lovingly created and copy and paste these as required. Song mode provides you with up to 128 MIDI tracks alongside eight audio tracks, the latter of which the 8800 sees as an extension of the sampler. This means that audio performances are captured by the sampler like the shorter looped phrases mentioned previously, and so are capable of similar, BPM-sync'd responses. Recording is realtime and in performance this is rock-solid even when audio is being added to more complex song arrangements.

One omission of note is the lack of an XLR input on the MV-8800. Again, I'd add this to my wish-list, as an input of this type with a dedicated phantom power switch would add a useful further dimension to the possibilities here.

Effects and mixing

Once your track is taking shape, it's time to turn to the 8800's virtual mixer



and effects sections. Both have dedicated switches on the front panel, so navigation is easy. The mixer lets you control 24 input tracks, plus effects auxiliary busses, and the screen neatly projects a regular mixing desk setup to aid you. The faders below the screen allow the adjustment of levels and a separate 3-band EQ is available to every sound within your mix.

There are three separate processors in total, with Roland's MFX (multi-FX) the most exciting of these.

This provides one of 25 FX algorithms, which can be assigned to a bus and made available to any track. Alongside the MFX, more basic reverb and delay/chorus units are available, again with multiple algorithms from which to choose.

compressor and limiting. The mastering stage imports the WAV file you've created at the mixdown stage in 'Song' mode and allows you to create a new, mastered version, which is saved into a 'Masters' folder.

When you're ready to author a CD of your masters, a dedicated function handles this, allowing you to order your tracks and to specify the gap you want

between each one.

You can't fault Roland for effort here, and although it's not always easy to think that dedicated boxes like this can see a project through

"This fulfils the studio's biggest requirements: it's inspiring and it can deliver. You can't say fairer than that"

The mixer also allows software control over the audio inputs, so you could actually perform through this box on stage if you so desired. Effects-wise, the 8800 doesn't let you down either.

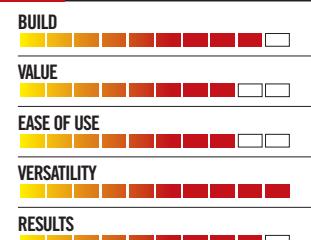
Mastering

The final piece of the puzzle is to convert your tune into a fully-mastered CD. A set of mastering tools is available at this stage, including multiband

from beginning to end, it's not too bold a claim for the MV-8800. There's further room for expansion and my wishlist would include dedicated XLR mic inputs, separate studio and control room outputs and a bigger onboard 'sound module'. This is a professional box that's also great fun and intuitive to use, and in this sense it fulfills perhaps the studio's biggest two requirements: it's inspiring and it can deliver. **FM**

Comprehensive editing facilities and settings make it easy to tailor your sounds

FutureMusic VERDICT



All-singing, all-dancing, all-grooving, all, er, burning... get it all right here!

ALTERNATIVES



Akai MPC4000 Plus
£2,300

Watching these two go head-to-head would be like being in Vegas on a fight night. Another MIDI/Audio monster, also boasting 128 MIDI tracks, sampling resolutions up to 24-bit, and built-in effects processors. Compare specs carefully before choosing.

akaipro.com

Laptop/Sequencer combo from £1,000

The principal other competition could be a hard/soft combination with a computer system running a sequencer. An Apple iBook running Logic Express, for example, plus the purchase of a MIDI/Audio Interface within a controller keyboard would give you another solution for less cash.