



DOMINIC MILANO KEYBOARD REPORT

Casio M-10 & VL-Tone

THIS MONTH WE'RE going to be looking at some instruments that may well be the wave of the future in keyboard technology. Casio, the people who make those credit-card-sized calculators and watches that play "Happy Birthday" to you, also manufacture a line of keyboard instruments, including the Casiotone M-10 and the VL-Tone VL-1. Toys, some of you might say, but they're surprisingly sophisticated toys. They're very compact and quite inexpensive, and they do quite a lot more than you'd expect instruments their size to do.

The Casiotone M-10. The M-10 is small (16½" long, 5¼" deep, and 2" high), weighs only 3 lbs 10 oz, and is completely self-contained. It has a built-in 2" speaker and a 2-1/2-octave keyboard (F to C), and is powered by five size C batteries. Its front panel isn't very complicated. It has three slide controls and an on/off switch. The first slider is a vibrato on/off switch. The second lets you select which of four sounds you want to play. And the third is a volume slider. The four preset sounds you get are called piano, violin, flute, and organ. These aren't especially realistic, but you should probably consider that they're only vaguely descriptive titles tacked onto sounds that were economical to generate. Within their limitations, the sounds are quite pleasing.

The keyboard itself has an organ-like action. It's made up of smaller-than-normal keys, and it takes some getting used to to play accurately. If you're accustomed to being able to span a tenth comfortably, you'll be able to span a twelfth with no problem on the M-10. That makes this keyboard really nice for children. The M-10 is polyphonic — you can play up to eight notes at once. If you hold more than eight keys down, the extra keys won't sound at all.

In addition to the unit's built-in speaker, there's an output jack for running it into an external amp. Unfortunately, this is a minijack, so if you're going to run it into an instrument amplifier, you'll need an adapter or a special patch cord. There's also a jack for connecting the M-10 to an AC adapter in case you get tired of running up big bills for size C batteries. That brings up the question of how long the batteries will last. The answer, of course, is that it depends on how much you use them, and whether you forget and leave the instrument switched on. The unit we have has had the same batteries in it for about six months, and they show no sign of dying yet.

The VL-Tone VL-1. The VL-1 is astoundingly small. It measures 11¾" long, 3" wide, and 1¾" high, and it weighs less than 1 lb. Like the M-10, it has its own built-in 2" speaker and runs on batteries (four size AA). Despite its size, it does much more than the M-10, but its front panel is correspondingly more complex. The VL-Tone has a 2-1/3 octave monophonic keyboard, G to B. It also incorporates a monophonic sequencer that will play back up to 100 notes. It has a built-in rhythm machine, and it even functions as a calculator! The keyboard isn't really a proper keyboard, but rather tiny calculator-type buttons arranged in the shape of a keyboard. The black keys are even slightly raised com-



The M-10 (top) and VL-Tone.

pared with the white keys, just as you'd expect. And while the keys on the M-10 are small, it's easy to span more than the whole keyboard of the VL-10 with one hand.

The Controls. There are five sliders, two of which are continuous pots and three of which are switches. The first is a volume control, the second lets you adjust the balance between the rhythm and the melody being played, the third is an octave switch with a 3-octave range, the fourth lets you choose between six different sounds, and the fifth turns the instrument off or puts it into play mode or record mode or activates the calculator function. The sounds you can choose from are piano, violin, flute, guitar, fantasy (which has some fuzz-box-like overtones), and one that's called ADSR, which means that you can adjust the envelope shape by using the numbers related to the calculator function. These sounds, like those on the M-10, are much like organ voices.

In addition to the slider controls, there are ten switches which do a variety of things. The first of these serves two purposes: to reset or stop the sequencer function, and to reset the power. The instrument has a power-off function that goes into effect six minutes after it hasn't been played if the power is left on. This is really nice in case you happen to leave it on — your batteries won't wear out. The next switch deletes or changes notes in the sequence. The next two switches are used to change the tempo of the rhythm machine and the sequence playback.

The next switch in line turns on the rhythm machine function. After this switch is pressed the keys on the keyboard become selector switches for the rhythm machine, and you can choose between march, waltz, 4-beat, swing, rock-1, rock-2, bossa nova, samba, rumba, and beguine. The rhythm sounds are all made up of the same three elements — a burst of "cymbal" white noise and two G's, one an octave higher than the other. It sounds like a limited version of the kind of rhythm unit found on a typical home organ.

Next to the rhythm switch is a switch that clears out the melody from the sequencer's memory, so you can start with a clean slate for whatever melody you want to record. The next switch is for calling up the demo that Casio loads into each VL-Tone. It's a simple little German folk song, which will drive you up the wall after a

while. This built-in sequence does all kind of neat things you can't do with the instrument in your own sequences, like change sounds, change rhythms, and change octaves, all in mid-tune.

And then we come to the switch that lets you cue up the sequence or melody you've stored in memory. You can also play through the sequence more than once without stopping, or step through the notes in the sequence one at a time. You can even break into the sequence and add more notes if you want to, as well as play back your sequence in any desired rhythm by hitting the One Key Play button in that rhythm to step through the sequence. While a sequence is playing, or before you start it, you can turn on the rhythm machine and have that accompany the sequencer. While the sequence is being played through, you can change timbre and speed it up or slow it down. The instrument is extremely versatile for being so small. About the only thing you can't get it to do is store rhythms along with the melody in the sequencer.

The last functions we'll get into are the ADSR sound and the LCD (liquid crystal display). The display is used when the VL-1 is functioning as a calculator, but it also shows you numerically which notes are being played at any given time. When you're changing the tempo of the rhythm machine or the playback of the sequencer, the LCD shows you what the speed is. The ADSR function allows you to choose a waveshape and define the envelope of your own sound by using the keys in their calculator mode to input numbers. You have ten waveshapes available, called piano, fantasy, violin, flute, guitar 1, guitar 2, English horn, electro-sound 1, electro-sound 2, and electro-sound 3. These names are all Casio gives as a description of their waveforms, but given their anticipated audience, this is understandable. The last two digits you input will control the amount of vibrato and tremolo that the sound will have.

Of course, the unit has a built-in calculator with the normal functions, but that's not the focus of this review. The system comes with a nice little plastic case, an output jack (again it's a minijack), and an input for an AC adapter. You can adjust the overall tuning via a trim pot on the back panel.

Conclusions. Everybody around the office will testify that these instruments are fun to play. The M-10, being polyphonic, might also be a useful tool to those of you who are spending a lot of time on the road, without the luxury of having some kind of keyboard to noodle on in your hotel room. Or it might come in handy for serenading your lover while you're dining with the ants in the middle of a tropical rain forest. And if you're looking for a musical gift for your three-year-old, a Casio keyboard might be just the thing. The M-10 lists for \$199.00 and the VL-1 for \$69.95, but if you shop around, you may be able to find them for less. Unless you're heavily into new wave minimalist theatre rock, you aren't likely to find yourself relying on either of them as the mainstay of your stage act, but they do make clever additions to overly serious high-tech keyboard setups. ■