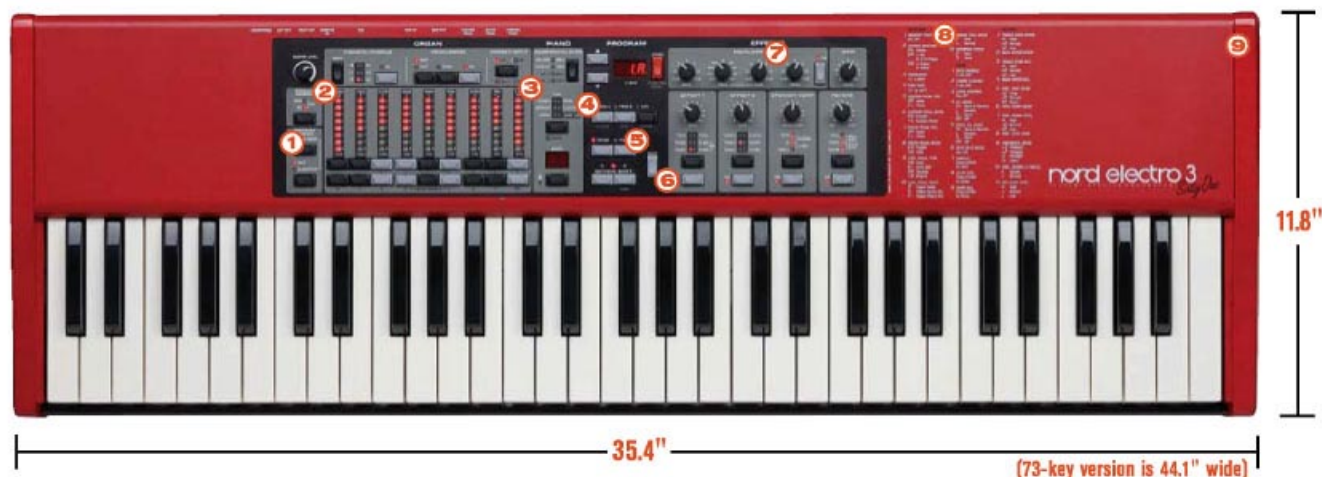




CLAVIA NORD ELECTRO 3

Vintage Keys Specialist Becomes Versatile Gig Workhorse

by Eric Lawson



The original Nord Electro and Electro 2 (reviewed Dec. '01 and Nov. '03, respectively) brought keyboardists a new concept: a focused batch of vintage keyboards in an incredibly small, light, fire-engine red package. Specs-wise, the Nord Electro 3 (from here on, NE3 for short) covers similar ground to the Nord Stage. While it doesn't have the Stage's virtual analog synth section, it does add some load-your-own-sounds ability. Should you make the NE3 your central axe for organ, vintage keys, piano, and other staple sounds? Does the NE3 give Nord Electro 2 owners a big incentive to upgrade? Let's find out.

SOUNDS

I played the NE3 alongside my trusty Electro 2 and Nord Stage EX for direct comparison, using ADAM A7 speakers as well as a vintage Leslie 122 with Speakeasy tube preamp. Sounds on the NE3 are grouped into two main modes, and the

NE3 can be in one mode or the other: Organ (modeled tonewheel, Vox, and Farfisa) or "Piano" (covering acoustic piano, Rhodes, Wurly, Clav/harpsichord, and CP80 electric grand). The Piano section also has a slot called "Sample Library" for calling up your own sample-based sounds or sounds from Nord's free online sound library – more on this on page 53. **Organ.** According to Nord, the tonewheel organ (meaning B-3) sound is an enhanced version of that of the dual-manual C1 (reviewed May '07). Where the C1 has a bass part for jazzers who want to plug in MIDI bass pedals; the NE3 has upper and lower manual parts only. That said, the NE3's organ section is more tweakable, starting with the choice of clean tonewheels or three flavors of vintage. Want over-the-top leakage and grunge? The third vintage setting has it. Overall, the sound quality is definitely more airy and spacious – the NE2 has a boxy, almost phasey character compared to the

PROS

Exceptional drawbar organ sounds. Best-in-class electric pianos and Clav. Ability to load user samples, which are saved even with power off. Well-stocked, high-quality sound library online, including smorgasbord of Mellotron sounds. Acoustic piano sounds are vastly improved over Electro 2.

CONS

Limited onboard control over Sample Library sounds. Not multitimbral, other than dual organ manuals and playing of pre-mapped splits. Keyboard doesn't have adjustable velocity curves.

INFO

73 keys: \$2,499 list/approx. \$2,199 street; 61 keys: \$2,250 list/approx. \$1,899 street, www.nordkeyboards.com

NE3. The virtual tonewheels now sound more muscular, with more presence and balls. The same holds true for the onboard

HANDS-ON

- ① On the Electro 2, rotary simulation buttons were in the center. Now they're on the left where they belong.
- ② You get new Vox and Farfisa organ models, along with new amp simulations and compressor effects.
- ③ The familiar "drawbuttons" are easier than they look for performing realtime drawbar moves.
- ④ Patch and sound selection has all been moved to the center of the panel, with a minimalist approach.
- ⑤ Organ and Piano are the main modes – here, Piano is an umbrella term covering all non-organ keyboard sounds as well as the new Sample Library.
- ⑥ The Shift button plays a larger role on the Electro 3 than on its predecessor, especially for stepping through Sample Library patches.
- ⑦ Effects controls are spaced more widely than on the Electro 2, making them easier to grab for tweaking.
- ⑧ Important setting menus are silkscreened right on the top panel, which means less digging into the manual.
- ⑨ Body has same look and feel as Electro 2, but is more squared-off and even lighter.

rotary simulator, which has a more defined sense of rotation, not to mention speed and acceleration fine-tuning not available in prior Nord's. Disabling the sim and running through my real Leslie delivered outstanding results, with raw tone edging out the older NE2 and Stage organ sounds. Harmonic percussion is both more editable and better-sounding than the NE2's, with a great clunky

character across the full key range.

The new Vox and Farfisa combo organ models (sourced from the Stage) are every bit as tweezy and cheesy as the real thing. If you need to cop Elvis Costello, Doors, or Smash Mouth tunes, you're in the right place!

Acoustic Piano. All sounds from the Nord Stage are compatible with the NE3, and what comes pre-loaded is *far* superior to the NE2 piano sound. I couldn't hear or feel any differences when I played the NE3's piano sounds from the weighted Stage EX keyboard action. I'd never have used my NE2 for my main gig piano sound, but I'd sure use the NE3!

Vintage Keys. I tested the Rhodes, Wurly, CP80 and Clav sounds in the NE3 and was pleased to find that they are very similar to, maybe even slightly improved over, the NE2. The electric pianos have the same key-off samples as the Stage, and I could discern no audible differences in the Clav sounds, which have a different editing console than the NE2, but the same options to emulate the pickup and tone switch settings of a vintage Hohner D6.

Sample Library. This capability is shared with the Nord Wave (reviewed Mar. '08). The NE3 comes loaded with over 24 factory sounds including strings, mallets, and an officially-authorized plethora of authentic Mellotron sounds. Nord's website has additional sounds for free. I launched the Nord Sample Editor software (see Figure 1 below) to try loading my own samples into

NEED TO KNOW

Keyboard feel: Same pummel-worthy action as Electro 2, with true waterfall keys. Slightly sprung tightness feels great for organ, Clav and Wurly, but less than ideal for piano.

How does it make sounds? Modeled B-3 and combo organ sounds, sample-playback for everything else.

Can I load my own sounds? The Electro 3 isn't a full-blown sampler, but you can load and tweak WAV files in the Nord Sample Editor software, then put them in the Electro 3.

What's new compared to the Electro 2? Improved tonewheel organ sounds, Vox and Farfisa, expanded memory, ability to load Nord Stage piano sounds, reverb and amp sims in effects section.

Can it do splits or layers? You get an upper/lower manual split in organ mode, but no bass pedal part. You can play splits that were created in the Sample Manager. Otherwise, it's not multitimbral.

Why get the Electro 3 instead of another keyboard? Most dedicated clonewheel organs don't have electric piano and other non-organ sounds of this quality; and most general-purpose keyboards don't have organ simulation anywhere near this good.

What if I only care about organs? The Electro 2 still stands up well next to the current crop of clonewheel organs. The Electro 3 takes it up a notch, using the same organ engine as the Nord C1, with more editing options.

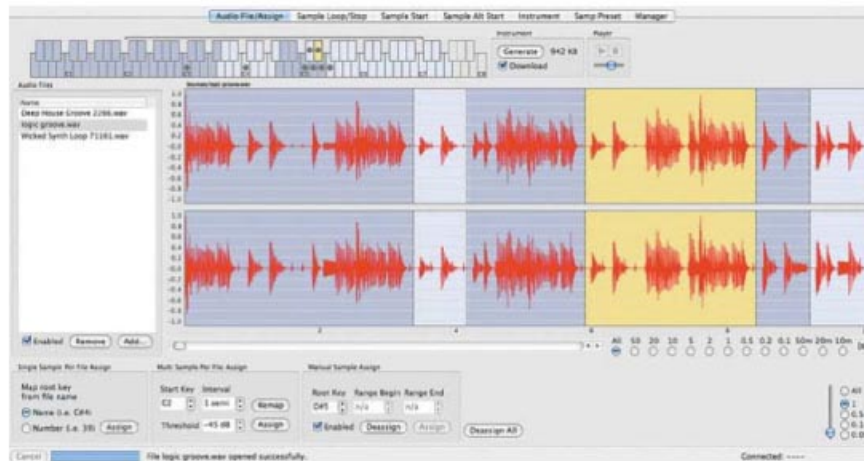


Fig. 1. Once you load, loop, and map your samples in the Nord Sample Manager software, click the Generate button to port the multisample to the Electro 3's next open Sample Library slot. You get 68MB of non-volatile flash RAM for loading user samples and/or sounds from the Nord's online Sample Library. Using the separate Electro 3 Manager app, you can load acoustic pianos and other sounds from Nord's separate Piano Library, also online. For this, you get 165MB more flash RAM.

the NE3. The sample import process is simple, and getting edited sounds from the software into the NE3's flash RAM (which retains sounds even with the power off) is seamless. Though the NE3 isn't multitimbral in the usual sense of playing multiple sounds at once, you can map different samples to different key zones in the Sample Manager app – the NE3 will treat the results as a single "patch" once you dump it in. I easily grabbed samples from my usual gig keyboard (a Yamaha S90) and created complex splits for the Who's "Baba O'Riley," an oft-requested song in one of my bands. You can't split the keyboard with Organ mode on one side and Piano or sample-based mode on the other, though. How about layers? You'd have to sample a sound that was layered already.

Onboard tweaking of Sample Library sounds is a bit limited. There's a basic envelope with fast and slow attack options (think piano-like vs. pad-like) and three release settings: short, medium, and long. Like all the NE3's sounds, those residing in the Sample library don't respond to MIDI pitchbend or modulation messages.

Sample loading with the NE3 is way cool, but does take a little time and preparation to achieve good results. I was refreshed by the possibilities I saw. They make the Electro 3 quite versatile, and are something that owners of prior Electros have been requesting for years.

ONSTAGE

The NE3 was my gig partner for an '80s cover band jam session and a gig with my usual funk and soul revue, Souler Coaster. The first thing I noticed was the improved output level – much hotter than the NE2. Weak output signal had been a grievance of NE2 owners.

I was a little bummed to find no adjustments for velocity sensitivity, which had been a feature of the NE2. Nord says they're trying to achieve a perfect velocity response with only one setting, but keyboardists should have a choice here, as we all have different playing techniques. That said, the default velocity worked well for



Fig. 2. The rear panel includes a 1/8" input for an MP3 player, routed to the headphone output for when you're learning tunes. At your option, the Electro 3 can send organ to the left main output and non-organ sounds to the right, so you can use a real rotary speaker on organ while everything else goes straight to your mixer.

me; perhaps it was too easy to get loud and bright, but this is better than the opposite situation where it's difficult to hit maximum velocities.

The new Sample Library sounds proved to be haunting, musical, and expressive. Some are so compelling as to give the NE3 a distinctive new voice. Others make the NE3 a great stand-in for ROMpler-type duties. For example, the marimba and vibes from the Nord Sample Library are spot-on, and the Melodica sample let me pull off Chaka Khan's "I Feel For You," a song that previously required me to carry my NE2 plus another keyboard to play the signature harmonica lead.

Getting more into the user interface, I discovered that it takes a little time and practice to change Sample Library sounds with its patch buttons. This isn't a problem when using the stock organ and vintage sounds, but it's more noticeable when you work the Sample Library hard and press the NE3 into service as a ROMpler replacement. I wish Nord had kept the NE2's eight patch buttons per bank, or put more than a simple numeric LED display on the NE3, or both. On the plus side, the Live button is totally cool – tweak one sound while playing, and your edits will remain "under" the Live button, even with the NE3 powered off.

EFFECTS

Amp models and reverb are new for the NE3, and are essentially identical to the Stage's effects section, minus its delay. Most of the other effects are lifted from the NE2, including that phaser that's great for the "Minute by Minute" or "Babylon Sisters" Rhodes, and the "bomp-chicka-wow-wow" auto-wah that responds to velocity and doesn't require a control pedal. My

main beef here was that rather than a knob, the effects have three fixed depths, which you step through with a button. Given the quality of the effects, this wasn't a detriment to the sound quality. To nitpick, the rotary simulation is tied to only one amp model, so you can't experiment with Leslyfying other amp types.

CONCLUSIONS

Is the NE3 revolutionary or evolutionary? It's a bit of both. The NE3 is in essence, a mini rendition of the Nord Stage, only with added, sample-based "gravy" sounds. The Nord Stage is akin to a BMW 7-series while the NE3 is like the 3-series. Both will take you to the destination with style and power, though the big 7 undeniably has more bells and whistles. However, it's easier to park a 3-series, just as it's easier to carry the 15-pound NE3 (a hair over 18 pounds if you get the 73-key version) to the gig.

While the NE's price is well above entry-level, it's similar to the prices of its predecessors when they first hit the stores. Let's consider its value: Deciding who does the best B-3 emulation would require a separate article, but the NE3 easily sits in the dedicated-clonewheel honors class. Its competing classmates, though, don't pack enough excellent non-organ sounds to be the general-purpose gig machine the NE3 can be. Likewise, ROMplers and workstations that do offer such sounds tend not to have modeled drawbar organ modes at all.

The Nord Electro 3 could be your only organ, your only acoustic piano, electric piano, and Clav source, and your well of gig essentials such as strings, pads, and "straight" comping synths. That makes it unique and flexible enough to merit a Key Buy. [K]