

KEYBOARD REPORT

YAMAHA MDF1 MIDI DATA DISK DRIVE

By Jim Aikin

NOW THAT WE'RE ALL DROWNING IN the infinite sea of MIDI data, storing the stuff is becoming a high priority. In particular, most instruments these days will send and receive their patch memories in the form of system-exclusive data. If you've got a computer handy, it's easy enough to buy an editor/librarian program, or even a generic sys-ex utility storage program that will work with lots of different instruments. But if you don't want the expense of a computer, or if you don't have room for it in your stage set-up, wouldn't it be nice to have a simple self-contained disk drive that would work with any MIDI instrument?

The folks at Yamaha thought so, because they came up with the MDF1 MIDI data filer. This nifty little device does everything it really needs to do, though it's certainly not packed with fancy extras. At \$350, it's a good deal more economical than its only current competition, the JL Cooper MidiDisk (\$895—see Keyboard Report, Mar. '86), and it has at least one advantage over the Cooper device, in that it will work with any instrument immediately when you get it out of the box. The MidiDisk forces you to buy a separate formatted master disk for each instrument you own, but each disk will hold far more data than an MDF1 disk.

The MDF1 should work with any keyboard or other unit that is capable of initiating its own data dump from a front-panel command. It worked fine with our Casio CZ-1, and Casio's sys-ex format is not entirely standard. If you have any reason to believe that your instrument deals with sys-ex data in a peculiar way, we'd suggest trying the MDF1 before you buy it, just to be on the safe side.

Memory Capacity. The MDF1 uses 2.8" quick disks. We would rather have seen standard 3.5" disks, which hold more and are stocked in more stores. The input buffer will hold up to 60 kilobytes of data, which is large enough for most synthesizer memory dumps, but probably not large enough to store a sequencer dump of any great size, and certainly not large enough for data from most samplers, unless your machine allows you to transmit each sound file individually. Each disk holds 59.9 kilobytes per side, which can be organized into as many as 19 files per side—fewer if the files are large. Each file can contain as many sys-ex messages as you'd like, up to the limit of the input buffer. This is great for doing pseudo-bulk dumps with instruments that can only send each patch as a separate message. It should also allow you to store data for several instruments on one



file to be transmitted with a single command.

Operations. As usual with Yamaha gear, all basic operations for the MDF1 are listed on the top panel. The unit has only a one-digit LED readout, however, which is sort of a bottleneck. Numbers greater than 9 are indicated by a little dot to the right of the digit. One result of having such a small display is that you can't name disk files; they are given numbers automatically by the machine. This means that you'll have to keep a pencil and paper handy for indexing the contents of each disk. Another result is that when the machine asks you to confirm a command, such as copying or deleting files, it uses the same character (sort of a reverse lower-case 'y') to ask for confirmation for several differ-

ent jobs. As long as you remember that Job 3 is 'delete' and Job 4 is 'copy,' this is not a problem, but if you ever forget which one you've selected, you could easily trash valuable data.

In addition to its basic send and receive functions, the MDF1 lets you check its remaining disk space (in 10% increments), slow down the transmission of multiple-message files, copy any selected file to a backup disk, delete a file, or initialize a disk. The 'delete' function always deletes the highest-numbered file on a disk. If you want to delete one of the lower-numbered files, you have to manually copy all the files after it to another disk and then delete everything back to the file you want to get rid of, after which (assuming that you're doing this to organize a disk so that all your patches are on a single disk for performance) you'll have to re-copy the good files from the backup disk back onto the main disk. A lot of unnecessary trouble, it seems to us, when a slightly better designed operating system would have let you delete any file.

Conclusions. The MDF1 should be real easy to use, even if you've never dealt with MIDI sys-ex data before. It's portable and affordable and compatible with just about any instrument, which is all you could ask of a memory expansion device. We do wish its operating system was a bit more friendly, but with a total of only eight possible operations to choose from, how confused can anybody possibly get?

MDF1

Description: MIDI system-exclusive data filing system with built-in disk drive.

Memory: Two-sided 2.8" quick disks. 60 kilobytes per disk side, 59.9 kilobytes of input buffer. Up to 19 data files per disk side.

Interfacing: MIDI in/out/thru, 10V DC power supply in.

Features: Disk formatting, file and disk copying, error detection, user-selectable timing slowdown.

Size: 10" x 4 1/4" x 3"; 2 3/4 lbs.

List Price: \$350.00.

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