



# Elektron Syntakt £849

Elektron's latest groovebox borrows sounds and ideas from various places in the company's product line. **Si Truss** asks if this is more than the sum of its parts

**CONTACT** WHO: Elektron TEL: +44 (0)1447 765765 WEB: [elektron.se](http://elektron.se) **KEY FEATURES** 12-track hybrid groovebox with four analogue tracks, eight digital tracks, plus an analogue effect track and reverb/delay sends



## THE PROS & CONS



Excellent balance of analogue and digital sound sources

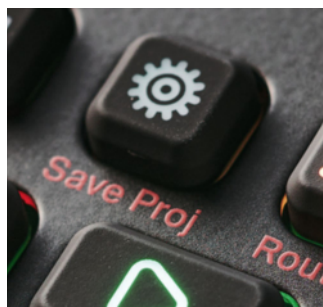
**Percussive synths double up as meaty melodic generators**

Deep sequencing workflow, complemented by Overbridge compatibility



**Limited hardware I/O**

Workflow will likely still take some getting used to, for those new to Elektron gear



In the early 2010s, Elektron were known as a brand responsible exclusively for deep, high-end gear. The likes of Octatrack, Analog Rytm and Analog Four were up there with the best hardware instruments on the market, but prices for each hovered at the £1k mark and you'd need a week to read the manual.

Over the past decade the Swedes have dipped into more affordable territory, right down to Model:Cycles and Model:Samples, each of which can be picked up for under £300.

Arguably, however, the point where Elektron really hit the 'sweet spot' was with the launch of Digitakt, their mid-priced, multi-track sampler. While Digitakt is undeniably more accessible than Elektron's other sampler, Octatrack, it still boasts plenty of the depth and creativity we now associate with Elektron gear. A similarly priced and sized follow-up, Digitone repeated this but with a unique take on FM synthesis.

On the surface, Elektron's latest groovebox Syntakt appears to be a neat third entry into this range. It

comes housed in a chassis that's the same size as both of those instruments, with a control layout almost identical to that of Digitakt. There is certainly a lot that's similar across the trio, particularly when it comes to the sequencing workflow. For all that Elektron gear can take a bit of getting used to – and there are still plenty of eccentricities on show here – prior users of Digitakt and Digitone will find themselves instantly at home with Syntakt's layout/design.

What makes this more than simply a synth-minded version of

Digitakt, though, is that Syntakt sees Elektron returning, at least in part, to analogue sound generation, in contrast to the entirely digital designs of Digitakt and Digitone.

In terms of its sound engine, Syntakt has a lot in common with Elektron's Analog Rytm, not only in its use of analogue percussion synths, but also in the way it uses distinct 'machines' to generate different types of sound.

However, whereas Rytm balances out its analogue elements with sampled hits, Syntakt combines

## THE ALTERNATIVES



### Korg Drumlogue £529

Also blending analogue and digital, Korg's new drum machine is slightly less slick, but it's also cheaper

[korg.com](http://korg.com)



### Elektron Digitakt £849

Syntakt's sample focussed sibling has a similar workflow and form factor, but with a different sonic remit. They pair nicely too

[elektron.se](http://elektron.se)



### Roland TR-8S £590

Roland's drum machine pairs faux-analogue sounds with samples and basic FM percussion, creating a very broad palette

[roland.com](http://roland.com)

analogue synthesis with FM-derived digital generators.

There are 12 tracks in total here, of which four are analogue and eight digital. In all cases, each track can be assigned one of several 'machines', which are effectively base presets specialising in a certain sound type or synthesis style.

The analogue tracks are divided into three drum tracks and one cymbal track. The drum tracks can each make use of a selection of 16 machines, which include a variety of kick drums, snares, rim shots, a pair of tonal synths, and noise and impulse generators. The cymbal track offers 12 machines, covering assorted hat and cymbal types, plus noise and impulse again.

The digital tracks, meanwhile, are identical, with 11 machines covering kicks, snares, cymbals/hats, claps and percussion, plus a selection of five tonal instruments. These digital machines are FM-based, derived from those found in Model:Cycles, albeit adjusted to offer more control over sound shaping and match Syntakt's signal flow.

While each machine is preset-like in its basic setup, each has up to eight adjustable parameters that can be controlled from Syntakt's Synth view. The precise setup of these

changes for each machine, but they generally offer decent depth in order to adjust the tuning, shape and timbral qualities of each sound. Beyond this synth section, each machine follows a broadly similar signal path, first through an overdrive module, then resonant multimode filter and into an amp. Each machine also has its own ADSR envelope to shape the filter cutoff, an envelope – switchable between ADSR and AHS – for the amp, along with two flexible LFOs that can be routed to pretty much any parameter in the signal flow. Modulation can also be routed from external MIDI sources such as velocity, aftertouch and pitchbend.

There are a few small but key differences between analogue and digital tracks. For the former, the machines, overdrive, filter and amp are all analogue, but controlled by digital modulators and accompanied by a digital noise generator. The

digital tracks are end-to-end digital, and add a second base-width filter in before the resonant filter. Every track can also be switched to become a MIDI machine, where the sequencer outputs to external gear rather than sequencing the internal engines.

Although percussion is Syntakt's obvious focus, there's a lot of sonic range available from the full line-up of machines. On the drum side of things, the balance of analogue and FM covers everything from classic xOx-alike tones to modern metallic percs and gritty, noisy hits. The inclusion of multiple types and sources of overdrive is a great touch, and particularly in the case of the analogue machines it means that Syntakt is capable of some brilliantly meaty, saturated drum hits. To point out the obvious, Syntakt's overall sound leans toward the synthetic – don't expect the sort of realism you'd get with a sampling drum machine,

## Overdrive is great; Syntakt is capable of some brilliantly meaty, saturated drum hits

## OVERBRIDGE

Elektron's Overbridge has been around since 2015 and – following a long beta phase and a slow rollout – is now at version 2 and working better than ever. Effectively, Overbridge lets any piece of Elektron gear function as a plugin in your DAW, with full streaming of audio from/to the hardware via USB, along with total recall of all parameters.

From a studio point of view this really adds to the usability, as it lets users individually output every channel, including the effects block, for individual processing, all without affecting any analogue I/O on your audio interface. It also means that almost all of the

synth's parameters can be automated and modulated like any other VST, depending on how your chosen DAW is set up.

Overbridge's interface is nicely designed too. If nothing else it offers a clear and understandable layout of what's going on under the hood of Syntakt.



particularly when it comes to the crisp, metallic cymbals. Within the remit of synthesised percussion though, this is one of the most versatile machines going.

That flexibility reaches into more tonal and melodic realms too. There's plenty of creative fun to be had by ditching the percussion parts entirely and using only the tonal generators to create purely melodic patterns. Used as such, the analogue generators can double as remarkably meaty two-oscillator monosynths, while the digital generators can create chord stabs, crunchy bit-crushed melodies, tuned percussive hits and 'swarms' of six detuned oscillators, which work great for throbbing pads and drones.

Alongside the sounds themselves, Syntakt packs a solid complement of effects. Each track can be sent to reverb and delay auxiliaries, which will be familiar to users of Digitakt and Digitone. While these aren't the most versatile effects out there, each has controls for adjusting the timing, plus filters for shaping the output.

Syntakt also features a separate analogue effects channel, which combines an additional drive circuit with a resonant multimode filter, along with its own envelope-controlled amp section. The effects track also has its own filter envelope and two LFOs routable to any of its parameters. Any of the other tracks can be routed here, and it gets its own virtual output when used with Overbridge [see boxout]. As mentioned, the various sources of drive and distortion are the stars of the show, but it's a well rounded set of happening tools altogether. A master compressor and EQ would be nice, but you won't feel hard done by.

The sequencing workflow is characteristically deep and creative. As with Digitone and Digitakt, the 64-step sequencer boasts full per-step parameter automation, probability and conditional triggers, and plenty of flexibility over playback speed, individual track lengths and step micro-timings.

One thing worth mentioning is Syntakt's Modifiers. These are a pair of modes that let users play any sound combined with up to four preset parameter changes. Essentially these let users trigger multiple alternative versions of each sound. It works particularly nicely for jamming with different chord shapes or bursts of reverb and delay-heavy percussive



**LOOK FAMILIAR?:** Syntakt's size, shape and control layout are almost identical to that of Digitakt, and very close to Digitone too

**SOUND FAMILIAR?:** Sonically, many of the 'machine' presets are based on those previously seen in Analog Rytm and Model:Cycles

**I/O:** Syntakt's rear panel has a pair of main outputs, pair of audio inputs, MIDI in/out/through, USB and a headphone output

**SEQUENCER:** Elektron's sequencing workflow can still be baffling for newcomers, although Digitakt/tone users will feel right at home

FX. Along with these, the sequencer also has retrigger and velocity modifiers, the first of these creates a quick way to generate rolls and fills across four different beat divisions, while the latter lets users quickly trigger four different levels of velocity. Syntakt's effects track has its own sequencer lane too, where users can input triggers for the track's LFO, amp envelope and/or filter envelope, with the same probability controls as the other tracks.

Although Syntakt is an obvious counterpart to Digitakt and Digitone, it's also a bit like a greatest hits for Elektron, with many of the features that made its two siblings so popular but sounds and effects that build on

elements of the Analog Rytm, Model:Cycles and even Analog Heat. Overall, it's possibly the most versatile of the Tone/Takt range, yet it feels like the most immediate and streamlined too – largely because it benefits from inheriting all the sequencing tweaks and refinements that have been added to its counterparts across various firmware updates.

I'd argue its biggest drawback is the lack of analogue outputs, with just two main outs and a headphone output on the rear panel. This leaves no option for individually processing the 12 tracks when used in a purely hardware setup, although Overbridge offers a simple way around this for studio use and laptop performances.

Minor drawbacks aside, Syntakt may just be the best groovebox you'll find for under £1000 right now. **FM**

## FM VERDICT

# 9.6

Building on the successes of multiple other Elektron instruments, Syntakt is a top quality groovebox with a lot of power under the hood