

TRAYNOR K4

STEREO KEYBOARD AMPLIFIER

by Stephen Fortner

Twin 12AX7 tubes for channel 1 live here, and the K4 uses them well. Without lead mode engaged, they warm up your sound but keep it clean.

With two pair of stereo inputs on channel 1, two keyboards can share its tube and lead capabilities.

Voicing control optimizes the center points of bass, mid, and treble knobs for four applications: studio, live, piano, and organ.

It makes sense that Traynor put the XLR mic input on channel 2, which doesn't have tube overdrive.

Channels 1 and 2 have three-band tone controls; channel 3 is EQ-less.



Stereo midrange and tweeter drivers flank a central 12" woofer, which competes with many 15" keyboard amps in terms of volume and bass.

Use channel 3's RCA inputs for an iPod or CD player with your break music, or a piece of DJ equipment.

Traynor? Keyboard amp? Ex-squeeze me? Didn't they make PA heads in, like, the '70s or something? Actually, they've been around since the '60s, and today are a division of Yorkville Sound, known for no-frills, git'er-done gear. One glance at the K4 tells you it's different than this. But does it have what it takes on the inside to compete with more familiar brands? After playing several gigs with the K4, my answer is, "and then some."

OVERVIEW

The K4 handles stereo in a way that's unique among keyboard amps. With its mono-summed woofer but dual midrange and tweeter pairs, it's like a 2.1 monitor system in one box. Stereo inputs for three main channels are right above the speaker grille; a fourth monitor channel (explained below), is around back, along with

the main XLR outputs you'd plug into a PA, a ground lift to reduce buzz (Yes!) and a 1/4" "subwoofer" out that actually carries a full-range mono mix. All inputs are balanced TRS, so you'll get the full benefit of keyboards with balanced outs. The K4 is very compact for a full-sized amp, and schleps surprisingly easily when you heft it by the handles in each side panel.

IN USE

There's no better test for a keyboard amp than a large, loud cover band, so I took the K4 to two bar gigs and two weddings over the course of a month, playing different combinations of a Yamaha CP300 stage piano, Kurzweil K-2000 and Roland Fantom-X workstations, and Clavia Nord Electro 2 and Hammond XK-1 organs. Channel 1's tube circuit had the most audible

Stereo keyboard amplifier with selectable tube signal path.

PROS

Tons of gain. Compact design. Stereo speakers sound great up close. Wide variety of tonal variations, including tube mode that adds just the right edge to vintage patches. Balanced inputs.

CONS

Difficult to get a totally uncolored sound.

\$1,049

Yorkville Sound
www.yorkville.com

VITAL STATS

RATED OUTPUT POWER

300W (200 to woofer, 50 each to midrange and tweeters).

SPEAKERS

12" woofer, 2 x 4.5" midrange drivers, 2 x 2.5" tweeters.

INPUT CHANNELS

4 stereo, fourth channel is not routed to line outputs.

PHYSICAL INPUTS

L/R 1/4" TRS balanced (all channels, 2 pair on ch. 1), XLR mic input (ch. 2 only), stereo RCA (ch. 3 only).

OUTPUTS

Stereo XLR with ground lift, 1/4" TRS balanced mono out, 1/4" stereo headphone out.

POWER SUPPLY

Internal with detachable, standard IEC power cord.

DIMENSIONS/WEIGHT

23.3" W x 19.6" H x 15.5" D; 50 lbs.

effect on more obviously digital sounds like shimmer pads and older piano samples from the Kurzweil, warming them up quite nicely. It also lent an authentic edge — I'm not talking crunch or distortion, yet — to CP300 and Fantom-X electric pianos. To boost gain or add overdrive, "lead mode" uses the tubes by default and has two knobs: "Lead level" boosts the signal above channel 1's main gain knob setting, and "OD trim" increases tube distortion. Some extra lead level was the perfect companion to my old K-2000, which has sounds I just love for soloing, but a weak output compared to my newer synths. Normally, I jack up its amp channel, leaving its own volume fader at about 60 percent so I can floor it when it's solo time. With the K4, I just kicked in lead mode with a footswitch, and my wormy synth solo jumped to the front of our rendition of "Burn Rubber" by the Gap Band. The footswitch isn't included, and you need a clicky, on/off type, not a momentary or sustain pedal.

A little "OD trim" gave just the right trashy, vintage quality to my organ sounds, and was better than simulated overdrive in both the XK-1 and Electro 2. Turn it up some more, and the K4 can get as crunchy and fuzzy as any guitar amp. (I hear the *Guitar Player* editors down the hall taunting, "Oh yeah?") Channel 1's "voicing" knob puts an overall EQ curve on the sound and moves the center frequencies of the tone controls. No two rooms sound alike, but I consistently

CLAIM CHECK

Yorkville's Tim Marshall says, "The heart of the new Traynor keyboard amps is the selectable tube or solid-state input and voicing circuitry on the main input channels. This hybrid input makes the K2 and K4 not merely great keyboard monitor systems, but part of the keyboard player's tone palette as well. The tube drive control can add subtle warmth and fatness to digital synths and samplers that often sound too pristine in a mix, while the voicing circuit tweaks the EQ curve and overall presence for specific instrument patches. In the case of the stereo K4, the tube gain and boost level can be engaged by an optional footswitch and dialed up to add a full-on all-tube overdrive, creating unique lead tones or ultra-fat bass sounds."

PERSONAL TRAYNOR

We also checked out the K4's little brother, the ultra-compact K2 (\$749). While it cuts significant corners — its keyboard inputs, line output, and speakers are mono-only, it retains the tube circuit but lacks full-on lead mode, and has two main channels plus a monitor input — it's also a true three-way system, with 200W driving a separate tweeter, midrange, and 10" woofer. It handled cranked-up synth bass from a Moog Little Phatty without sounding flabby, and did a respectable job of capturing detail in piano sounds from our various 'boards. Can it get loud for its size? The words "pit bull" come to mind.




liked what the piano setting (position 3) did for the Fantom's "Ultimate Grand" preset.

Cool features aside, an amp must put out enough clean volume to hear yourself and project your keyboards' character on a stageful of "amped" musicians. This is where the K4 really brings it. Like a lot of bands, our stage volume rises with our energy and the crowd's, but no matter how loud it got, I never felt the K4 breathing hard. While its master volume was all the way up, channel gains never had to go above 2 o'clock. Our audience was hearing the house PA, but in a smaller combo, I'd have no problem using the K4 as the sole keyboard source in the room.

How about its stereo approach? No single cabinet is going to pump out the sense of space that two properly-placed ones will, and I doubt I could flag the K4 as a stereo amp from 30 feet away. Next to my keyboard rig, it sounded fabulous; worlds different than any amp with stereo inputs but mono speakers. Patches using stereo chorus, delay, and reverb really popped. Not to mention that this is a true three-way amp, and those separate midrange drivers add clarity and detail you don't get from the woofer and tweeter that need to handle the full range in most keyboard amps.

I have one suggestion: Channel 4's routing is fixed, sending signals to the K4's speakers but not its main outs. This is so you, but not the crowd, can hear a click track or monitor send from the house PA. It would be more flexible if, like on Roland's KC-550, you had main outs and headphones-only options as well.

CONCLUSIONS

Keyboard players tend to have pretty vanilla criteria for amps, such as lots of inputs and plenty of power. The K4 solidly delivers these, then goes beyond to create the keyboard equivalent of a guitarist's relationship with their rig: It's fun, sexy, and just as much a part of your tone as your instrument itself. It's not afraid to let you color the sound in musically pleasing ways, or even extreme ones if you want. This can make it hard to get a totally "reference" sound — I wouldn't choose the K4 for a solo piano performance with Synthogy Ivory, for example. For any gig where booty might shake or lighters might wave, though, it's my new favorite. 

Stephen Fortner is heading into his 11th year as keyboardist of Area 51, a funk and soul revue based in Santa Barbara, California. Their guitar player constantly inspires his quest for great keyboard amps.