

MT Reviews

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Excellence
10/10
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££\$
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NOVATION Bass Station II

20 years after the original, **Andy Jones** meets an update to one of his first synth dates. Is she marriage material? Time to buy a hat...

Details

Price **£399**
Contact **Novation +44 1494 462246**
Web
www.novationmusic.com

Key Features

- Analogue signal path, digitally controlled
- 2 filters: Classic and Acid
- 70 patches, 58 user patches
- 32-step sequencer & arpeggiator
- 6 sound sources

Allow a little indulgence please. Twenty years ago, a younger me was starting out on music technology magazines. It was a time when people danced to repetitive beats and bleeps in fields; music made by people with ancient Roland gear, notably a TB-303 for bass and TR-808 or 909 for beats. This gear consequently became very expensive. Other manufacturers saw an opportunity (not Roland, bizarrely) and what started as a trickle became a wave of new gear specifically tailored for those repetitive beats, bleeps and bass lines.

One of the first such releases was the Novation Bass Station. I remember joining a magazine just after it had reviewed it – a glowing review which compared it favourably to those early acid machines. This angered ‘proper’ 303 owners, who said it sounded nothing like them. (And you thought it was all Happy pills and smiling faces back then. Oh no, there was a lot of filter-based anger in home studios of

the time.) But even though it didn’t quite re-create the tones of the 303, the original Bass Station became a classic in its own right. A software version came out and did well, but music changed and the synth was phased out, to become just one in what is now a long lineage of Novation models.

/// The timing seems right for a **new Bass Station** – and it’s not just the old one repackaged ///

So 20 years on and I find myself on another music technology magazine reviewing Bass Station II, an analogue-based monophonic and monotimbral synth. It’s like the last couple of decades haven’t happened, or we’re in some kind of reverse-based music technology time-loop thing. What? You mean people used to make music using

software instruments? Crazy! And next month I’ll be looking at the latest steam-powered piano...

Future past future, er...

Yes, proper analogue synths really are the ‘in thing’ at the moment. But does this resurgence in classic synth hardware mean that the computer music revolution has faltered? Are people sick of software? Well, the folk at Novation have certainly been getting a message like that and told us a few months back that one of the reasons that Bass Station II is coming is because people really do like knobs (stop laughing at the back – you’re better than that) and that they are just not getting this hands-on control from computer-based plug-ins (and iPads/Pods for that matter).

And then there’s dance music. Has it really changed that much over 20 years? Sure, it’s become a bit slicker, a bit dirtier in places, but the emphasis is still very much on the beats (repetitive or not) and the bass. So the timing does seem right for a new Bass Station, and it’s not just the old one repackaged: it comes with extra dirt and – can any 303 owners calm down now please – it also comes with added acid...

Second date

So that’s the reasoning, and now here it is. Actually, this isn’t the first time I’ve laid my hands on one as we first encountered the Bass Station II at Novation’s HQ some months ago – a then unfinished prototype, but broadly similar to the finished item I have in my hands today.

Bass Station II’s an analogue synth in that its audio path is analogue but under digital control. It has two primary oscillators, a sub (locked to and always one or two octaves below the first) plus three other sources: noise, ring mod and an external input. A simple mixer section lets you adjust the levels of the first three with individual rotary

controls, while a switch enables you to select one of the latter three to be adjusted by a fourth rotary. The sub has its own octave and waveform section while the two primary oscillators can be switched between to adjust their waveforms and tuning.


Both oscillators' pitches can be modulated by LFO1, which has four waveforms, a Speed and Delay selector, plus a Depth rotary. They can also be modulated by a Modulation Envelope (ADSR sliders), the depth of which is controlled by another rotary. Both of these options tend to give you pitch effects from anything such as vibrato (subtle adjustments to LFO1 will give

a pretty impressive Hoover-like sound from scratch. Press Save and that's preset number 71 in the clip!

Lastly in the oscillator section is Osc Sync, which allows you to make the waveform from the first oscillator retrigger oscillator 2's waveform before its cycle is complete. This can produce interesting sideways-types of effects that can add brashness to a sound, in my case it was a bit more pitchy edge.

You turn this on, by the way, using one of Bass Station II's On-Keys, whereby each of its playing keys is assigned another function that you access by holding the Function key. Osc Sync, for example, is the upper D on the

Alternatives
 Funnily enough, another synth I reviewed recently, the Moog Sub Phatty (£849), has a very similar architecture to Bass Station II, right down to the distortion circuit. You do pay more for the Moog by some measure, but consider it the polite and great-sounding parent of the rude young kid that is the Bass Station II. I'll be getting them together in some kind of 'bass off' in a couple of months.



/// Bases are rich, punchy, fat and varied and the leads tear through where they should ///

you this) to more dramatic movement over a longer period with the Modulation Envelope.

The Pulse Width rotary comes into its own when either of the primary oscillators is set to square or pulse waves and controls the width of that cycle. Again, this can be modulated by the Mod Envelope, manually or with the second LFO. Experimenting with this can result in edgy and very big sounds, with the Mod Envelope especially taking a dramatic role. Indeed, by exploring this section I found I'd created

keyboard, so switch it on by holding down Function, pressing upper D, then the right arrow below the screen to nudge the value from Off to On. Easy.

The acid effect

Phew, so that's the oscillators – a lot to say for a little synth. Moving over to the Filter section, and whatever you have summed together from your various sources (the two main oscillators, sub, external, noise and ring mod) now streams through the filter – and this is where things get very interesting.



Firstly, you have a choice of Classic or Acid filters. The former is variable, so the slope can be adjusted between 12 and 24dB and the type adjusted between low-, band- or high-pass. The Acid filter, however, is a fixed 4-pole low-pass based on diode ladder types 'found in various synths popular in the 1980s', according to the manual. We're pretty sure they mean the aforementioned Roland TB-303, as you get splashes of its acid-like squealing across presets, but more on these later.

The big Frequency dial is one you will return to for massive and dramatic sonic changes, while the Resonance dial also does its thing, enhancing or reducing frequencies around that set

The 25 full-size keys are velocity-sensitive with assignable aftertouch.

MT Navigation Up-close and personal

a FUNCTION BUTTON
 Hit the Function button and the synth's actual note keys enable you to access other functions.

b ADSR
 The Amp, Mod and Amp/Mod Envelope is a typical ADSR set of sliders.

c OSCILLATORS
 Two primary, one sub, noise, ring mod and external input are your sources.



d FILTERS
 Acid and Classic mean that Bass Station II has a great variety of big, quality sounds.

e LFOs
 LFO 1 modulates pitch while 2 concentrates on frequency.

→ by the Frequency dial. It adds growl and a lot of edge to whatever sounds you are working with.

Like the Pulse Width, the frequency can be modulated by both LFO2 and the Modulation Envelope. So think of Bass Station 2's modulation possibilities simply as: LFO1 and the Modulation Envelope control the oscillators, while the ME and LFO2 control the frequency (in Classic mode). It's perhaps a little simplistic but you get why the Mod Envelope is so important – it has a hand modulating three important components in the synth's architecture.

You dirty boy

By now the sound I've been accidentally creating as I work through the synth is taking on a life of its own and I'm



MIDI I/O and USB connectivity enable Bass Station II to be connected to your music software as well as MIDI-compatible hardware.

sounds, and often each comes with a lot of movement thanks to the onboard arpeggiator. Indeed, the combination of arpeggiator and the extra layers the distortion and sub-oscillator offer can make you feel you are wrestling with more than one note, but monophonic this definitely is – it's just that the 'mono' is very big.

So there's already a lot more happening here than there was in our first face-to-face demo those few

because the presets you do get are so surprisingly varied that you wonder why more weren't included to show off what Bass Station II can do. I suspect, though, that those 56 extras will easily be filled either by owners (I've added to mine already, it's so easy), third parties or Novation itself. Still, the trip through what is on offer was one of the most enjoyable I've had – short, yes, but a more melodramatic me might say 'high-octane'...

What the Bass Station II is designed to do it does exceptionally well, but do remember that it is a narrowly focused synth in the grand scheme of things. Soft synths can, and do, do everything, but this is analogue, pure and simple. It unashamedly harks back to those fields within the M25 back in 1989, and sometimes steams right up-to-date, nodding its blue hat to dubstep. The focus, then, is squarely on electronica and dance music (old and new). No big pads or digital textures, no polyphony, no chords, no 'real' sounds or emulations, just pure, ferocious, proper analogue synth sounds. Just the sound of the circuit at its raw, dirty, animal-like best. And at just £399.99 – a mere £50 more than the original cost on its release two decades ago – it's stunning, simple as that. **MT**

The full potential of the Bass Station II is way bigger than you might initially think

starting to truly believe I'm some kind of analogue synth genius – a slightly less good-looking Jean Michel Jarre, perhaps. Anyway, my sound is huge; it's fat and it's very dirty. What do I need now? Overdrive!

Yep, just in case you need it, Bass Station II's signal path encounters an overdrive circuit that determines the amount of distortion you can add (it actually comes in pre-filter). The Distortion rotary sits next to another Filter Modulation effect just in case you haven't already whipped your poor sound to within an inch of its life. I hold back adding too much of either effect at this stage but it certainly didn't stop Novation's programmers...

On my sonic journey through Bass Station II's features I'm quickly realising that the full potential of the synth is way bigger than you might initially think, especially given its small size and fairly simple architecture. I've already created what I think are a couple of amazing sounds, but let's move on to what the professionals have done...

More than bass

What you might expect the synth to do well – basses and leads – are indeed a focus, but within those confines the programmers have pushed the limits in all sorts of directions. So while the box might be marked 'bass', it's a box that is absolutely chock-full with brash

months ago. The sound designers have clearly put a lot of effort into what goes where, and while there aren't banks of specific sounds together – leads, subs and so on – this means you are constantly surprised and, in the main, impressed. Indeed, there are only two presets that didn't do it for me. The basses are rich, punchy, fat and varied and the leads tear through where they should. Plenty of the sounds have that added arpeggiation, so you get rich, melodic ideas almost instantly and you are constantly drawn to that big Filter knob for even more instant frequency action. It becomes almost a performance pose: left hand playing riff, right hand dramatically nudging the Filter knob.

Alongside the basses and leads, analogue synthesis is able to create other types of sound, and the Novation team has excelled here, too. So there are occasional vocoder-like presets and plenty of bleepy analogue percussion sounds: claps, snares, kicks etc. Get to the top end of the presets and they start to take a turn to the dark side, with more in-your-face distortion.

The manual states 64 patches (plus 64 user) but mine ran to 70, which Novation has confirmed is the true number shipping with the keyboard. Either way, the journey through them finished rather too quickly and I was left wanting more. That's possibly

MT Verdict

- + Rich, deep and painful(!) sounds
- + Great drive and dirt
- + Solid construction
- + Acid filter adds punch
- + Lovely layout for performing
- + Sequencer and arpeggiator also great for performance

- Could've done with more presets
- Er, the power lead isn't very long

Bass Station II is an exceptional synth. For £399 you could buy a couple of high-end synth plug-ins. Don't. Buy this instead.

10/10

Method Spot

The Bass Station II really does come alive when you engage the arpeggiator, which has all of the features and patterns you will want as well as control over tempo. It has a bank of 32 increasingly complex arp sequences that are selected with the Rhythm control, and you can easily adjust both octave and swing. A really useful performance or ideas feature is the onboard sequencer. You can store four banks of 32 notes (retained on power-off) so can jot down ideas when you are on your own doodling, or trigger melodies when showing off to friends.