

ByteNoise

How to Sound Like Vangelis

Vangelis is one of the few synthesiser players who plays his instrument expressively, infusing his performances with real emotion. Here are a few tips on how to emulate his style and sound.

Symphony to the Powers B, Movement 3 (The Cosmos theme)

This piece of music brilliantly demonstrates how synthesisers can add depth to what surely must have started life as a piano solo. Vangelis starts this one off soft and gentle, then spends the whole track building to a climax of awe inspiring beauty.

The "trick" here, as much as it can be called that, is not to sit down and try to work out a kind of sound you want to achieve, but rather to write a beautiful piano solo and then embellish it with synthesisers later on.

Alpha

As with the last track, the whole song's a big, repeating crescendo that keeps on having stuff added to it and building up and up and up, only this time it's even more epic sounding. Again, the focus is on the expressive performance of a melody, and the diverse sounds provided by the synthesisers are merely used to add to this, not as a starting point. This is emotional

music played on a synthesiser, rather than synthesiser music as an end in itself.

Blade Runner's Main Titles

Listening to Main Titles from Vangelis's Blade Runner soundtrack, it's easy to hear that it's emotive and expressive, a really atmospheric piece. What may not be so obvious is how this effect is achieved. Most of the magic seems to be in the lead synth line, which is played with a level of expression is usually reserved for wind instruments.

There are some excellent covers¹ of this piece of music on the Internet, not to mention tutorials² on how to create the lead sound. What becomes apparent while watching these is that the wonderfully expressive signature sound isn't achieved by using some specific piece of elusive hardware such as Vangelis's Yamaha CS-80. Other people have achieved similar sounds with much more basic, and hence much cheaper, synthesisers. Pretty much any synth with a mod wheel or expression pedal is good enough for this. I found SubTractor to be completely adequate.

Admittedly, this is an offshoot of something I've talked about previously, namely how it can be easy for someone — especially a producer of electronic music — to trick themselves into thinking that she could make better music if only she had some coveted holy grail tool to do the job with, whereas in reality she could make better music if only she practiced.

For the lead sound in this particular piece of music, the trick is to make the patch expressive. You can do this by wiring up something that you can control at the same time as playing the

keyboard, such as the mod wheel or expression pedal, to the filter's cutoff point. As anyone who's used a subtractive synthesiser probably already knows, this changes how bright or dull the synthesiser sounds, like opening and closing a door. The trick is to create a patch where having the mod wheel held all the way down, or having the pedal untouched, will make the sound so dull that it's completely silent, and turning the wheel all the way up, or pressing the pedal all the way down, will make it pretty bright.

The rest of the patch isn't so important, so I simply went with two sawtooth oscillators tuned three cents down and three cents up to get a nice fattening effect. The attenuator isn't needed, so maximum sustain and minimum everything else on its envelope generator is just fine.

The trick is to keep the mod wheel all the way down whenever you start or stop playing a note, so the very beginning and end are silent. As you move the mod wheel up, then down again, the sound fades in from silence to a dull murmur, then to a full, bright sound, then back to a dull murmur again before returning to nothing. By experimenting a bit with how you use the mod wheel, you can get some nice, expressive sounds out of such a patch.

Incidentally, if you play a low, bassy A using this patch, you get the sound used in The Dust Brothers's Stealing Fat, on the Fight Club soundtrack.

Another key part of that atmospheric sound is to use the pitch wheel to decrease the pitch at the very end of the last note in a melodic phrase. Another staple of ambient music is reverb, so as always, make sure you drown it in that. I think the idea is that it sounds like the doppler shift of, say, the lonely call of a bird

flying away from you, its voice echoing off canyon walls.

With that, you're all set!

Memories of Green

The "drunk piano" sound in Memories of Green is much simpler: just run your piano recording or sampler through a chorus effect. You may need to play around a little bit to get the effect just right. Keep it nice and subtle.

Conclusion

What's crazy about the music industry, as countless library albums can attest to, is the fact that lead sheets and patches can be copyrighted but soundscapes can't. So feel free to go ahead and use these tips in your latest tracks, as long as you write your own melodies. The only practical reasons not to at least experiment with these techniques is a Trevor Horn-esque fetish for quantisation.

So in short, it doesn't matter which hardware you use. Find a decent emulation or sample of an acoustic piano, and a synthesiser that lets you use the mod wheel or a foot pedal to change its brightness as you play it, and you're set. Pretty much any modern hardware can do these things, as several YouTube videos attest to. Vangelis's sound is achieved through his expressive style of playing, not through expensive technology. So if you want to start making music like his, it's time to start practicing your scales on the piano.

Summary

To summarise, there are a few basic steps to sounding like Vangelis:

1. Learn to play the keyboard properly. This is pretty straightforward, but will likely take about ten years if the ten thousand hour rule popularised by Malcolm Gladwell in his book *Outliers* is to be believed. To achieve this, all you need is a good teacher or video, pretty much any keyboard of a comfortable size and decent amount of octaves, and roughly ten years.
2. Buy some keyboards. They don't need to be particularly good, they just need to have a good few octaves, velocity sensitivity, a mod wheel, and a half decent sound. A fairly cheap controller keyboard and some software should suffice.
3. Learn to compose properly. This should also take ten years, but with significant overlap, so you're probably already halfway there.
4. Compose piano solos with synthesised embellishments. This is where you get to enjoy the fruits of your labour. Just remember to play the synthesiser as if you're playing an expressive musical instrument, not as if you're programming a piece of lab equipment.

As with anything else, it's not particularly difficult so much as time consuming. As long as you don't plan to have both children and a day job in addition to such a hobby/career, you should do fine.

References

1. YouTube: mik300z: Vangelis-Bladerunner atmosphere (cover)

2. YouTube: meastempo: That Vangelis bladerunner sound...