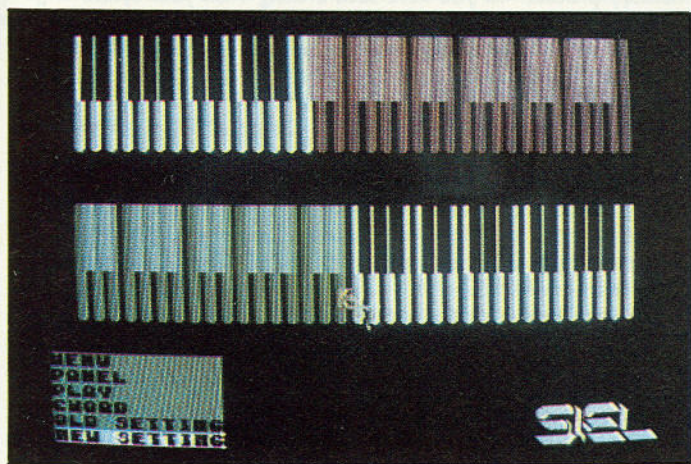
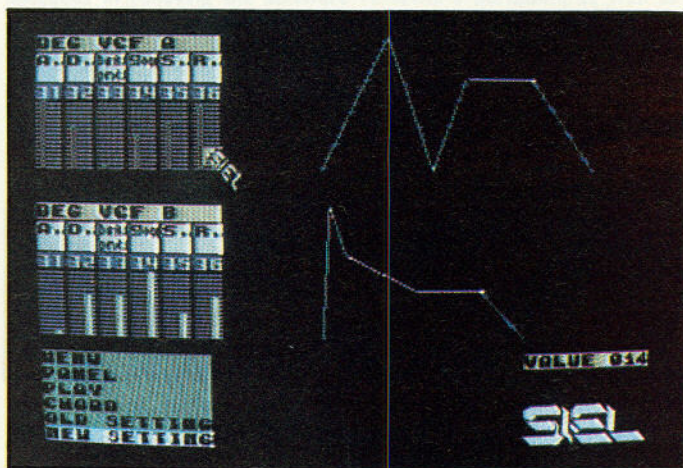
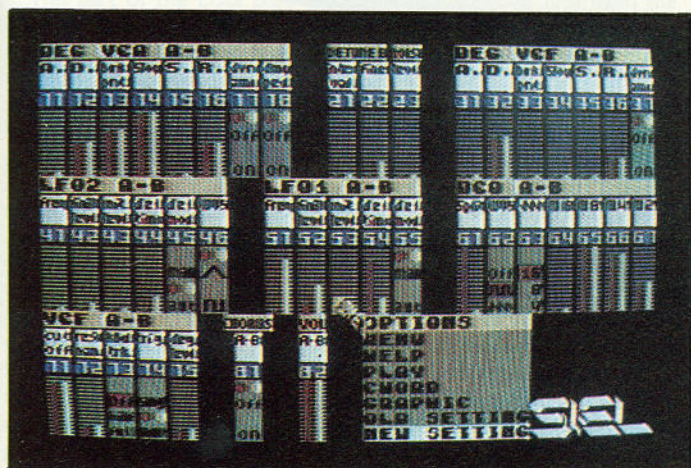




GRAPHICALLY YOURS



The writers at SIEL's software lab have been working overtime to come up with two new MIDI packages. The first is a DK editing package with dramatic graphics, the second a complete patch memory database.

Trish McGrath

Using a home computer to edit parameters on a synth is an unexpected, but very welcome, spinoff of the MIDI revolution. At a time when every new polysynth is coming equipped with a digital parameter access system, any means of giving musicians more programming information is a real godsend.

SIEL were among the first to realise the potential of putting a synth's parameter system on a computer screen, and their Expander 6 editing package was impressive enough to give a good many doubting Thomases a nasty shock as to what MIDI was capable of achieving. A year later, they're offering the Graphic Editor as an almost irresistible temptation to Commodore 64 owners and their DK80 polysynths. It's available on either disk or cassette, and has broadly the same hardware requirements as the Data Base package reviewed later on.

Once loaded, the program displays an Options Menu housing such goodies as Panel, Load, Save, Free, Play, Chord, Old

Setting, New Setting and End of Job. All selections are cursor-controlled by way of moving a curious representation of the SIEL logo around the screen and pressing Return (or 'fire' on a joystick, if you have one) when it's hovering over the required option; a highlight line confirms your selection. While this system worked well enough in practice, having to play *The Golden Shot* every time I attempted a selection wore on my patience eventually. I also can't help thinking that if SIEL's cursor was a little smaller and simpler in composition, it wouldn't take so long for the Commodore to tell it to move around—as things stand, it's a decidedly sluggish little beast.

Anyway, from the main menu you can Load one of the DK80's programs, while Panel displays the parameters of the chosen sound in glorious technicolor. Seeing as the DK80 is bitimbral, the two timbres are presented in different colours side by side, which is rather neat. And you have to commend SIEL on the way they've managed to cram all the

synth's parameters (it isn't the world's simplest polysynth, remember) onto one screen – even if they are a little difficult to read at times.

Options on the Panel menu comprise Menu, Help, Play, Chord, Graphic, Old Setting, and New Setting, appropriate titles all.

Selecting Play instructs the program to play a monophonic sequence (entirely separate from the sequencer in the DK) when you hold the Return key down, while Chord triggers a chord sequence. Both these options are designed to let you hear the sound you're creating without having to play the keyboard, which is pretty smart.

To begin editing the sound you've loaded, you simply select a parameter with the wandering cursor and press Return. This displays the current value, which you can then alter using the +/- keys. That's all utterly simple and logical, but SIEL have incorporated a few extra niceties to make life easier still.

Selecting Help and one of the eight parameter blocks, for example, presents you with an explanation of what each parameter does. Useful when you can't quite suss out the screen display, or you're suffering from mild amnesia.

More useful is the Graphic option, which allows you to zoom in on modules such as the VCA and VCF envelope sections, and the DCO rectangular waveform. The waveshape diagrams change in real time when parameters are edited, and you can also obtain a visual representation of the DK80's split points in Graphic mode, with two keyboard displays, and a white area that denotes the 'playing' section.

Editor *'You have to commend SIEL on the way they've managed to cram all the DK80's parameters onto one screen.'*

Apparently, split points can also be edited from this screen by the usual system of cursor movements and Return key presses – but the review program thought otherwise.

And so to the Old Setting option – and a bit of a bug. As you've probably guessed, this option lets you compare your original sound with the edited version, and is selectable from any screen display. Once it's selected (and you've waited patiently for a few seconds), all the parameters change accordingly and the highlighted line swops to Old Setting. However, dare you lack patience and press the Return key twice, the parameters will change once – and then again a few seconds later. No harm in that, you might think, but the fact that the program doesn't return the highlighted line back to the New Setting means that the edited parameters on display end up being labelled 'Old Setting'. Unhelpful, confusing, and generally a bit of a mess. You can redraw the graph simply by reselecting the highlighted option (which shouldn't be allowed to happen either, to my mind), and could probably avoid the situation altogether by being reasonably alert in the first place, but I do hope Siel consider a bit of software rewriting in this area. At the moment, we're left with another example of human beings – and journalists in particular – not being competent enough to make proper use of a computer's supreme intelligence...

As for the remaining options, these include Save (for writing your fully edited sound to memory), Free (for creating a sound from scratch), and End of Job (for returning the Commodore to power-up mode).

In essence, the Graphic Editor is a bold attempt at counteracting the ergonomic limitations inherent in digital access synths. It's questionable whether a system as slothful as this will ever make for speedier sound-changing, but one thing is certain: editing this way is a lot more rewarding than struggling blindly through the DK80, with just a two-digit LED window to guide you on your way. And with a number of excellent (just look at the pictures) array of graphic displays, using this package means you're a lot more likely to make the right changes first time, which makes things a lot less laborious. If you've ever felt frustrated at the hands of your digital access DK, you'll need some willpower to resist splashing out on the Editor. ■

Just as the programmable synth put an end to the arduous task of memorising patch changes for regurgitation during a live performance, so the home computer and the MIDI are conspiring to put an end to the task of filing heaps of patch chart information. First indication that this is taking place is SIEL's Data Base package, a computer-assisted filing system that allows storage and manipulation of a MIDI synth's program memory.

The idea behind the program is simple enough: given that just about



every MIDI synth is capable of sending patch-change data out of its DIN sockets, there's no reason why the information from several machines couldn't be pooled into some central reserve of synth voices. Once that's done, the lucky MIDI system owner can order the voices into 'families' for particular sets of applications.

The SIEL software should work with any MIDI synth with the exception of the Yamaha DX series, though Casio synths remain uncooperative until you give them the opportunity to have an initial conversation with the host computer before releasing data. If at all possible, assemble your own setup in the shop and rest easy.

In total, hardware requirements are a suitable MIDI synth, Commodore 64 and disk drive (or cassette machine), SIEL MIDI computer interface, TV or monitor, and the necessary leads for connecting them all together (that's when the fun starts). Preparation consists of enabling two-way MIDI communication and disabling the memory protect – if you have such a thing – on your synth.

Under test, the Data Base loaded from disk in a respectable 100 seconds, and offered a main menu of options comprising Family Operation, Sequence Operation, Disk Operation, Clear Data Base, and End of Job.

What do they all do? Well, Disk Operation is the menu whereby the database currently residing in the computer's memory can be saved to disk, and a previous database recalled for use or further editing. It also encompasses housekeeping functions such as erasing a stored database and displaying the disk directory. Clear Data Base simply clears the current data and presents you with a blank database from which to work, while End of Job clears the CBM64 of the Data Base program and returns it to basic power-up mode. Sensibly, these latter two options require you to confirm your intentions before you can wipe the boards clear.

As for the test synth, I played safe and opted to use the ultracompatible SIEL DK80 poly, which was immediately set to work on the Family Operation. This option allows you to store single

Data Base *'The Family option allows you to store single voices for filing into as many as 32 groups of sounds.'*

voices for filing into up to 32 groups of sounds, or 'families'. Most obviously, these families can be piano sounds, brass sounds, or whatever sort of sound you're working on at the time. But as with all database programs, the choice is yours as to what a family should represent. So you could, for instance, file all the sounds needed for a particular song as one family.

The Family Directory lists the groups, and allows you to Edit, View or Exit to the main menu. Selecting either View or Edit for a particular family moves you into the Program Directory for that group of sounds. This is neatly headed up Name (eg. Hellish Row, YMO Ripoff), Keyboard (reminds you which synth the sound belongs to), and Family.

Select View and you can choose one of the sounds and download it from the database to a specific program number on your synth. Edit, meanwhile, gives you the freedom to Insert (or add) another sound program into the family, Delete a sound, or Rename it

(though you can't rename a sound if the new title already exists elsewhere). And when you've built up 16 sounds in a Program Directory, it simply starts another page for you to carry on up to an overall maximum of 250 sounds.

Thoughtfully, SIEL have provided the means to scroll page by page in View mode, though why it wasn't considered necessary in Edit mode is beyond me.

Using the Family part of the database is simplicity itself. One-character key presses select a new option, a white highlight line homes in on a sound for deleting or renaming, and the f1 and f3 function keys serve to move this line up and down as required.

Niggles? None really, though I'd have found a search facility really useful in helping to locate a specific sound post haste, and a method of printing out program directories wouldn't have gone amiss, either.

That just about rounds up the filing of single voices within the database. But what if you need to download whole banks of voices in one swift swoop? Well, luckily for you, the Sequence Operator bit of the package is designed to do just that. So, make your way back to the main menu, enter the Sequence Directory, and...

This part of the Data Base is designed to combine files from the Program Directories in desired sequences, thus allowing your synth's memory to be reprogrammed at any time. You could be forgiven for thinking you can do this anyway, what with being able to store the memory's contents on cassette, RAM packs, or whatever your instrument can manage. The difference the Data Base makes is that it doesn't limit you to having to replace and overwrite the existing memory in its entirety. In fact, you can simply replace, say, all the odd-numbered programs in one go, leaving the even-numbered ones intact.

How does it work? Basically, you name a new sequence (with maybe your synth's name or a song's title), enter Edit mode, and get given the option to Insert, Hole, Delete or Exit. Insert presents you with the Family Directory for you to Choose from, which in turn asks you to specify a particular sound from the group for inserting into the sequence. This, in the meantime, is counting the sounds from zero upwards. However, Offset allows you to renumber sounds, so that if you want to, say, download eight sounds to a particular bank on a synth, you can offset the sequence to store from program number 09 onwards, for instance. And if you want to keep one

or more of the programs in that bank intact, Hole allows you to miss out that number when saving to the synth's memory.

Once your sequence compilation is underway, you can insert new sounds at any point (further sounds are renumbered automatically), and Delete a program by homing in on it and pressing the Big D on the Commodore.

When it comes to storing the completed sequence in your synth, you've a choice of downloading manually or automatically. Some keyboards will only accept programs one at a time (in which case you press the space bar manually for each sound), while others can receive complete blocks of sounds.

One unexpected bonus is that, since all this option involves is manipulating patch numbers already held in a family memory, you can put patches into order without a MIDI keyboard in sight. If you've ever suffered an attack of just-before-gig change of heart, you'll know just how helpful such a provision can be.

Finally, the program's disk options let you save your various databases to disk for posterity.

So, a well-conceived and user-friendly software package that succeeds in relieving the software reviewer's boredom, as well as getting something really novel out of the MIDI standard. If you've got the hardware, you'll find it hard to resist. ■

D A T A F I L E

SIEL DK80 Graphic Editor; MIDI Data Base

Format 5 1/4" floppy disk or cassette

Hardware Requirements Commodore 64 or SX64 micro, disk drive or datasette, monitor or TV, SIEL MIDI Computer Interface, 2 MIDI cables

Prices DK80 Graphic Editor £54; Data Base £39; MIDI Computer Interface £79. All prices inclusive of VAT.

More from SIEL UK, Ahed Depot, Reigate Road, Hookwood, Horley, Surrey, RH6 0AY. ☎ (0293) 776153/4.

Lost your voice...

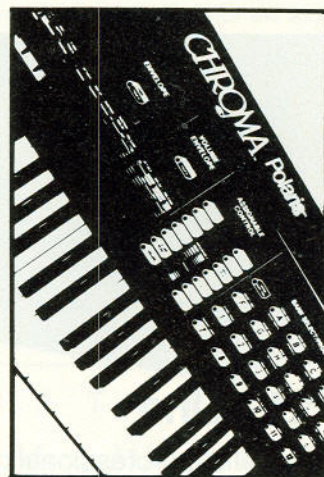
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