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# Lighting & Sound international

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# Classic Gear: Yamaha SPX90

Rob Halliday takes a nostalgic but instructive look back at the tools that have shaped the industry . . .

As well as being a powerful search tool, Google can also chart the rise and fall of now-classic products. Enter Yamaha SPX90 into the search box; the first few entries will tell you about the product that was ahead of its time, that quickly became the standard tool of the trade, that could achieve things nothing else could. Then many, many entries for studios that still have the units in their equipment stock. Ten pages in, you get musicians waxing lyrical, talking of creating compositions 'for organ and SPX90'. A few pages later, you start to find concessions of its limitations. After that, listings of units for sale, and youngsters who've set up mini-studios in their bedrooms equipped with SPX90s - no doubt bought cheaply from those online sales.

That's quite a career arc.

Introduced in 1985, the SPX90 was a highly-versatile, digital, MIDI-controllable effects processor in a package compact enough to take anywhere. Often thought of as just a reverb unit, it was a great deal more than that, offering delays, modulation effects, pitch shift, plus effects then pretty much new to the world of digital in the mid-1980s: panning, sampling and sample playback, parametric EQ, compression. And you could edit the effects and store your own versions. All for a list price of under \$800.

The SPX90 found friends everywhere, from starter studios who could just about afford it to the grandest installations, who thought it so cheap they might as well buy some, even if that meant overlooking limitations such as the unbalanced connections on 1/4" jack plugs. Rep theatres could add simple effects to sounds (the SPX90's front-panel and display made it easy to get it to do something, if harder to finesse). The most complex



The Yamaha SPX90 processor.

live events and shows loved the device's MIDI capabilities - including the ability to change program parameters as well as change programs - meant that it could be triggered from the computers already controlling the rest of the sound system.

In those early days, when the 'silent background' of compact discs was still relatively new and few other products could match it on price, let alone features, you could even overlook its limitations: though 16-bit, its internal clock speed was only 31.25kHz, limiting its upper usable frequency response to about 12kHz, and it wasn't silent in operation. Some would just call it a 'warm' sound . . .

But though it had its limitations, it was comfortable, relatively easy to use, and, over time, familiar. You learnt what the reverbs sounded like. You soon knew how to get to the effect you needed, or to describe to someone else the kind of thing you were after - a 'hall' reverb, a 'symphonic' effect. So much so that, though Yamaha's newer products are infinitely more advanced, infinitely more high-tech, they still remain much of the familiar look of the SPX90 on the outside, and much of the nomenclature of the SPX90 on the inside.

Yamaha's website helpfully notes that the SPX90 is 'discontinued, and may not be available at all dealer locations', but still offers the full tech specs and the user manual.

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