

KILLER KEYS: WHAT'S THE DEAL WITH SYNTH PADS?

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If you've been playing keyboards in a worship band setting for any amount of time, chances are your team leader has asked you the following question: "Can you give me a spacey [or insert atmospheric, warm or sizzly] synth pad for this song?" In fact, you have probably been asked to play a pad more than once during a single worship set. To be perfectly honest, the problem with playing pads is that they can be downright boring – to play. Where's the challenge and creativity in playing sustained chords for measures at a time, right? But this view is a product of a wrong perspective. The reality can be that with a reasonable command of the synthesizer and an understanding of the role that pads play in a song, keyboard players can express themselves quite eloquently through the use of synth pads.



THE BIG DEAL WITH PADS

So what is with this apparent obsession with synth pads? Why is it that the synth pad has become so essential and relied upon in the worship band arrangement? The answer lies largely in record studio production. The average recorded song not only has standard instrumentation but it also has layers of extra guitar, synth, vocal and general atmospheric parts buried in the background. These extra tracks create energy, dimension, and interest for the listener.

Think about those times when your worship band played a song for the first time with everyone playing their correct parts – yet the song just didn't "pop" like it did on the recording. Chances are the lack of energy was due to the missing atmospherics that were on the recording.

This is where pads get their chance to shine. They can be used to bring up the energy level of a struggling song. All of those recorded parts that no one else can possibly pull off live can be approximated through a thoughtfully crafted pad.

CRAFTING A KILLER PAD

- **Get cozy with your instrument** – A keyboard player who is familiar with his or her instrument is like a boy scout with a Swiss army knife able to use it to produce what is necessary. This is why it is important for all keyboard players to dig into their synth and see what makes it tick. Mess with it, tweak the settings and yes, even change and overwrite some of the factory settings and patches!

No one would ever buy a car and not adjust the seat, steering wheel, AC and radio simply because they were set a certain way at the factory. So why is it that almost all keyboard players rely on the synth patches that come right out of the box? A synth can be a very expensive investment so use it to your full advantage by coaxing it into giving you the sounds you want and need.

I'm not suggesting that you have to go as far as learning the science of synthesis and learn to draw waves, tweak LFOs and shape filters. On the contrary, taking control of your synth and building killer pads can be as simple as learning how to combine existing sounds and applying the right onboard effects. Let's take a deeper look at this.

Liberal, reckless experimentation

- **Select the right sounds** – This is where things get subjective. There's no way to definitively say what the "right" sounds for a pad are, but there are some basic "pad-isms" that can be applied to get started. The most basic of all of these "pad-isms" is that a good pad will have movement, dimension and interest.

  Almost every synth has the ability to layer two or more existing patches or sounds and doing this is the easiest route to producing a great pad. Generally speaking, the most basic layer of a multi-layered pad is a sound that will never decay as long as the keys or sustain pedal are held down.

  Obvious candidates for this are strings, synth strings, soft horns or simple sounds that might already labeled "pad" – such as "dark pad" or "fast pad." Usually, these sounds by themselves are one-dimensional and need to be dressed up with other sounds or effects.

  One possibility for the next layer might be a similar sustaining sound that has been transposed up an octave or two from the original layer. This produces a thick and expansive sound, even when just a few notes are played. Other equally qualifying sounds would be a wide array of faster decaying sounds. These could be anything from a low level piano with heavy reverb to a synth with a slow attack. The idea on this second layer is to brighten up the pad and add an obvious second dimension.

  In short, a good pad can have two or more layered sounds contributing to the overall interest of the pad. One sound might give warmth and sustain, while another one adds brightness and movement. Of course the overall sound of a pad can be greatly enhanced by applying the right effects.

- **Applying effects** – At the very least, a modern synthesizer is going to be equipped with basic reverb and chorus effects while some models have an additional variety of effects including delay, phase, distortion and compression. While not absolutely necessary, these effects can be used to lightly punch up a pad or even take it to a radical new level. Soft slow pads can be transformed by applying distortion. Delays can be applied where reverbs are generally used. The great thing about effects is that they can be used either subtly or shamelessly. Liberal, reckless experimentation is the key to getting the most out of effects.

LET'S PLAY

Here's where things get fun. There's nothing quite as exciting as approaching a song with the power of a strong synth pad under your fingers. But the quickest road to musical boredom is to simply play with a pad using only basic chords. Instead, try playing single notes or playing partial or open chords such as root-fifth-root with the right hand. Think like a string section and use passing tones to add movement into the next chord. As a challenge, play as few notes as possible by finding single common tones and sticking only to those.

No longer should the request for more pads be tedious and disappointing. We are keyboard players and we have what it takes to bring it every time! As you prepare to rock it with your new pads, keep a few things in mind. Remember that a hearty pad can easily hog up sonic space – which can quickly get a keyboard player in trouble with the rest of the band and sound operator. A pad should enhance, not hijack, the arrangement and mix. The best tools that a keyboard player can bring on a Sunday morning are ears, self-control and discriminating musical choices. Above all, choose to make good music even if that means playing less.



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