



CASIO Middle East launches new CT-X and AT-3 series of musical keyboards in Kuwait

CASIO Middle East & their partner in Kuwait Easa Husain Al-Yousifi & Sons Company has launched its recently improved AT-3 and brand-new CT-X series keyboards specifically designed for the Arab market, marking the company's formal entry to the growing Arab electronic musical instrument industry. The formal unveiling of the two products took place at Radisson Blu Hotel - Dasman Hall, and was attended by a company guests and top senior managers in addition to the press and media, the one-stop music experience showroom and academy, at Radisson Blu Hotel.

In conjunction with the launch was the rolling out of Casio Middle East's Arabic YouTube channel to serve as its official platform in the hugely popular video-sharing website. The channel will broadcast footage of its latest top-of-the-line musical instruments and their features, as

well as easy-to-follow tutorial videos for beginners and professionals alike in keeping with the company's commitment to help nurture music geniuses in the region.

The CT-X series features a right mix of unique Western, Oriental and Gulf sources capable of playing different styles of music such as R&B, Rock, Jazz, Saïdi, Maksoum and Katakofiti, while the upgraded version of the competitively priced AT-3 series offers a new set of Oriental rhythms with a professional arranger to support new beginners and a veteran musician performing a one-man show. Both strong Oriental keyboard products are integrated with pre-set Arab music and oriental rhythms to appeal to local and regional artists.

Koji Naka, Managing Director, CASIO Middle East, said: "The two new products launched is a boost to our initiative to highlight the role of music, a universal lan-

guage, in bringing people together regardless of their nationalities and cultural backgrounds. In the Middle East, we aim to attract Arab musicians, listeners, and fans by offering them a product that fits their needs. On the business side, the unveiling provided us with an opportunity to show our strong interest and desire to capture a large portion of the Arab market amid the rising opportunities in the electronic musical instrument industry here."

Ammar Aho Hassoun, Manager of the music department, Easa Husain Al-Yousifi & Sons Company, said "The Kuwaiti market are eager for such range of CASIO musical products and will surely be used by most of the music lovers, the improved AT-3 is a great keyboard in today's musical instruments market for learning or playing Oriental music. Live performances by Adham (Keyboard), Mohammad (Nay) and Yazan (Violin) Mustapha (Qanun)

dominated the launch event attended by key CASIO and Al-Yousifi executives and teachers from Ministry of Education. According to Maestro Mohammad Al-Fakahani the new changes that has been made on AT-3

Improved its performance because it is loaded with advanced features that give flexibility for users to get creative with the rhythms, tones and music. The outstanding quality of the keyboard will meet a large group of the musicians especially in the education sector.

The enthusiastic audience also tried their hand on the new keyboards and other Casio musical instruments during the launch, giving them an opportunity to experience the power of the high-quality and exceptionally made instruments. These CASIO ranges of musical instruments are sold in Kuwait at BEST Al-Yousifi Electronics showrooms & all authorized distributors.

Back to the future: Cassettes launch comeback tour

The humble cassette—that tiny little plastic rectangle containing the homemade mixtapes of yesteryear—is back, joining vinyl as a darling of audiophiles who miss side A and side B. But as top musicians including Ariana Grande and Justin Bieber release their music on tape and demand continues to climb, the niche revival has faced a global shortage of music-quality magnetic tape needed for production. Now, two facilities—one in the American Midwest and the other in western France—have stepped in to meet the need. "It's a good place to be—there's plenty of business for both of us," said Steve Stepp, who founded the National Audio Company in Springfield, Missouri with his father 50 years ago. He said that around 2000 the "imperial hegemony of the CD" cut his business, which stayed alive as a major manufacturer of books on tape that remained popular.



This picture taken on March 14, 2019, shows an audio cassette made with magnetic stripes in the production plant of Mulann, in Avranches, northwestern France. — AFP

But despite the astronomical rise of streaming, Stepp said rock bands like Pearl Jam and The Smashing Pumpkins began seeking to manufacture anniversary tapes in the mid-2000s, launching a cassette comeback tour. "That convinced major record labels that there was still life in the cassette as a music form," he said. Several years ago National Audio bought 300,000 reels of tape from a South Korean company that gave up music-grade tape production.

As that stockpile began to shrink, his facility in November 2016 was faced with a choice: either make reels, or fold. His business invested several million dollars buying up old equipment from defunct production facilities, and last year National Audio manufactured 18 million audio cassettes, Stepp said, selling to 3,500 record labels globally. "I think it's got a bright future," Stepp told AFP of the cassette market. "It died in 2000, as far as conventional wisdom was concerned, and it has made a strong comeback since." "Reports of its death were greatly exaggerated."

90s vibes

Since November, Mulann—a small French company near Mont Saint Michel—has also rebooted production, the country's first manufacturing of music-grade tape in two decades. Already selling magnetic tape for metro tickets or military recording studios, the Mulann group acquired a plant to produce analog audio tapes under the trademark Recording The Masters. For Jean-Luc Renou, Mulann's CEO, there's still a place for analog sound in today's ephemeral music world.

"Take the example of heating: you have radiators at home. It's comfortable, it's digital—but next to you, you can make a good fire." "Pleasure" is the goal, he said. "That's the cassette or vinyl." The company sells tapes for 3.49 euros each, producing them by the thousands each month and exporting 95 percent worldwide, according to commercial director Theo Gardin.

The 27-year-old admits he didn't know in his youth the joys—and pains—of the Walkman personal tape player, or the delicate strip of tape that tangles up and must be rewound with, say, a pen. Or a finger. According to Stepp, it's precisely 20-somethings like Gardin fast-forwarding demand, as young people seek something tangible in the internet age.—AFP



Mexican Totonac natives perform a ceremony to request permission from the gods, to hold the Tajin Summit Festival -aimed at preserving the Totonac legacy- in Papantla, Veracruz state, Mexico. — AFP photos



MEXICO'S 'VOLADORES' SEEK TO KEEP ANCESTORS' FLYING SPIRIT ALIVE

Four teenagers climb to the top of a towering pole, fasten themselves to ropes and throw themselves, head-first and backwards, into the air. No, it's not the latest social media challenge. It's the "danza de los voladores," the dance of the flyers, a more than 2,500-year-old ritual practiced by the Totonac people of central Mexico, who are fighting to keep the tradition alive by giving it some modern tweaks.

Spinning in widening circles around the pole as they fly upside-down through the air, the four dancers slowly descend to the ground, dressed in white tunics, red pants and conical hats with rainbow-colored streamers that trail across the sky. A fifth dancer balances atop the pole — a 30-meter tree trunk — playing a festive tune on a reed flute while beating a small drum. Every aspect of the tradition has deeper meaning for the Totonac, who use the dance to ask the gods for rain and fertility.

The four flyers represent the four cardinal points of their cosmology, and the fifth dancer the center. The 13 circles they spin around the tree trunk, multiplied by four, equal the number of years per cycle in their ancestors' highly advanced calendar: 52. And their colorful streamers represent the rainbow that appears after the rain.

"The dance is an offering that the Totonac people invented to end a terrible drought. The job was given to five chaste young men, who climbed to the top of the tallest tree and threw themselves off like birds," says Cruz Ramirez, 58, a veteran flyer. But in the year 2019, leaping backwards off a 30-meter pole is not for everyone — one reason why Ramirez and the other grandfathers who are the keepers of the tradition decided they had to bring it into the modern world.

They founded the Papantla Flying School, where young voladores now learn the art from professional teachers,

with benefits such as life and accident insurance, legal safeguards and labor laws to protect them when they graduate. "We were thinking about whom we would leave this heritage to, trying to make sure the ceremony wouldn't be lost," says Ramirez. "Ten years ago, we didn't have life insurance, accident insurance, we had absolutely nothing."

Gift of the birdman

But the essence of the ritual — which was named to UNESCO's list of the world's Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2009 — remains. "Young people come to the school to learn to value the ritual again, as something essential in life, to integrate the spiritual, the mental and the emotional," says Francisco Hernandez, 51, another teacher. The tradition is on full display every year around this time — the spring equinox — at the Tajin summit, a cultural festival held in the town of Papantla, in Veracruz state, which wraps up Sunday.

The Papantla flyers have also toured the world, performing in Britain, France, Switzerland, Italy and the United Arab Emirates. Thanks to their persistence and their lobbying efforts, they now have life and accident insurance that protects them in Mexico and abroad, under an agreement reached with the state government in 2009. Eugenio San Martin is one of the students at the flying school. The shy 14-year-old comes from a family of voladores: his father and grandfathers were also flyers. He is studying to be a "caporal," the dancer who balances atop the pole while playing the flute. "I started when I was seven, because I liked it," he said.

"The first time I climbed the pole, I was really scared. But the teacher climbed up with me." The school welcomes around 100 new students each year, ages eight to 10. But only about 20 in every class have what it takes to become

professional flyers, says Hernandez. "Not everyone has the gift," he says. "When a child has that power, you can see it in his eyes." There is no set time period to learn the ritual, says Hernandez. At a minimum, it takes 10 years. But in reality, "you never stop learning it," he says. "Ironically, flying is the easy part. What it's really all about is learning the symbolism of the tradition." — AFP

Giant floating mouse sculpture arrives in Hong Kong harbor

A massive inflatable floating sculpture reminiscent of Mickey Mouse was towed into Hong Kong's Victoria Harbour on Friday, as a crowd of curious locals looked on. The 37-metre piece called KAWS:HOLIDAY—about the length of three double-decker buses—is the work of American artist KAWS, who is known for his whimsical characters which have Xs for eyes. Tugboats towed the macabre grey figure—a character named COMPANION, floating on its back—into the harbor and stationed it off Hong Kong's busy Central district. Part of an art festival in the city, it will remain there until the end of the month. KAWS, whose real name is Brian Donnelly, said he hopes his work will help people to relax. "Hong Kong's such a busy city... I thought it would be a good juxtaposition to have a work like this just floating in Victoria Harbour," he told reporters.

"I just thought about... for myself, what's a really relaxing position, and that's really when you just zone out and look at the sky and think about nothing else." Locals and visitors, some wearing t-shirts designed by KAWS, took photos and looked on excitedly as the sculpture was brought to its display site. The figure has been compared to a huge floating yellow duck that was displayed in the Hong Kong harbor in 2013.

That work—smaller than the KAWS piece-by-Dutch artist Florentijn Hofman was hugely popular, inspiring special duck dishes in restaurants and even copies in several Chinese cities. "The yellow duck is more attractive, more lively," said Fung Foon-yung, 67. "I don't know what this one looks like, it's just lying there," she added, saying it reminded her of a corpse. Cheer Chen, 31, a self-described KAWS fan and Sichuan resident, said she came to Hong Kong especially to see the sculpture after missing out on its previous stops in Seoul and Taipei. "Maybe there are some things in the world it doesn't want to see," said Hong Kong resident Leung Kin-ye, referring to the figure's eyes. "Inequality, human selfishness, greed." — AFP

