





FIRST PLAY



FENDER TONE MASTER PRO
£1,649

WHAT IS IT? Fender's new digital modelling floorboard, with over 125 amp/effects models, eight-core processing power and full-colour touchscreen graphics

Universal Tone Machine

Fender's big entry into the digital modelling floorboard arena offers stunning amp and effects models and double the processing power of its nearest rivals

Words Nick Guppy **Photography** Neil Godwin

It's been about four years since Fender sprang a surprise on us with the introduction of the all-digital Tone Master amplifier range, which leveraged high-powered digital processing, Class D power and lightweight speakers to recreate some of its best-loved 1960s black-panel amplifiers. These had no menus, no presets and no effects other than the reverb and tremolo the original amps came with.

With dwindling and increasingly variable valve supply putting pressure on volume manufacturers, the Tone Master amps make a lot of sense, delivering authentic classic tones with the consistency, reliability and portability that valves struggle to compete with. They also set many of us wondering what kind of product might result if the Tone Master's prodigious digital capability was unleashed. Now we have the answer with Fender's latest surprise – the Tone



1. The Tone Master Pro's rear panel offers practically every connection you're ever likely to need. Highlights include no less than four assignable effects loops and two pairs of stereo outputs, with jack and XLR options

2. In a nod to the company's unrivalled heritage, Fender's Tone Master Pro features a miniature version of the iconic jewelled power indicator light, used on most of its valve amps for around seven decades

Master Pro, a stunning broadside into the professional modelling floorboard market.

The Tone Master Pro is a good-looking and substantial piece of kit, with a solid alloy top surrounding a seven-inch full-colour touchscreen display, with two large knobs either side. Behind the screen lurk no less than eight cores of processing power, double that of the Tone Master amps and the immediate competition. The knob on the left is the Navigation control, which turns to browse presets and can be pushed to switch between Normal and Gig views – the latter being a high-visibility display of

the current preset. The knob on the right is a global master volume, which can be pushed to display the Tone Master Pro's output mixer.

Below the screen are 10 footswitches, which also double as rotary encoders. Each switch has a dynamic illuminated 'scribble strip' above it as well as a colour-coded illuminated surround, which provides at-a-glance info for which preset or effect is active. The two switches on the far left govern bank up/down changes, while the two on the far right operate tap tempo/tuner and the footswitch mode, toggling between effect and footswitch operation and enabling the Tone Master Pro's 60-second looper.

There's a wealth of connectivity on the rear panel, with a standard guitar jack alongside a Mic/Line input on combi jack/XLR. Four effects loops can be configured for mono or stereo operation, and there are two pairs of stereo line outputs on jack and XLR, with a useful ground lift switch. You'll also find an Aux In 3.5mm jack and a 6.3mm headphones jack back here, followed by sockets for two expression pedals, an external footswitch and a TRS amp control jack, which can be used on most amplifiers to operate up to two functions. Then we get MIDI In and Out/Thru DIN connectors, together with a mini SD Card connector and a USB 'C' socket for connecting to the Tone Master Pro's desktop editing app, as well as





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four-channel audio recording and firmware updating. Lastly, a regular IEC mains plug and on/off rocker switch are topped by a miniature version of Fender's iconic 'jewel' power indicator.

The Tone Master Pro's smart, understated looks and heavy-duty hardware exude the kind of class and pro-standard reliability we'd expect from Fender.

In Use & Sounds

The Tone Master Pro's display features superb visual renderings of effects, amps and cabinets. The screen is optimised for touch-controlled editing, with a few conventional menus operating quietly in the background. Tapping on amp or effects images zooms in and instantly makes parameters available to tweak on the rotary encoder footswitches. You can also swipe to add, remove or replace items as needed. It's a fast, flexible and highly intuitive workflow that needs little reference to user manuals as everything is on display with just a couple of taps or swipes.

"After tone, the second most important thing was to make the interface absolutely easy to use," says Fender's director of product management, Jason Stilwell. "Our ethos is 'three knobs and the truth', that's the Fender way. We spent literally thousands of hours evaluating the workflows to make them so easy."

A USB 'C' socket on the rear panel of the unit lets you connect the Tone Master Pro to a Mac or PC desktop for editing, recording and connecting to the Fender Tone portal. There's also integrated Bluetooth for streaming music.

3. 10 footswitches handle bank up/down and preset/effects selection, with integral rotary encoders for fast editing of all the amp and effects parameters. There's also a 60-second looper and tap tempo/tuner quick access

4. As well as a regular guitar input, the Tone Master Pro has a mic/line input on a combi jack/XLR socket to process vocals or other instruments



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The Tone Master Pro's large, bright full-colour touchscreen is a delight to look at and use, with beautifully rendered graphics and intuitive workflows, which make even complex editing jobs possible without needing to wade through menus and manuals



FENDER TONE MASTER PRO

PRICE: £1,649

ORIGIN: Designed in USA, made in China

TYPE: Digital modelling preamp

DIMENSIONS: 288 (w) x 149 (d) x 81mm (h)

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 1.98/4.35

CABINET: Alloy/steel

PRESETS: 504 user preset patches, over 125 amp/effects models

CONTROLS: Navigate/mode knob, master volume/mixer knob

FOOTSWITCH: 10x assignable footswitch/rotary encoders

CONNECTIONS: Guitar in, line/mic in, 4x effects loops, 3x stereo outputs on jack and XLR, aux in, headphones out, MIDI in/out/thru, 2x expression pedal, toe switch and amp control. Micro SD (for software expansion), USB 'C'

ADDITIONAL FEATURES: 4x effects loops, aux in, headphones out. MIDI in/out/thru/merge, USB for recording and editing app, expression pedal/toe switch/amp control jacks, dedicated mic/line input, 60-second looper, tap tempo and tuner

POWER: IEC mains connector

OPTIONS: Mission Engineering SP1-TMP expression pedal (£159)

RANGE OPTIONS: FR-12 (£519) and FR-10 (£469) full-range powered cabs

Fender Musical Instruments Europe

0333 200 8765

www.fender.com



10/10

PROS Stunning authentic amp and effects tones covering all genres; industry-leading eight-core processing power; superlative user interface; all the connectivity you could wish for; available at a fair price

CONS It's hard to level any criticism – this is a product that's set to grow and evolve and will likely stay at the top of the tree for some time

Fender has put the Tone Master Pro way ahead of the competition, as well as adding plenty of room for expansion over time

The Tone Master Pro's amp and effects voices use the same component-based modelling as the Tone Master designs, and they sound amazing with an organic depth and dynamic response that seems unique to the Tone Master family. "Each amp model takes around three months to complete from the day the engineer starts coding, then there are many listening tests until we feel the model is dialled in," adds Jason.

As you'd expect, then, there are many prime cuts from Fender's back catalogue, with Tweed and black-panel era legends to the fore, alongside more modern classics such as the 3x10 Vibro-King, while Fender family members EVH are well represented in the high-gain stakes, the highlight being an apparently Van-Halen-approved EVH 5150. British amp model offerings include the JCM800 and Silver Jubilee alongside normal and bright AC30s, while boutique fans can salivate over superb MkiIC+ and BE100 models.

Effects are equally tempting, with classic circuits such as the TS and Rat alongside many modern cult designs. There are

currently around 125 amp and effects models, with many more due in the near future. Together with over 6,000 Fender-approved IRs, the Tone Master Pro offers a practically infinite range of sounds, from ethereal pads to stunning stripped-back valve-like authenticity.

Verdict

With no less than eight processing cores, Fender has put the Tone Master Pro way ahead of the competition, as well as adding plenty of room for expansion over time. There's currently no option for profiling, although the separate mic/line input suggests it may be possible at some point further down the road. Meanwhile, the Tone Master Pro is a serious professional tool for stage, studio and home, especially when teamed with one or two of Fender's new FR cabs (reviewed over the page), and it's priced to compete with the nearest rivals. If you're ready to make the move to digital, we reckon there's very little that comes close at the moment. Definitely a leap into the future. **G**