

# ROUND-UP MIDI CONTROL SURFACES

Your keyboard and mouse are fine when you're processing words, but when it comes to making music, you need a different kind of device...

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**I**t's now almost ten years since Steinberg kicked off a revolution with their Virtual Studio Technology (VST), which brought new levels of functionality and affordability to musicians working at home on their computers. However, although Macs and PCs are now far more powerful than they were a decade ago, enabling you to run huge numbers of virtual instruments and effects simultaneously, the biggest drawback of the virtual studio – a lack of hands-on control – remains a serious issue.

Fortunately, a number of enterprising companies have realised this and released products that address the problem. Control surfaces

(as they're known) provide users with a selection of buttons, knobs and other controls that generate MIDI messages. These messages are then piped into the computer and, once the host software has been configured correctly, can be used to tweak soft synths, plug-in effects and virtual mixers.

## Studio staple

In recent years, control surfaces have become much more functional, yet more affordable at the same time. In fact, no serious computer musician should be without one. With this in mind, we've put together a round-up of six controllers, each of which offers slightly different features. Although it's possible to buy an integrated control

surface and keyboard (Novation, M-Audio and Edirol produce several of these), we'll be concentrating on dedicated surfaces here.

As we review each product, we'll consider the number of features and controls on offer, ease of use, build quality, and any bundled software. It should also be noted that, although all of the control surfaces here can be used with popular software packages like Reason, Live, Cubase SX, Sonar and Logic Pro, some models offer a higher level of integration when used with certain packages. Remember, too, that the ratings given in this round-up may differ from earlier **cm** reviews – the market has changed a lot over the last 18 months. **cm**



Mac PC Behringer BCF2000

PRICE: £156



**THE BEHRINGER BCF2000**

features eight motorised faders, eight rotary encoders (each of which has an LED position indicator and a built-in push switch) and 30 push buttons (most of which have built-in on/off indicator LEDs). The unit connects to your computer via USB or MIDI, but must be mains powered.

Thanks to several significant firmware upgrades, the BCF2000 is now capable of emulating a number of industry-standard control surfaces (including the Logic and Mackie Controls). As a result, the unit is a viable budget alternative to the expensive heavyweight solutions – the BCF2000 integrates very well into a wide variety of software packages.

The unit is supported natively within

Reason 3 and offers a high level of integration after almost no setup time.

For advanced users, the BCF2000 features comprehensive programming options (you can delve into the murky world of System Exclusive level programming should you so desire). For the benefit of us mere mortals, Behringer also provide graphical programming software.

In most respects, the BCF2000 is a pleasure to use. However the motors that move the faders are a little too noisy for our liking, and this could be a problem when you're mixing at low or moderate monitoring levels. Also, though the build quality is more than adequate for home use, live users may want to consider a sturdier unit. Ultimately, though, the Behringer BCF2000 is a wise choice – it has an impressive feature list and offers great value for money.

CONTACT: Behringer Germany, +49 2154 92060  
WWW: www.behringer.com

**VERDICT:** A firmware upgrade has made an already good product outstanding. Superb value for money

RATING

9

Mac PC Mackie Control C4

PRICE: £799

**MACKIE FIRST MADE** a name for themselves in the control surface market with the Mackie Control (now known as the Mackie Control Universal). This is still a firm favourite, but their product line now also includes the Control Extender add-on and the C4.

The C4 works standalone or in combination with a Mackie Control. It needs to be connected to your computer via a set of dedicated MIDI ports (these can't be shared with anything else), as there's no built-in USB functionality.

The Mackie Control Universal can be used to control virtually any effect or instrument parameter and also acts as a fully-fledged mixer. However, the C4 is optimised for non-mixing duties, and it performs them superbly. This is thanks to the four large LCD displays – these provide full labelling for each

and every control (providing the unit is used with software that has full Mackie Control support). The 24 endless 'V-Pots' are surrounded by LED position indicators that respond to incoming automation data and show the current position of the control.

Although Reason 3, Cubase SX and Live 5 provide native support for the Mackie Control, none of them worked seamlessly with the C4 in our tests. Logic Pro, on the other hand, explicitly supports the C4, and as a result, it works really well with this software.

When it's properly supported, the C4 is a dream to use. It exudes quality, though you'll need to read the manual if you want to discover all that it has to offer.



CONTACT: Loud Technologies, 01268 571212  
WWW: www.mackie.com

**VERDICT:** A well featured device with excellent build quality. It's only let down by poor host software support

RATING

8

Mac PC **Kenton Control Freak Studio Edition**

PRICE: £250



**THE CONTROL FREAK**

Studio Edition is the only controller in this line-up to offer a complete set of 16 faders and buttons, making it ideal for tweaking complex mixes. Like the Kenton Spin Doctor, it only has MIDI connectivity, so you'll need to budget for an additional MIDI interface if no ports are currently available in your setup. The Control Freak feels like it's built to last – all of the controls are substantial enough to survive the rigours of regular live use.

The faders on the Control Freak offer roughly one third less travel than those on the Behringer BCF2000, although this is unlikely to be a serious problem (unless you want to make ridiculously accurate adjustments).

More importantly, the Studio Edition isn't capable of emulating any of the industry standard control surfaces, which will be an issue for some users. However, Reason 3 does offer native support for the device, so owners of this software should certainly consider taking a look at it.

The Control Freak Studio Edition is a solid performer that's been with us for quite some time now. However, since it was introduced, the market has moved on, and Kenton would be wise to add a few more features – such as a USB interface or motorised faders – if they want it to remain competitive. Likely to appeal most to those who want to get hands-on with the mixing of larger projects, the Control Freak Studio Edition is still a sound choice, but it no longer represents the best value for money option out there.

CONTACT: Kenton, 020 8544 9200  
WWW.kentonuk.com

VERDICT: An established, well-built product. However, there are now cheaper controllers with better functionality

RATING  
**7**

Mac PC **Kenton Spin Doctor**

PRICE: £90

**THE SPIN DOCTOR** has been around for quite some time now. It offers 16 rotary controllers, which can be assigned in 25 different programs. The unit must be powered from an external power source as it only has MIDI connectivity, though it is capable of merging an incoming MIDI signal with the outgoing signal (this contains the MIDI events produced by the unit). The Spin Doctor can also serve as a MIDI Analyser, making it a potentially useful problem solving tool to have in your studio.

The basic four-digit LED display shows the control value that's being transmitted. It's also used to demonstrate the functionality offered by the current preset – a brief description scrolls across the display.

The Spin Doctor is supported natively in Reason, and as with many control surfaces, the knobs available

are effectively multiplied through the use of keyboard shortcuts. This means that practically the entire Reason mixer can be controlled using just the 16 rotaries.

A simple PC-based utility can be used to edit, load and save templates to and from the control surface – useful if you find editing on the device to be a bit convoluted. Like the other Kenton unit in this round-up, the Spin Doctor has an all-metal case and is built like a tank. In terms of value for money, it compares well with the Evolution X-Session, but unfortunately lacks the convenience and ease of use of a USB connection.



CONTACT: Kenton, 020 8544 9200  
WWW.kentonuk.com

VERDICT: A refreshingly straightforward device to use, but a built-in USB MIDI interface would sweeten the deal

RATING  
**7**

Mac PC Behringer B-Control Nano

PRICE: £39

**THE BEHRINGER B-CONTROL**

Nano can be thought of as the baby brother of the BCF2000. However, although it shares many of the same visual design cues, it offers but a small fraction of the functionality of its elder sibling. What's more, the device is made completely from plastic, so it doesn't score particularly well in the build quality stakes.

Rather bizarrely, Behringer have kitted the Nano out with just MIDI connectivity, making the device appeal more to hardware freaks than computer geeks (who would have preferred USB support). The unit can be powered either by an external AC adapter or from three AA batteries. With a physical footprint that's just over half that of the BCF2000, the Nano is a little large for practical mobile use – given that it's marketed as an 'ultra-compact' device, we're surprised at

just how big it actually is.

The top panel of the Nano features four endless rotary encoders. These are similar to those found on the BCF2000, but don't have the LED position indicators. A total of eight push switches are available on the unit, but some of these are used exclusively for house-keeping functions.

Internally, the Nano is quite flexible and configurable, but the manual must be consulted if you want to make the most of its features.

At £39, the Nano is an obvious choice if you're working to a very tight budget. However, when you factor the cost of a MIDI interface into the equation, it starts to look a little less attractive. If it was half the size and had built-in USB, Behringer would have been onto a winner.



CONTACT: Behringer Germany, +49 2154 92060  
WWW.behringer.com

**VERDICT:** An entry level device that looks good on paper but should have been made half the size and USB-compatible

RATING

6

Mac PC Evolution X-Session

PRICE: £90



**THE X-SESSION IS** aimed squarely at digital DJs, but it can also serve as a perfectly good control surface for other musicians. The front panel contains one horizontal slider (for crossfades and scratchin'), a funky blue illuminated LCD display, 16 rotary controllers (of the end-to-end rather than endless type) and 12 buttons.

Both USB and MIDI interfaces are provided, and the unit can be host-powered when connected via USB or from an external AC adapter on other occasions. The device is big enough to give you comfortable access to all the controls, but not so large that you couldn't take it out and about with a laptop. The X-Session is class compliant, which means that no drivers are required in Windows XP or Mac OS X. In other words, this is a genuine plug 'n' play device.

Up to ten configuration presets can be saved in non-volatile memory. This is probably enough for the majority of users, but those who feel they might require more should clearly look elsewhere.

Reason 3 provides native support for the X-Session – you can use it to switch rack devices, flip between rack unit presets and, of course, control any of the rack units without performing any tedious setup chores. The controller ships with cutdown versions of Ableton Live and Arturia Storm.

The X-Session's build quality is pretty good, though the buttons don't have a very positive feel when you push them. It has obvious appeal for anyone with an interest in computer-based mixing, but it shouldn't be discounted by those who just want a basic but solid control surface at a reasonable price.

CONTACT: M-Audio, 01923 204010  
WWW.maudio.co.uk

**VERDICT:** A sensible starting point for the budget conscious – the X-Session isn't just for digital DJs

RATING

8