Akai PC MAC
APC40 £399

COMPUTER music EDITOR'S CHOICE *Award*

COMPUTER music PERFORMANCE *Award*

The hardware interface kings have teamed up with the live sequencing dons to create the ultimate tactile control surface

System requirements

PC 1.5GHz CPU, 512MB RAM,
Windows XP/Vista, Ableton Live 7

Mac G4 CPU, 512MB RAM,
Mac OS X 10.3.9, Ableton Live 7

Test system

Mac Apple Mac Pro Dual 2.8GHz
Quad-core Intel Xeon, 4GB RAM,
Mac OS X 10.5.6, Ableton Live 8

> Few would disagree that Ableton Live 8 is the benchmark for live sequencing software. Still, despite all the amazing performance functionality it puts at your fingertips, you'll often resort to staring at your laptop screen to figure out what's going on at any given moment. And even hardware controller options, offering all the debauched auto-mapping delights one could wish for, have typically involved far too much staring at the screen. Until now, that is...

The latest offering from hardware bigwigs Akai takes everything they've learned about tactile interfaces and intuitive workflow and combines it with Ableton's knowledge of what users of their software really need – the result is

the best controller we've ever used, without a shadow of a doubt. It's a USB device with an external PSU, and while it does work with other software as a standard MIDI controller, it's not especially exciting in this capacity. So let's have a look at what makes it such a winner with Live...

The unit presents your project in manageable chunks of eight channels, and it's dominated by a matrix of buttons delivering five clip triggers for an octet of tracks. These light up amber when there's a clip loaded, green if there's one playing and red if the clip is recording. And when triggered, they flash the count-in, just like the play buttons in Live. Very slick!

To the right are Scene trigger buttons for all

> "It's all incredibly well thought out, feels great and makes it hard to imagine a better controller"

navigate one row or column at a time, with the backlit buttons reflecting this. Shift-pressing the cursor buttons moves by along by five scenes or eight channels, and you can jump to any 8x5 matrix 'set': hold down Shift and the clip buttons show every available 8x5 group – for example, if you had a project with 32 channels and 20 scenes, holding Shift would reveal a 4x4 grid. The current 8x5 group is represented by an amber button, all others are red.

Anybody who knows the joys of Live 8's new channel groups will appreciate the fact that closed group channels appear as one channel/column on the matrix, while opening a group reveals the contained channels (although it'd be nice to be able to do this from the unit itself, which Ableton hope to implement in future).

WYSIWYG

The buttons in the lower-left potion represent all of the main mixer controls you get on screen. There are eight tracks' worth of buttons for channel select, mute, solo/cue and record arm, plus a level fader per channel. Notably, all the mixer buttons are backlit in the same colours as their software equivalents. There's a strip for the master channel, too, with a Cue Level knob in place of the mute/solo/arm buttons.

The top-right Track Control section houses eight endless rotary knobs, one for each current channel, which can be assigned to Pan or one of three send buses. Below this is the Device Control area, with yet another bank of eight rotaries, this time for controlling your plug-ins – see the boxout for more on this. What's more, all of the rotary encoders have LED rings to show each parameter's current value.

Other controls include buttons for Tap Tempo, tempo Nudge and global Play/Stop/Record, and a crossfader for the Live equivalent.

Is there anything missing? Well, we'd like to see some clip-loop facility, but that's about it. It's all incredibly well thought out, feels great and makes it hard to imagine a better controller. It revolutionises live play and opens the door to on-the-fly arrangement techniques in the studio – this is something that Live has always promised, but mapping effects, clips and scenes has quite never been practical enough for it.

If you use Ableton Live in a performance situation, the APC40 is essential; if you use Live to arrange your tracks, it's highly recommended; and if you do neither of these things with Live, then you don't know what you're missing! If you're not currently an Ableton advocate, then the APC40 could be a compelling reason for you to 'go Live' – it even comes with a cutdown version of the software to get you started. **cm**

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five rows, while Clip Stop buttons are found beneath each column, with a global Stop All Clips button at the bottom right.

Five alive

Now, five clips per channel might not seem like a lot, but it quickly becomes apparent that it's enough to be useful, while still enabling you to take in the state of play at a glance. If the grid was larger, it would probably be confusing and the device would be bulkier, so five is spot on.

The clip navigation system is as perfect as could be. A red outline in Live's interface surrounds the clips currently displayed on the APC40 matrix. Using the cursor keys, you can

What a knob!

One of our favourite aspects of the APC40 is the amazing Device Control section. The eight knobs are automatically assigned to the parameters of the current plug-in, so for most Live plug-ins and simple Devices, you don't need to configure anything to use them. And not only that, but their endless pots have LED readouts that show exactly what the setting in Live is.

You're not limited to eight parameters, of course, as the Shift button lets you use the buttons to jump between eight different banks of parameters, giving an effective total of 64. But eight is perfect for controlling the macro knobs on Live Racks, so you'll most often rack up your effects for convenient use.

Without the Shift button, the Device Section's keys offer a wide range of incredibly useful functions. These are Clip/Track, which switches between plug-in view and the clip view on your computer's monitor; Device On/Off; a pair of buttons for moving to the next or previous device on the channel; and Detail View, which opens or closes the clip/channel window. There are three more buttons in this section that are actually global rather than device-specific: Record Quantization, MIDI Overdub and Metronome.

All in all, we can't think of any way in which this section could be improved – it simply makes Live a joy to perform and record with.

Alternatively

Faderfox LV-2
N/A >> N/A >> £199
More versatile than the APC40, but not nearly as effective for Live itself

M-Audio X-Session Pro
cm108 >> 6/10 >> £79
This extremely simple controller is very popular with numerous Live-using DJs

Verdict

For Nice build quality
Impeccably thought-out control system
Great matrix navigation
Perfect integration with Live
Size and weight just right
Footswitch inputs for additional control

Against Faders too short for some

Without peer in the Live controller market, this is essential gear for Ableton Live users

10/10