

Akai MPC500 Music Production Centre | £549

Eighteen years after the first incarnation, Akai return with a new MPC. *Jono Buchanan* wipes a tear from his eye as he watches it come of age with pride...



ON THE DVD

WHAT IS IT?

A highly portable budget addition to Akai's legendary MPC range

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HIGHLIGHTS

- 1 Battery or AC mains power
- 2 Portability
- 3 Solid dual effects processors and separate master effect

Back in 1988, Roger Linn joined forces with Akai to produce the first MPC sampling drum machine.

The MPC60 was its name. Such was its success that Akai have been developing variations, updates and modifications of it ever since.

The basic MPC concept is a simple, three-stage affair: firstly, provide

sampling as standard, so that a library of individual hits and phrases can be recorded and saved onboard. Secondly, put pads on the front panel to allow direct, touch-sensitive access to the sample collection. And lastly, shove in a fully-fledged sequencer that allows the arrangement of these hits into a series of patterns, which can be easily chained together into songs.

The original units were brilliant for a number of reasons; the principal one being that suddenly three big areas of performance were housed under one roof. But in these days of all-singing, all-dancing DAWs, our needs have changed and functionality of this type isn't just standard, it's been equalled and surpassed by the functions offered by software-based sequencers.

So, what does the MPC have to offer us now? And how does this latest model, the MPC500, fit into the rest of Akai's range?

Legends in a box

The MPC has endured, in part, as not everyone is as taken with the DAW concept as us studio types. The immediacy of the system described above shouldn't be underestimated and neither should its playability. Also, the early days of DAW development, particularly when MIDI and audio were first housed under one roof, had many of us recoiling from horrible timing clashes between different types of data – none of which troubled the trusty MPC range.

It's easy to find interviews and testimonies from countless producers who continue to swear by their Akai



units. For as long as this remains true, the legend will endure. So what does this latest unit, the MPC500, offer?

Little brother

The MPC500 joins three other models currently on the market: the top-of-the-range MPC4000Plus, the MPC2500 and the MPC1000BK. It joins at the bottom of the ladder, offering an affordable way to get your hands on the technology. On the sample front, the 500 offers 16-bit, 44.1kHz sampling with 16MB of memory.

The sequencer offers 100,000 steps, with capacity for 99 sequences. Sequences can be ordered and saved into songs, 20 of which can be held onboard. The 500 also breaks with the MPC tradition of offering 16 front panel pads, with 12 instead available; the 500 is considerably smaller than its peers, so this is simply a decision designed to save space. The rest of the top panel features transport controls, a volume control and gain dial for input sources, plus Akai's Q-link controller.

Elsewhere, assorted buttons provide access to the MPC's various modes, which we'll get to very shortly. Round the back, you'll find line level stereo in and out, MIDI In/Out, USB and headphone ports and a toggle switch to power up the LCD's backlight.

The front panel features a slot for a Compact Flash card, while the underside of the unit reveals a big feature of the MPC500; a battery compartment for six AAs. Add this feature to the new compact size and it's clear Akai want to push this box as a creative solution for live musicians. So that's the spec, but how is it in use?

Plug and play

Immediate, fun and intuitive are the three words which spring to mind with this latest MPC. The 500 ships with four demo tracks (check out the DVD), which do a good job of showcasing the MPC's sound and playability. Once one of these songs is selected the sample set spreads itself out over the pads so that the individual samples can be triggered, in true MPC tradition.

As mentioned there are 12 physical pads, but these are organised into four pad banks – a simple button press takes you from one to the next – so 48 actual samples can be triggered from the front panel as a set. The pads themselves are, of course, velocity sensitive and require a pretty substantial tonk to play really loudly. These onboard sample sets feature

Effects and connectivity

The MPC500 provides two stereo effects processors for individual samples and a separate master effect to sit over the mix.

Nine effects algorithms are available, and the two stereo effects can be applied either to your entire collection of sounds or, more usefully, to a

single pad. Setting this up is easy with just a combination of button presses and then a hearty smack of the chosen pad.

All sounds can then be sent to the master effect, which is where you get busy with compressors, EQs and the like. You can hear how crunchy the

sound becomes with a master compressor on this month's DVD.

The USB port allows direct connectivity to your computer for storage, and on cabling it up the MPC's memory card shows up as a hard drive icon. You can then drag and drop any data you want to transfer.

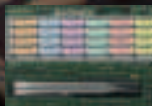
ALTERNATIVES



Roland SP-606

£446

An MPC by any other name? Well, kind of. The 16 front-panel pads look awfully familiar, but this is no cheap rip-off. The SP-606 features digital I/O as standard, generous sample times and real-time controllers like D-Beam. roland.com



NI Battery 3

£150

Battery has just reached version 3 – I know what you're thinking, it's software and therefore ineligible for comparison here. Not really: install this on a laptop and you've got a portable solution with almost endless sample memory and pad triggers. See? native-instruments.com



Akai MPC2500

£980

A fairly obvious alternative this one, but worth a direct comparison to the MPC500. Digital I/O ports lie on the back panel, as do a monstrous four MIDI Outs, meaning those pads can become a huge control surface. Eight line outs and an onboard CD/DVD drive option hint at the higher end spec too. akaipro.com



SPECS

Display: Two 16 character LCD w/back light
Memory card slot: Compact Flash (from 32MB to 2GB)
Power requirement: 12V DC 600mA (negative tip)
Battery life: Approx. 4.5 hours with backlight on.
Sound Generator
Sampling rate: 44.1kHz
Memory capacity: 16MB standard (11.5MB for sound memory), expandable up to 128MB
Recording time: 136sec. (16MB, mono) or 24m 28sec. (128MB, mono)
Memory expansion slot: One for optional EXM128
Data format: 16-bit linear
Polyphony: Up to 32 (dependent on processing)
Dynamic filtering: 2-pole low-pass filter per voice
Preset sound memory: 5MB
Number of programs: 24
Effects
Effects: Two stereo effects and master effect
Effect type: Chorus, Flanger, Bit Cringer, 4-band EQ, Compressor, Phase shifter, Tremolo, Flying Pan, Reverb, Delay
Master effect: 4-band EQ, Compressor
Sequencer
Maximum events: 100,000 notes
Resolution: 96 parts per 1/4-note
Sequences: 99
Tracks per sequence: 48
MIDI output channels: 16
Song mode: 20 songs, 250 steps per song
Drum pad: 12 (velocity and pressure sensitive)
Drum pad banks: 4
Sync mode: MIDI clock
Inputs/Outputs
Record input (L and R): Two 1/4-inch jacks
Stereo output (L and R): Two 1/4-inch jacks
Phones output: 1/4-inch jack
MIDI: In, Out
USB port: 1
Dimensions: 266 x 175 x 44mm
Weight: 1.34kg

bass sequences, percussion and effects alongside the beats too, which makes you quickly realise why Hip Hop and R 'n' B producers have taken these machines so much to heart.

However, the real joy comes when you start sampling and creating sound sets of your own – this is, after all, why you'd buy this box in the first place. Once you've connected your recording source at the back, it's easy to set gain control for the inputs and capture a recording. You can then assign your

start' at the same time. A one-bar count in will then lead you into a two-bar default loop (this can be extended) during which time you can bash as many pads as you like. The loop cycles round, playing back the results as you go, so layering multiple overdubs is quick, easy and enormously fun.

If you make a mistake or have second thoughts about a particular sound, a quick hold of 'erase' while tapping the offending pad will remove its contents from your sequence. Once

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new sample to a pad and repeat the process to your heart's content, building a library as you go.

Make tracks

Once your samples are safely onboard, it's time to build a sequence. This can be done in step-time via a MIDI controller keyboard or, most likely, in real-time via the pads, which is certainly the most fun and hassle free way. Choose a tempo, select an empty sequence from the 99 available locations, then hit 'record' and 'play

you've created your sequence you can then build it into a song arrangement, as these organise sequences and decide how long they'll play for before the next one takes over. If you're working live and don't like the idea of predetermining these changes, lining sequences up and notching the MPC from one to the next is also child's play.

Edits and control

The pads themselves double as function switches, accessing a range of controls. They dial up load and save

options, for example, as well as allowing access to the onboard effects (see box on page 71) and audio edit tools, like Sample Trim and Loop. The front panel also features a tap-tempo button, which you hold down whilst banging repeatedly on any pad to determine the tempo you want. This is well designed, as you can't do this inadvertently; good news for wannabe live users.

The Timing Correct feature acts as Quantise for your real-time pad recordings and defaults to 'on', though this can be disabled if you want a looser feel. As expected, the timing is rock solid. The Q-Link slider on the front panel lets you assign a parameter and perform real-time edits.

Seriously, now...

The MPC500 is great fun, but a serious musical tool as well. It's obviously

aimed at musicians on the move and nothing rivals it for portability and instant rhythmic gratification.

There's no real learning curve as

all functions are either immediately obvious or well described in the manual. Akai offer a useful comparison chart on their website so that you can check the 500's spec against the other MPC models available, and I guess this is the one area you need to do some research if you're considering a purchase. Do you need extra outputs, digital connections and the like?

Generally, the more advanced features come in bigger, less portable boxes and won't run off batteries, so the choice is yours. Assuming you can sacrifice these things, I can't recommend the 500 highly enough as a beat maker and phrase sampler. Legend preserved, reputation intact. **FM**

Which MPC to choose?

As we've seen, the 500 joins the MPC range at the bottom, offering fewer features but a more attractive price than ever before. However, how much is really missing?



Well, the next model up (the 1000BK) offers an envelope generator for filter as well as amplifier (the 500 just has an amp

EG), 32 channels of MIDI compared to the 500's 16, an extra pair of line outs, plus two MIDI Ins and Outs and SPDIF I/O as standard. And it also features a second Q-Link slider.



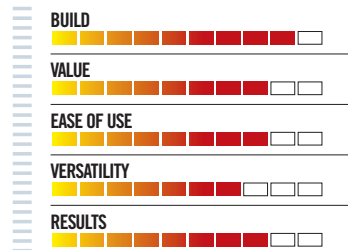
The 2500 features more MIDI and physical line outs with eight rear-mounted ports, and yet

more real-time physical sliders on the front panel.



You might even want to check out the flagship 4000, with multiple sample rates, colossal onboard memory, extended polyphony, vast step sequencer, more songs, extra pad banks and so on. You will need 1,600-odd quid, though.

FutureMusic VERDICT



It might strip back a few MPC features, but it offers true portability in their place...