Akai MPD32 | £250

The classic MPC look is stripped of audio functions and goes all 'virtual' on us. ***Robbie Stamp*** bins his zip drive and gets controlled...

ON THE DVD

WHAT IS IT?

USB/MIDI pad control unit with 16 classic MPC pads, 8 assignable faders, knobs and switches and transport controls.

CONTACT

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HIGHLIGHTS

1 Quick to setup and edit
2 Uncrowded controller surface with plenty of space
3 Wide range of parameter assignments

With a dearth of control surfaces filling the audio production market, Akai are relying on the classic look of their MPC range to make the MPD32 stand out from the crowd. It's bigger than its predecessor, the MPD24 (more like an MPC2000, but standing lower and weighing a lot less), offers more controls and sports a more pleasing black/dark grey colour scheme.

The nod to DAW control of the MPD24 has now been made into a full feature with expanded controls, I/O and assignment possibilities. Though there is more in the box, does the MPD32 go far enough to be a useful DAW controller as well as drum/MIDI programming tool?

As with the MPD24, this unit is a USB beast that can be buss powered, although when used in a standalone MIDI mode, a 6v DC supply is needed (not supplied).

Once plugged in via USB the unit shows up as 3 separate USB/MIDI devices. This means that 48 MIDI channels can be utilised to create a wide-ranging DAW control, MIDI instrument triggering and program/parameter change structure without having to get too conservative.

Pads, knobs and faders

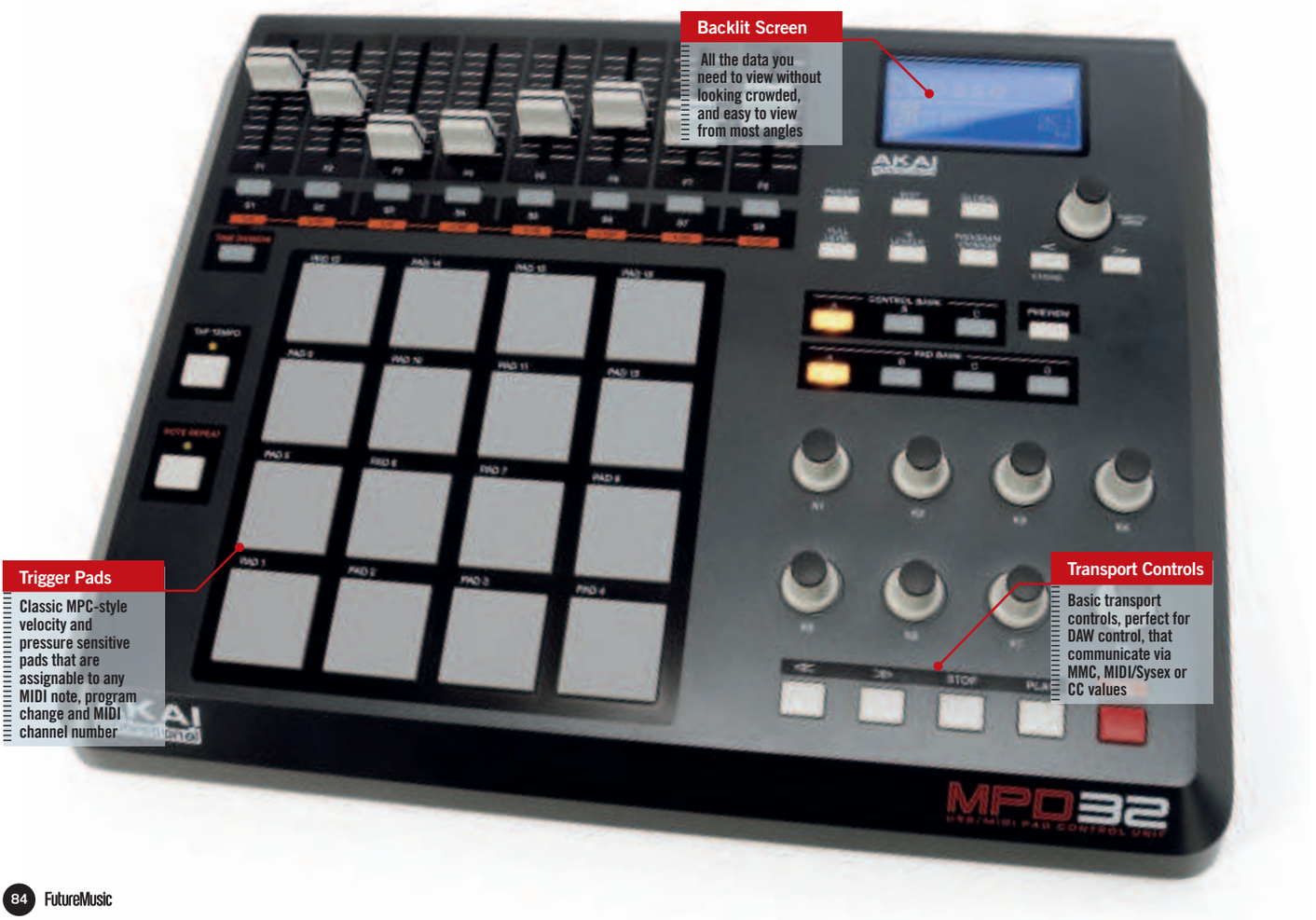
Of course 'wide ranging' can also mean 'confusing', and this is where a well-made menu/edit system can make all the difference, a point that shall be addressed once we've had a wee tour of the broad interface.

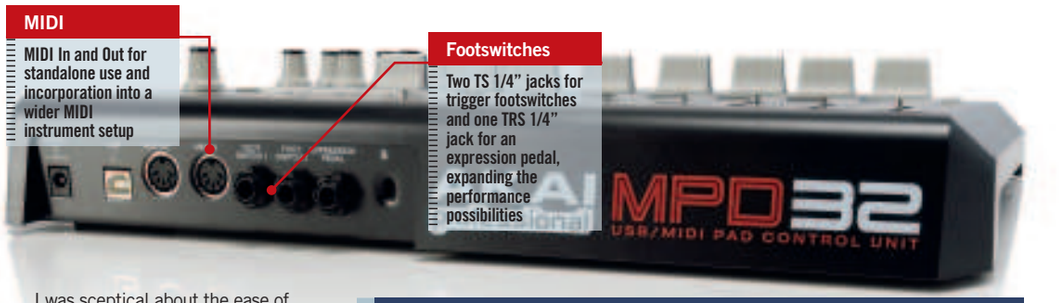
As well as the 16 MPC style pads, 8 rotary knobs and 8 faders, with 8 lit toggle switches beneath, there are three more input possibilities: rear jack sockets for one expression pedal and two footswitches.

The final input controls come in the form of a transport section (record, play, stop, forward and rewind). These can address transport communication with software platforms via four different protocols: CC number, MMC, MIDI/Sysex, and a MIDI/MMC combination.

The pads, faders and switches feel just like they always have on the MPCs, though the knobs have been altered as they can now rotate continuously. The controls all feel solid enough to endure a fair battering and the layout is quick to navigate, though I do find the plastic chassis a little uninspiring.

The hardware interface is a backlit LCD which, considering the amount of parameters that can be altered, has a lot of deliver within its 27cm^2 area. As ever you can have all the parameters and useful features you want, but if getting to them is via a labyrinthine menu then they might as well not exist.





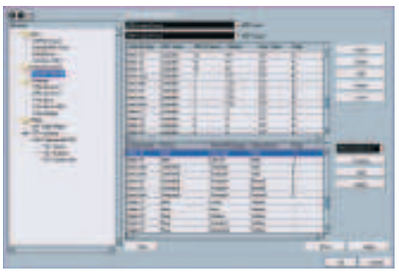
I was sceptical about the ease of getting all these pads, knobs and faders doing what I wanted, but in fact it was a synch. Apart from a few global settings, most of the editing only involved one screen, accessed by pressing the Edit switch after tweaking the knob/fader/switch in question.

I know there's not a lot one can do with a trigger pad or fader, but I can't imagine anything else I would need to edit beyond what is on offer here. As well as the primary use of each control (notes via pads, CCs from the knobs, faders and switches), each has an alternative assignment.

The pads and switches can be used to send program change messages, whilst the knobs and faders can assigned to control aftertouch. All CC ranges can be set (i.e. minimum and maximum values), which is essential to prevent overshooting on filter resonance control, for instance, or limiting DAW fader throws to peak at 0dB.

DAW Control

With all DAW packages offering some degree of external controllability via MIDI based interfaces, there is no reason to stay chained to the common computer mouse. Though the basic presets that ship with the MPD32 assign the faders to levels controls, the switches to channel muting and the knobs to panpot duties, there are a multitude of uses for these simple controls.



With three control banks on offer, some extensive, mouse time-saving setups can be developed to increase productivity.

Vital mix plug-ins can have their parameters mapped to rotary knobs, while delays can be turned on and off via switches and filter sweeps set to fader control. The possibilities are endless, even overwhelming, but once you've ditched the mouse and started tweaking knobs and faders, a bolder, more colourful approach to a mix can be realised.

MPC genes

The MIDI programming side of the MPD32 keeps many of the familiar MPC functions. The 16 pads are extended by the four pad bank switches that allow for four sets of pad assignments, a function that really helped the MPCs become such renowned performance tools. The Full Level switch allows the user to set all the pads to send velocity at 127, and 16 Levels maps the last pressed pad's note number to all 16 pads with the velocity numbers increasing up the pads from 7 to 127.

Again, from the MPC side there is the Note Repeat function, which does what it says! The repeating can be assigned to either momentary or toggling behaviours, and Gate and Swing parameters are on the next edit page along to make the most of those repeats. Tap Tempo and Time Division switches come into play here too, though tempo can be set per preset (i.e. global setup) or to incoming MIDI clock.

As a DAW controller, the unit is supplied with setups for a range of popular sequencers and softsynths (Live, Cubase, Sonar, Reason, Arturia, BFD and more), and the CD-ROM contains a selection of device map templates for these applications to make the setting up pretty much instant. Customising the MPD32 for any DAW or softsynth is simple – it's probably going to be the software that creates the headaches.

Just as the pads have 4 banks, so the controllers (faders, knobs and switches) have their own Control Bank switches to select one of the three available banks. This gives the user, for instance, 24 level faders, pan pots and mutes. Though the faders have a shorter throw than those commonly found on mixing desks, they are smooth, sturdy and have enough track to ride levels in a worthwhile fashion. h.

Twist to open

The knobs are also smooth and their placement means they are not crammed in between rows of other knobs and switches (as is so often the case) making them easy to access, an important factor when being creative with a mix or synth.

> "The controls all feel solid enough to endure a fair battering and the layout is quick to navigate"

The MPD32 has 30 preset slots available in its memory, with each preset containing a total snapshot of the controller assignments and ranges. Though this may not seem a lot when you consider the sheer amount of banks in workstation synths and the like, I think it's easily enough for a controller.

To be honest I'd happily use only three or four presets for sequencer control, live performance and a couple of softsynths. Of course there is no real limit to the number of presets one can store when using the supplied Vyzex editor/librarian application (see the box

SPECS

Connections: MIDI In x1, MIDI Out x1 (5 pin DIN), TS 1/4" jack footswitch inputs x2, TRS 1/4" jack expression pedal input x1, USB x1, 6v DC power in, Kensington lock slot

Drum Pads: 16 – velocity and pressure sensitive

Drum Pad Banks: 4

Faders: 8 (45mm throw)

Rotary knobs: 8 (360°, non-detented)

Switches: 8 (below faders)

Transport Controls: Rec, Play, Stop, Ffwd, Rew

MIDI Channels: 48 via USB (16 channels x 3 ports) and 16 channels over MIDI In/Out DINs

Preset Slots: 30 (all user editable)

Power: Either USB bus power (~100mA/5v DC) or via external adaptor (~1A, 6v DC)

Display: 70mm x 38mm backlit LCD (white on blue) with adjustable contrast (software parameter)

Dimensions:
308 x 384 x 64mm

Weight:
2.5kg

on Vyzex the Librarian on p88). As with the rest of the programming on this unit, storing, loading and naming presets is simple and quick.

Sitting on the fence

On one hand the MPD32 could be considered a fence-sitter, hedging its bets between MIDI programming/performance and DAW control, but with many platforms, Ableton Live in particular, sitting on the same fence, this multi-usage seems to make sense.

There are obviously more dedicated and integrated DAW controllers on the market, though at a much higher price, but in this role, it's definitely a useful product. As a MIDI/drum programming and performance tool for those working with computer and MIDI based instruments it's flexible, well featured and quick to set up.

The control surface is simple and uncrowded, though this is no surprise as it has a substantial footprint. The LCD is not expansive in any way, but it provides enough feedback to allow the user to see what information they are sending and adjust parameters without wading through endless menu pages. My only real gripe is that no PSU is supplied. Otherwise, I am happy to see the classic MPC heritage reapplied to the audio-free realm of virtual controllers, creating a useful, flexible and easy to use programming and performance tool. FM

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ALTERNATIVES

Novation Remote ZeRO SL

£229

Smaller, lighter and with battery operated potential, this is a direct price competitor. The Automap Universal function makes it even quicker to integrate with your DAW, but its MIDI programming functionality, with just 8 pads, is a lot less extensive. Less of a performance tool than the MPD32, sitting on the DAW side of the controller fence.

novationmusic.com

Korg Pad Kontrol

£152

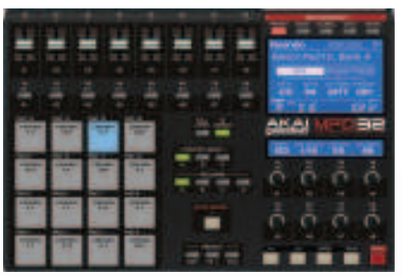
There's only the 16 drum pads here, so not so much of a DAW control ability, but the X-Y pad makes it a useful plugin effects controller. Drum programming is the prescribed use here, with MIDI In/Out and footswitch input making it a MIDI setup contender. Again, this is smaller and so the lack of extra controllers is traded for portability and price.

korg.com

Vyzex the Librarian

The MPD32 ships with an editor/librarian package created by Psicraft Designs. The first, most obvious use for Vyzex, which sounds like some Conan the Barbarian sidekick, is for expanding upon the 30 preset slots available on the MPD32, allowing the archiving of all the user's project control setups.

If the user wants to really lean on the controller and use it in conjunction with numerous platforms, this can prove invaluable. Even though the MPD32 is easy to setup and adjust, Vyzex does allow the user to view all the assignments for each fader, pad, knob and switch in one screen, as well as edit any of the parameters for each.



Rearranging of the presets can also be executed here much quicker than on the controller, so performance setups can be tailored for onstage use without losing the studio setups.

The final use is that it can be used to update firmware as and when it becomes available.

FutureMusic VERDICT

BUILD

VALUE

EASE OF USE

VERSATILITY

RESULTS

A flexible and extensive controller for studio and performance, making it worthy of the MPC heritage.