M-Audio ProKeys Sono 61 | £259

This multi-talented machine wants you to perform, record and practice. ***Chris Barker*** finds out if this digital piano and interface can really deliver it all

WHAT IS IT?

61-key digital piano and USB audio interface

CONTACT

Who: M-Audio
Tel: +44 (0)1923 204010
Web: m-audio.co.uk

HIGHLIGHTS

1 Easy to use
2 Flexible
3 Great piano sound

SPECS

Controls
61-note, semi-weighted, velocity-sensitive keyboard
Assignable modulation wheel and volume control
Pitch bend wheel
Piano Reset button restores all settings to piano sound

Sounds
On-board, stereo-sampled Steinway premium piano sound and four other high-quality instruments: Bright piano, electric piano, organ and clav

Effects
Reverb and chorus

Audio Interface
USB 2-in/2-out audio interface with 16-bit/44.1kHz audio

I/O
XLR mic input
1/4" instrument and RCA inputs
1/4" jacks for stereo line output
Dual front-mounted headphone jacks
Sustain pedal jack
MIDI out jack

There's more choice than a Marks & Spencer sandwich shelf when it comes to key-speckled MIDI controllers, so another one seems like suicide, right? Well not according to M-Audio, who have focused their attentions on providing a value-for-money, niche version of a few products in the form of their Pro Keys Sono 61. There's a definite gap in the market for a controller that combines the flexibility of a semi-weighted keyboard and soundset of a digital piano with a USB audio interface – but is it a gap really worth filling?

My initial thoughts on this hybrid device were pretty sceptical, but considering the low price, it was something worth investigating further. On unboxing the keyboard, the initial surprise is how light it is – it's ideal for the gigging musician and bedroom computer music maker. The downside of the easy-to-carry mentality is the cheap-plastic feel – although it's nothing different to most MIDI controller keyboards, it would be interesting to see how this would survive serious touring.

The 'piano' style action was also slightly disappointing because of the spongy feel of the keys, but again, for a semi-weighted keyboard at this price, it wasn't a massive issue and the keys actually responded quite well with the in-built sounds.

There's no power supply in the box, but the unit happily powers over USB either from a USB-style plug or connected to a computer. Round the back there's an XLR microphone input, instrument quarter inch jack and phono RCA inputs – so it works as a 2 x 2 audio interface when jacked in to your computer via USB. Also in the bundle is the ubiquitous copy of Ableton Live Lite for anyone buying this as a true starter package.

Sono rise

Playing the instrument standalone is very nice and the five included sounds (Piano, Bright Piano, Electric Piano, Organ and Clav) are great and would work when performing live or teaching or practicing. The good ol' GM sound bank is also built in to the keyboard if so desired [shudder!]. There are basic wet/dry rotary controls to add very generic reverb and chorus effects. The biggest disappointment for me was that there was no basic sustain pedal included, and along with the fact that there's no AC power supply included you'll have to spend some extra cash if you were really intending to perform using the Sono. The inclusion of two headphone sockets on the front of the keyboard should make this a great teaching keyboard and again adds another extra shot of flexibility.

ProEase

Even though M-Audio are straddling a few different areas with this product, overall they have done a pretty decent job on providing a product for the piano player to begin recording with a more realistic action than your standard MIDI controller. Plus, being able to turn the Sono 61 on and play a decent stereo-sampled Steinway Piano sound instantly makes the Sono a great value Digital Piano and MIDI controller – even without using the audio interface capabilities.

I found myself actually playing piano more than I have done in years, simply because of the feel of the keys and because I didn't have to boot my entire studio with FireWire connections, USB, MIDI and virtual instruments just to get a sound up and running! Overall, the Sono is a bit of a jack-of-all-trades. You get everything you need in one sleek case and at £300 it's also a bit of a bargain. FM

FutureMusic VERDICT

BUILD
VALUE
EASE OF USE
VERSATILITY
RESULTS

It's aimed at the beginner but the price and flexibility could tempt any producer or performer.

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