

Akai APC40 | £400

It's been a long wait so is the APC40 going to live up to the hype of being the first Ableton-branded controller? *Martin Delaney* steps up to the grid

WHAT IS IT?

A dedicated (and Ableton-endorsed) MIDI hardware controller for Live 7 and 8, with intriguing three-colour LED clip launch buttons.

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HIGHLIGHTS

- 1 Those buttons are going to sell it
- 2 No-brainer setup and software integration for Ableton Live 8 users
- 3 Hefty build quality

Back in January, Ableton announced Live 8, Max for Live, and the Akai APC40. Since then? Well, Live 8 is out, no sign of Max for Live, and we've finally got a finished APC40. Can any hardware controller live up to the anticipation? Can one hardware controller satisfy every type of Live user? The words 'No' and 'No' come to mind, but it's important to stay flexible. Best read on.

Built to last

The black/grey APC feels solid and certainly won't dismantle itself mid-set. Meanwhile the size is 'interesting' for something targeting

performance use – it's a little big to be comfortably backpacked, and I've done a lot of gigs in bars and booths where this wouldn't fit. The size makes sense in other ways, though – the controls are clearly laid out, and there's enough room between them for the chubbier-fingered artisté.

But where should you put the APC? If it's beside your computer, it might get in the way of your USB, FireWire, or power cables. If it's in front then your screen and keyboard are going to disappear into the distance. Fact is it's always hard to get a line of sight where you can see what's happening on the APC and what's going on on your screen at the same time.

The left-hand side of the APC's surface holds the clip launch buttons, and below that is the mixer section, including a cue level knob and short faders. The knob-rich right-hand side deals with effect sends, navigation, macro controls, transport and finishes off with a replaceable DJ-style crossfader – DJs will also dig the dedicated nudge and tap tempo buttons. Round the back there's a USB connection, mains power in, on/off switch, and two footswitch inputs.

Light up the stage

Plug the APC into the mains – you can't power that many lights from USB – and connect it to your computer. Launch Live 8 (or the feature-limited version of Live that comes in the box to get you started), open Preferences, and select the APC as a control surface in the MIDI/Sync tab. Load some clips into Session View, and the clip buttons light immediately to show their status. It's simple.

There are four colour states: Off = no clip, amber = clip loaded, green = clip playing, and red = recording. The APC can't differentiate deactivated clips, though and I'd prefer if they



Clip Launch

These colour-changing buttons show clip status, and let you overview your entire set.

Track Buttons

Track select, activate, solo, and record. Pretty lights and very useful!

Mixer Section

Short-but-functional faders and rotary cue level. It all feels pretty solid.

Crossfader

DJ-friendly crossfader, which can be replaced or upgraded by removing a panel under the APC.



Clip Launch

No I'm not kidding. This is what it's all about – Ableton's endorsement makes a difference.

Footswitches

Plug two footswitches into this for basic hands-free operations.

Power

Those lights have to get their power from somewhere – simple USB connection won't cut it.

disappeared from the grid, but tap a launch button (they're not velocity sensitive, by the way), and it'll flash according to global quantisation before the clip launches, just like on screen.

A red rectangle appears in Session View, enclosing the first eight tracks horizontally, and the first five scenes vertically (that's right – 8 x 5 = 40). The clips in this area are the ones in focus on the APC clip launcher grid, and you can use the bank select buttons to move this rectangle up/

down and left/right in steps of one scene or one track. Or press the shift button at the same time to move in steps of five instead. Press the shift button on its own, and the grid 'zooms out' so that each lit button represents an 8 x 5 grid from your Session View, then tap any one of these to jump straight to that grid. Below the clip grid you've got nine clip stop buttons, and below those, nine track select buttons. At the right are five scene launch buttons. All perfectly sensible.

the first eight macros or device parameters in your chosen track, but use shift and the four buttons below them to switch between four banks – so you can step to the next eight controls in whatever device you have loaded. The rest of the time, those four buttons are for viewing, activating, and navigating effects in the highlighted track. Below them are buttons for record quantisation, MIDI overdub, and metronome which is easy to trigger accidentally during a set,

SPECS

Connections: USB communication with computer, mains power required (power supply included), two footswitch inputs.

Software required: Ableton Live 8 required, or the feature-limited Akai version of Live 7, which is included in the box. This will also detect and upgrade any installed version of Live 7 to bring APC compatibility, or will install from scratch as usual if you don't already have Live 7.

System requirements:
Mac: G4 or faster, Intel recommended, 512 MB RAM/1 GB recommended, QuickTime 6.5 or higher, DVD-ROM drive, USB port.

PC: 1.5 GHz or faster, 512 MB RAM/1 GB recommended, Windows XP or Vista, Windows-compatible sound card/ASIO driver support recommended, QuickTime 6.5 or higher, DVD-ROM drive, USB port.

Controls: 40 tri-colour LED clip launch buttons, five scene launch buttons, Stop all clips button, eight stop clip buttons, nine select track buttons, four bank select buttons and shift button, Pan/Send select buttons, Activation/Solo/Record buttons for each track, Transport and other assorted button controls
Track controls: Eight endless rotary controllers.
Device controls: Eight endless rotary controllers in four banks, nine faders, Crossfader, Cue volume level knob.

Dimensions:
429 x 334 x 67mm
Weight:
5.8lbs

The clip launch grid was fun, but it doesn't give enough visual feedback without looking at the computer

Track Control

These endless knobs control your track pan, and up to three send amounts for each track.

Out of control

Things come up for debate when you get to the top right however. There are eight knobs for pans and sends. Press the pan button to make them pans, press the send A button to control the send A level for each track, likewise with sends B and C. It feels intuitively like these knobs should reflect the currently selected track, so you'd see all sends for a specific track – eight sends – but what you get instead is all of the send As or Bs or Cs for your grid. Which is frankly odd. Meanwhile the lower eight knobs instantly map to

remember that these ready-made MIDI mappings can be overridden by going into MIDI Map Mode as usual. I.e.

Into the groove

I enjoyed my first jams with the APC, and the clip launch grid was fun, but it doesn't give enough visual feedback that you can work without looking at the computer. And I *still* couldn't figure out where to put it. Over time, though, I started to get somewhere – I decided to overhaul my Live set (see the *Be Flexible* box on the next page for more about this), optimising the

Device Control

These control device parameters in the selected track, in up to four banks of eight parameters.

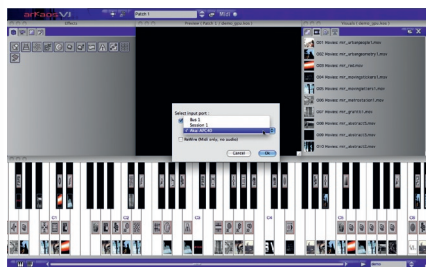
What About With Other Software?

I tried the APC with other music and VJ apps – it's recognised as a MIDI input, and it sends MIDI

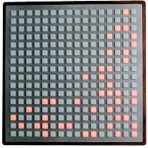
from the knobs and pads, but there's zero visual feedback – no pad lights, and no rings round the

knobs. Also, each vertical row of buttons sends the same MIDI notes, just on different channels, so it's not that useful as a generic controller.

By the time you figure out how to get it talking to other apps, you'll be wishing you bought something else. This highlights how Live-centric the APC is – but don't complain – that's what it's for!



ALTERNATIVES



Monome
\$500-\$1400

The Monome's another grid-based MIDI controller, but it's much more of a home-brew creation than the Akai, with all the good and bad that entails. If you want something that's more flexible than the APC, and plays nice with other apps, then the Monome is a good candidate – get on the waiting list!

monome.org



Novation ReMote Zero SL
£190

The Zero Mk I is one of the best Live-compatible controllers around, with those two screens giving tons of visual feedback, and plenty of knobs, buttons and faders. It's possibly the best equipped controller on the market for Live's instant mapping, so very little setup's required to get a hardware instrument experience.

novationmusic.com

Session View clip layout, and the arrangement of the on-screen windows, so the computer showed what the APC couldn't. Then I put the APC on top of my 15" MacBook Pro's keyboard – the APC's feet sit on the MacBook's speakers, and there's just enough height to clear the keyboard.

After these changes, it started to feel more like a hardware experience – like having an APC with a massive screen hanging off the back. It doesn't take long to get used to the rectangle-based navigation either, and the overview feature is a smart idea for managing more than eight tracks.

Target market

So, can it live up to the anticipation? Yes – a lot of thought has gone into this, and it's paid off. Will it satisfy ever type of user? No – but let's break them down. Producers might be better off with something like a Mackie MCU, unless they're the type who enjoys composing with jams in Session View.

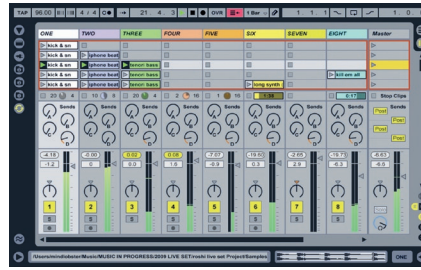
DJs will get more out of it, though a mouse is still needed to drop songs in from the Browser, and MIDI

Be Flexible

As soon as you select the APC40 in Live's Preferences, it's ready to control your set – the built-in navigation tools – the scene launch buttons, and the bank select buttons – make it pretty easy to get around, no matter how many scenes

or clips you have. Truth is though, you'll get more from the relationship between hardware and software if you adapt your Live set. I've updated the layout of my clips, so that each track contains mainly one type of sound – making it easier to

remember what's in each clip slot. I also deconstructed the way the clips were laid out across scenes – so I'm not using scenes so much to work through songs – there's more triggering of individual clips. I also used Live 8's Zoom Display feature to zoom up to 185%, hid my return tracks, closed the browser, opened my sends, and expanded the Session mixer upwards so that only five scenes are visible. I also dragged my tracks wider to fill the entire width of the screen – see the screen shot.



mapping will be necessary to control loop parameters. The APC's a Session View machine – it's going to work best for performers – that's why there's a P in the name, after all, and you'll see a lot of these at gigs this year, though

you might want to add a more interactive gesture-type controller, for Ableton's standard XY-style effects parameter control.

There's another important type of user, though – the new user. If I was

If I was coming to Live new, from scratch, this would definitely be on my shopping list

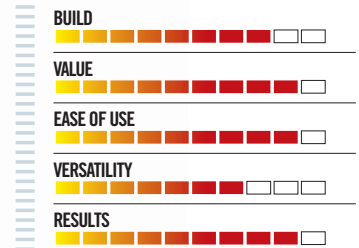
coming to Live from scratch, this would definitely be on my list, especially at this price. You'll get the best out of the APC by meeting it in the middle:

Change your working methods, or as a new user, don't resist building your Live set around it's layout and you'll soon get the best from it.

As a piece of hardware, it's not revolutionary by any means, but the APC40 and Live do work great together. The replication of Live's Session View in hardware can't be underestimated and remains a feature that – right now – no other controller attempts or pulls off so ably. **FM**



FutureMusic VERDICT



The Live controller everybody has to beat – a great balancing act between price and function.