

M-Audio Axiom Pro 49 | £318

The fight in the 'smart keyboard controller' arena just went box office. **Jono Buchanan** punches his weight with M-Audio's Axiom Pro...



WHAT IS IT?

A radical overhaul of M-Audio's flagship controller keyboard for introducing M-Audio's HyperControl integration software stacked with DAW control possibilities

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HIGHLIGHTS

- 1 HyperControl is super-intuitive
- 2 Computer functions controlled direct from the Axiom front panel
- 3 TruTouch keyboard is a joy to play



Hot on the heels of Novation's Remote SL Mark II series of keyboard controllers comes M-Audio's latest attempt to

wrest back control of this heavily contested territory. Like Novation, M-Audio have watched as producers and music makers have become more demanding about the number of controls they want to have direct access to from the front panel of their controller keyboards and have responded accordingly.

So, within a month of the new Remote SLs hitting the shop-floors, here is M-Audio's Axiom Pro which offers its own take on full DAW integration, with a fair few tricks up its sleeve. Get ready to rumble...

Overview

Firstly, here's an overview of the Axiom Pro range. Officially, this is an update to the original Axiom series but as

there are so many significant updates, I'm going to treat this as a 'new product' review rather than comparing the old with the new. There are three keyboard sizes available (25, 49 and

61 keys) and, so long as you're using your chosen model to operate your DAW of choice, the keyboard is USB buss-powered. If you're using it without connecting to a computer, you'll need to use a 9V DC input which must be purchased separately.

The other ports on the keyboard's back panel are a single pair of MIDI In/Out ports, connectors for Expression (Volume) and Sustain pedals and a rocker switch to enable power. If you're working with a Mac, operation is truly plug and play with no additional drivers required but if you're a PC user, you'll find what you need on one of Axiom Pro's two bundled CD install discs.

The other is required by Mac and PC users alike and contains Axiom Pro's all important HyperControl mapping software, the beating heart of the Axiom's integration possibilities. The front panel is awash with control

HyperControl

One of the reasons Axiom Pro makes such a great first impression is because it makes installing its HyperControl mapping software (the real heart of this instrument) so intuitive. Normally for a product of this kind, there's a universal installer which spans all DAWs and applications but M-Audio have developed a neater system – upon install via

CD, you choose your DAW from the supported application list before deciding whether to install straightaway, or 'Learn' about integration for the chosen program before you go ahead. The 'Learn' button launches a

'mini-manual' that guides you step-by-step through the setup process, with screengrabs from the DAW and 'print-outs' from the Axiom itself.

These are just the right length – comprehensively informative yet not unnecessarily wordy. A 20-minute read provides 90% of the information you need before working with Axiom becomes fully intuitive.





options with nine sliders, eight rotary encoders, eight pads, nine slider buttons, seven function keys, a further row of eight soft keys, a numerical keypad and a full set of transport controls. Not to mention octave up/down buttons, 'traditional' modulation and pitch bend wheels and the keyboard itself. This has been significantly updated from the original Axiom and now features M-Audio's TruTouch technology, which, if you don't like jargon, equates to a semi-weighted feel with aftertouch.

doesn't take long before you realise just how many tasks can be carried out directly from the front panel. Given that M-Audio is owned by Digidesign, integration with Pro Tools is stunning. What did surprise me though was just how great it was with every other DAW too. I was struck by how little manual reading I needed to do to get up and running and how quickly I abandoned my keyboard and mouse in favour of the Axiom's control options.

The transport controls worked immediately and the addition of a loop

status of the pads, with a real-time read-out of velocity weight and a virtual 'pad map' to show you which pads are being played. The eight pads trigger what M-Audio refer to as a virtual kit with kit one triggering the GM standard keys for kick, snare, open and closed hats, two toms plus ride and crash cymbals by default, with the option to switch to three other 'kits' (ie different assigned groups of notes) below the Axiom's display. This works well but would be better with soft key 'kit switch' buttons below the pads

themselves, so that you don't have to reach across while playing in real time.

Control aplenty

So, with note input taking care of itself, how does Axiom set about controlling a growing mix?

Well, very intuitively is the answer, with tasks appropriately grouped to control sources but with exactly the right amount of flexibility thereafter. Here's what I mean. By default, the fader banks control volume for the first eight channels, while the encoders look

SPECS

PC: Windows XP (SP2) Home or Professional Edition only, 800MHz or higher, 256MB RAM, DirectX 9.0b or higher, Windows Vista (32bit), 1GHz or higher, 1GB RAM, DirectX 10 or higher
Mac: OS X 10.4.9, G4, 733MHz, 512MB RAM, Mac OS X 10.5.0, G4, 867MHz, 768MB RAM, spare USB port

Compatible with: Pro Tools (HD, LE and M-Powered) 7.4 or above, Logic, Cubase, Reason, Live

Keyboard: 25-, 49- or 61-note, TruTouch semi-weighted, piano-style, professional-action keybed HyperControl MIDI mapping ASCII messages for software keyboard shortcuts

65 MIDI-assignable controls in total:

9 sliders, 9 buttons slider buttons, 8 rotary encoders, 8 velocity-sensitive trigger pads, 12 buttons in keypad arrangement, 6 transport buttons, 7 function keys, Aftertouch, Pitch bend and modulation wheels
 50 onboard memory locations
 USB buss-powered
 MIDI Out and MIDI In ports for extended external connectivity

4 programmable keyboard zones

Dimensions
 810 x 285 x 66mm
Weight
 4.5kg

As a keyboard player, I'm sniffy about keyboard action but the Axiom Pro really impressed me

As a keyboard player, I'm sniffy about keyboard action but I must say the Axiom Pro really impressed me. To echo my grumble from Novation's SL Mark II review however, where are the 76 and 88 key models?

Getting down to business

Once you're working within your chosen host (see Integration boxes), it

on/off toggle switch here is really handy. As well as the nice weight of the keyboard action, the pads also feel really good to play. You have to give them a pretty brutal smack to achieve 127 units of velocity (by default – the velocity curves are yours to edit) and they're capable of very musical results.

The moment you hit a pad, the Axiom's display transforms to show the



after pan duties. However, a simple press of the F1 'Mode' switch toggles the Axiom Pro away from mixing control and instead lets it control software instruments. These are often more readily controlled by rotaries and switches so, lo and behold, the rotaries and switches spring into life to edit the selected instrument while the faders remain on mixing duty. However, if you want to use the sliders to edit synth parameters you can, simply by pressing the fader flip button (S18).

Thereafter, faders control synth parameters, with a blue LED status light shining reassuringly at you from the middle of S18 until you switch fader flip off. And what do the rotaries do in fader flip mode? Take over volume mixing duties, of course!

It's a great system, as it lets you work immediately with relevant controls for the plug-in you have open. If you're working with a virtual B3 with drawbar controllers, the sliders will suit, whereas rotaries come to the fore

for instruments like Arturia's Minimoog V2. You can dive into other modes from the Home screen as well. Four soft keys lie below the screen, three of which are labelled for Inserts, Sends and EQ. Press the inserts button and three of the encoders allow you to firstly select the insert slot you want to assign – secondly, toggle it on or off (using bypass) and thirdly, scroll through the available plug-ins native to your DAW and select them, directly from Axiom's front panel!

Axiom Integration Watch

How well will the Axiom work with your DAW?

ALTERNATIVES



Novation Remote SL49 Mk II

£246

The single biggest contender to take on the might of the Axiom Pro. Featuring Novation's intuitive Automap software, this beast is also capable of comprehensively controlling your DAW of choice.

novationmusic.com



Euphonix MC Mix

£860

It lacks a keyboard, so why's it included here? Well, aside from note input, it does many of the Axiom's jobs – multiple DAW control despite the relatively sparsely front panel. Much more expensive and with ongoing screen 'issues'.

euphonix.com



CME VX5

£441

CME are coming up hot on the heels of the likes of M-Audio and Novation and the VX5 is among the reasons why. Featuring motorised faders and a series of other controller gems, this is also worthy of your consideration, though more long-winded to integrate initially.

cme-pro.com

Integration with... Logic

Once you've run the HyperControl setup installer, Logic integration is fantastic. Via Preferences and Control Panel setup, the Axiom Pro awaits your selection in the list of options and once ticked, you're away. By

default, the sliders and encoders control mixer volume and pan for the first 8 selected channels but a quick click of the 'F1' mode button switches you into instrument edit mode and up pop the parameters for your selected

instrument. Use the encoders to dial in the setting you want and arrow across the pages with the soft keys to track down the parameters you want (there are 33 pages of these for the monstrously proportioned ES2!).



Integration with... Reason

Once you've launched Reason, dive into the preferences and select control surfaces. The Axiom will show up as a control surface the moment you press the 'Autodetect Surfaces' button. There's no

need to select instruments from your keyboard or mouse as, in Reason, the 'Track <' and '>' buttons toggle from one instrument to the next. Watch out for one thing, though. The Axiom can only control devices within Reason

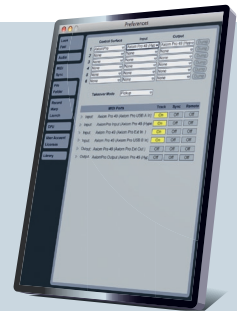
which are assigned to the sequencer track. To remedy this, control-click the relevant device and simply select 'Create Track' from the bottom of the pop-up list. Thereafter, you're fully integrated and ready to go.

Integration with... Ableton Live

Live is missing from the list of DAWs on the CD because Live 8 features the Axiom Pro on its supported list of Control Surfaces without additional install! By now, it's a familiar story – integration is immediate. You can toggle

between instruments either by using the track left and right buttons or by directly selecting the fader select buttons below the fader of your choice and having real time control of effects like Beat Repeat is intuitive.

It goes without saying that the pads are a match made in heaven for the Drum Racks and I think it's fair to say if you're a keyboard-playing Live user, this could be the control surface you've been waiting for.



Integration with... Stand-ones

And – of course – Pro Tools is supported by Axiom Pro too but as it's integration is similarly tight and immediate, I thought I'd put my word count to better use to explain how the Axiom works with standalone instruments. Over

USB, the Axiom is effectively just a very powerful MIDI controller. So, no HyperControl mapping and two-way conversations between the Axiom and your instrument take place. However, you can use the

array of control options to pick up and modify the MIDI CC parameters of your choice. Some templates are pre-installed on the Axiom (MiniMonsta, Oddity, ImpOSCar, etc), and editing your own is simple enough.

In other words, if I want to set up Logic's DJ EQ into slot five of channel 17, I can, without having to touch my computer. Rejoice. The Send button switches the rotary encoders to become send levels for the first eight auxiliary sends, whilst EQ does what you'd expect – maps the parameters of your EQ plug-in to the Axiom.

I was initially a little confused by how to select more than the 'first' eight parameters of my Channel EQ but a second press of the EQ button answered the question – rather than dropping out of 'EQ' mode, pressing the EQ button again ramps you up a page to the next set of controls.

Keypad fantastic

The Axiom's numerical keypad is worthy of note, as it too is capable of working in different ways. First and foremost, it lets you save and load any dedicated patches you've made for Axiom. But hang on a minute – why would you need to save patches? After all, if Axiom updates automatically to present you with all available parameters for the currently selected instrument or track, why would you need to save a master patch?

Well, Axiom can also control external MIDI instruments via controllers and setting and saving maps for these, for instance, spares the hassle of assigning relevant controller numbers each time you want to control your Virus Snow, for instance. The other advantages of saving patches relates directly to the numerical keypad itself.

For instance, a press of button '1',

Getting MIDI Busy

HyperControl is great but, as explained, it's currently limited to the major DAWs alone. As these contain their own instruments and effects, if you're a user of Logic, Live, Pro Tools, Reason or Cubase, it could be that you'll only ever need to use the Axiom with all of its blistering HyperControl technology. However, if you want to use it with standalone virtual instruments or external MIDI gear, you'll be

reassured to know that, via MIDI Control and other message types, all functions can be targeted at your musical 'object' of choice. Every control slider, encoder, button, pad and even the keypad can be used to output MIDI messages so complete control of most gear is possible. Axiom also supports both 'absolute' and 'relative' MIDI control change messages. A common problem with 'external'

control of technology is that if an encoder controlling cutoff, for instance, is set to value 70 and you switch patch on the gear you're controlling, a single incremental twiddle of that encoder could result in an unmusical 'jump' (for example, from cutoff = 0 to cutoff = 71). In Relative mode, a turn of the Encoder would simply increase the patch's cutoff from its starting position, avoiding any jumps.

saves your project, '2' acts as Undo, '3' toggles the mixer window open and closed and so on. Having these dedicated computer short-cuts available is fantastic and genuinely saves time switching between your DAW and the front panel of Axiom and it's possible to teach Axiom your own key commands if they're not assigned.

Axiom and out

I'm hugely impressed by Axiom and I'll nail my colours to the mast and say that, even as a Logic user primarily, I found Axiom Pro to be a more immediate fit than Novation's SL.

There were no integration issues, I found setup a doddle and a broad smile crossed my face on more than one occasion when I discovered that yet another function could be run directly from the front panel. One

man's drink is another man's poison, so you should be sure to check both (and other alternatives) if you're in the market for a new controller keyboard. However, the Axiom is a staggeringly flexible device and one which comes with a thorough recommendation. **FM**

FutureMusic VERDICT

BUILD	████████████████████
VALUE	████████████████████
EASE OF USE	██████████████████
VERSATILITY	████████████████████
RESULTS	██████████████████

For me, the Axiom is the most tightly integrated major DAW controller available today.

