

# Akai MiniAK | £379

Akai's diminutive new synth hits the shelves. This little monster promises much, but does it pack the power we need? *Dan 'JD73' Goldman* takes a look



### WHAT IS IT?

A compact virtual analogue powerhouse with powerful filters, sequencing, arpeggiator and rhythm machine

### CONTACT

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### HIGHLIGHTS

- 1 Portable and well-built plus looks great
- 2 Huge array of great sounds, effects and sound shaping available
- 3 Sequencing and rhythm machine are huge bonuses

**T**hink Akai, and synths are probably the last thing that comes to mind. However, this is not Akai's first foray into synthesis by any means.

In 1984, Akai released their AX range of analogue synths (AX80, AX73, AX60 and later the VX range) and though these synths came at a particularly tricky time for analogue synthesis with the advent of digital technology (and rule of the Yamaha DX7 in particular) they were nonetheless very capable analogue synthesizers. So it's good to know that Akai do have a solid synthesizer heritage at their foundation, as well as their thorough knowledge of sampling.

After some financial difficulties, Akai became part of the Numark group of companies in 2004, alongside Numark and Alesis, bringing expertise onboard from across these companies.

The MiniAK is clearly a product of the partnership with the Alesis team as it is in fact a re-branded and improved Alesis Micron.

### AK facts

The MiniAK is a good-looking machine, more serious looking than its chirpier looking Micron brother. Its black livery is very much current Akai style and the branding is very strong all round –

make no mistake you know what you are playing! The build quality feels good for a low-priced synth too, with the front panel knobs, dials and buttons feeling reassuringly solid.

It's great to see three wheels on the front of this synth. I don't know why more manufacturers don't do this. My Yamaha EX5 had three and I much prefer wheels to dials as they are so quick to use and very tactile. The MiniAK's three yellow-backlit wheels (pitch plus two assignable wheels) have a nice textured rubberised surface to them, unlike those horrible overly sprung hard plastic wheels you often find in products around this price point.

A quick look around the interface reveals there is little else to grab apart from the X, Y and Z assignable dials, though in practice, these work very well and as much as it would be nice to have more control (it would be great to have dedicated envelope and filter controls) there is enough here to draw you in and keep you involved in the sound creation and performance areas.

To assign the XYZ dials to a function, it's simply a case of scrolling to the function you want using the data dial, press and hold it and turn the





corresponding XYZ dial that you want to assign the function to. Very easy. Another not too shabby aspect of the MiniAK is its keyboard. Yes it's short but it's fine to play (though slightly too stiffly sprung) but certainly not bad. Unfortunately, bad is something that can be associated with the screen.

It's very difficult to read at the best of times. Blue writing on a blue background is not the best combo, nor is the fact that the screen can only be easily viewed from directly above it. And, because it's so deeply set, it's hard to read from certain angles and can be obscured by the bottom-edge of the screen. Some serious marks off

## Modulation, Vocoder and Effects

The MiniAK has 12 freely-assignable modulation slots with source, destination and level available for each. Pretty much any parameter can be assigned to anything you like – the scope is vast! The tracking generator is a neat feature too, breaking up normally linear modulations into 32 independent segments for making complex and

evolving sounds. Another bonus with the MiniAK is the stereo audio input allowing you to route audio through the filters and effects in real time. A 40-band vocoder is also provided, though as I've already mentioned, it's not the strongest aspect of the MiniAK. Though it's definitely a useful addition, it does take some work to get useable sounds from it, something

which can't be angled at the MiniAK's general sound bank.

Effects-wise, there are drive effects plus two effect slots. The first slot includes mod effects such as chorus, flangers and phasers while effect slot two includes mono and stereo delays, reverbs plus the vocoder effect. All these effects are musical and enhance the sounds in a flattering manner.

The sound is wide, full, musical and very analogue too, especially with the fabulous drift parameter

modulations) and mod routings within the presets and for the mod wheels and dials.

The synth engine is an eight-voice

here then, especially as it relies so heavily on its screen for programming.

### MiniAK control

Other controls on the front include up and down octave buttons (you can also

set the MiniAK so that when changing octaves, held notes stay where they are but the newly played notes are in the newly selected octave) plus there are controls for pattern play which will allow triggering of rhythmic pattern from any of the keys while still playing other sounds, a phrase arp button, which allows you to record phrases on the fly for instant playback, plus a latch for the arp/sequencer, so you don't have to have your finger down all the time.

One conspicuous change between the MiniAK and the Micron is the addition and inclusion of a gooseneck mic for the vocoder, much like the Korg R3 and microKorg XL. More later.

### AKhilles heel

Programming is unfortunately the MiniAK's downfall. All in all, it's pretty slow and confusing and relies wholly on the data dial and screen. It is useful though, having the keyboard linked to particular key areas of editing such as filter, oscillators, pre/post mix levels, envelopes, LFOs, track (the tracking area which allows non-linear

polyphonic, three-oscillator, two LFO per voice, three envelopes, eight-part multi-timbral machine based on a virtual synthesis engine. Available waveforms include sine, tri/saw and pulse all with continuously variable waveshapes for maximum versatility. The overall sound is wide, full, musical and very analogue too, especially when using detuning and the fabulous analogue drift parameter. Superb.

I'm impressed by its ability to create pretty much any type of analogue sound you could want, from lush Jupiter/Prophet-like pads to edgy Moog-like basses, serene strings, cutting leads, plus it doesn't have that plasticity brittleness that many soft synths and some VA synths often have.

### AKtung, baby

There are 16 filter types on board that will cover any type of sound you could want and they all sound very good. There's enough low-end oomph plus plenty of high-end sizzle too and a punchy midrange. There's Minimoog, Jupiter and Prophet filter emulations

## SPECS

**Synthesis:** Virtual Analogue Synthesis

**Polyphony:** Up to 8 voices

**Timbrality:** Up to 8 parts

**Oscillators:** 3 per voice with continuously variable waveshapes, sync, linear and exponential FM, Ring Mod, routable modulation matrix per voice

**Filters:** 2 multi-mode resonating filters per voice with 16 filter types

**Modulation:** 2 LFO's per voice with multiple wave shapes, sample and hold, tracking generator, freely routable modulation matrix per voice

**Effects:** 4 drive effects, 1 per part, master effects

**Sequencing:** Step sequencer, arpeggiator, drum machine/rhythm sequencer, and phrase sequencing

**Program memory:** Up to 1,000 Programs and multi-timbral Multis

**Velocity sensitive:** Yes

**Keyboard:** 37-key, semi-weighted

**External control:** MIDI in/out/thru

**Inputs:** 2 balanced 1/4" TRS, mic

**Outputs:** 2 balanced 1/4" TRS, 1/4" TRS headphone

**Controls:** Pitch wheel, two assignable Q-Link modulation wheels, X, Y, and Z parameter knobs, pattern play, phrase arpeggiator, latch arpeggiator, keyboard octave, tap tempo, program controls, data push-knob, config, store, master volume

**Pedal Inputs:** Assignable expression pedal, sustain pedal

**Dimensions:**

**580 x 275 x 85mm**

**Weight:**

**5.5Kg**



