

NI Maschine Mikro | £299



balance between cost-effectiveness and an adequate feature-set? Let's see.

Under the microscope

Install is straightforward. Components must be installed in the usual places, while the 6GB library of content can be placed wherever you like, with a fast external drive NI's recommendation.

6GB might not sound too much these days but when you consider that the vast majority of Maschine's sounds are tiny, super-efficient drum hits then you'll begin to realise that Maschine's library is truly vast. More on this later.

After Service Centre registration and restart, simply attach the hardware controller and run Maschine's

standalone mode first, as this detects the other components you have installed on your computer, so that they too can be integrated within Maschine. After this, to work within a DAW, simply quit and boot your host. Easy.

As its name suggests, Mikro's hardware is considerably smaller than the 'full' control surface, taking up the same width as its big brother but only two-thirds of its depth. This, inevitably, comes with a sacrifice of dedicated buttons, with a single screen and rotary dial replacing Maschine's two and 11 respectively, an absence of dedicated Group buttons (Groups are now accessed from a single button with

If you like the look of Maschine but not its price tag, read on, as **Jono Buchanan** discovers the slimmed-down Mikro could be for you

ON THE DVD

WHAT IS IT?

A low-cost, cut-down version of Maschine which retains most functions

CONTACT

Who: Native Instruments
Web: www.native-instruments.com

HIGHLIGHTS

- 1 Much of Maschine's full functionality is still present
- 2 For studio-based users particularly, Mikro is great value for money
- 3 Surface is reduced in size but remains as tactile

This is a good time for enthusiasts of the drum machine concept. As well as dedicated plug-ins such as

Rob Papen's Punch and FXpansion's Geist and hardware-only devices such as the DSI/Roger Linn collaboration Tempest, hybrid devices such as Arturia's Spark are proving hugely popular and a welcome alternative to dragging around coloured bars on a left to right timeline...

Now, into the latter category, Native Instruments' Maschine takes its rightful place as a market-leader. Matching comprehensive software, laden with hits, loops, sampling and effects to a

hardware front end to allow you to sequence, sample and arrange, it's proved popular with live and studio users alike. At £500, though, Maschine represents a significant outlay and many would-be users have been forced to ask themselves whether they can justify such an expense for tasks they can achieve, albeit less ergonomically, via other means. After all this is just a drum machine after all, right?

Not so. Maschine is much more than that and now it has spawned a little brother in the form of Maschine Mikro, which sacrifices some hardware control for a sleeker, cheaper version of the same concept. Can it strike the



Single Screen

One screen at half the size means you're operating with a quarter of Maschine's usual screen real estate

One Knob

No more Macro controls for simultaneous parameter editing

Maschine Vs Mikro

If you're deciding which way to go between the Maschine options and want a comparison between feature sets, here's a list of what's missing from Mikro. There's one display, which features a 64 x 128 pixel screen, compared to Maschine's twin 64 x 256 equivalents. There's no direct access to groups from Mikro's hardware (though this is possible via shortcut commands) and it's not possible to record parameter automation direct from the hardware either. Due to the

single rotary dial on Mikro, compared to Maschine's 11, it's not possible to manipulate multiple parameters simultaneously, though you can, of course, assign controls to other hardware surfaces in your studio. Lastly, there's no dedicated MIDI interface within the unit, though as most people will simply use Mikro as a control source for its software and the USB connection provides this, I suspect this won't be too serious a consideration for most users.



more reliance on 'soft' controls) and the removal of the soft controls which reside above the twin displays on the original unit.

The good news, though, is that while Mikro does away with these dedicated buttons, the size of those

which remain are the same as those you'll find on Maschine – I was pleased to discover the pad surface isn't unduly fiddly or restricted in this respect. The more major compromise comes in the form of the screen, which is half the width of one of Maschine's displays,

how you choose to assign sounds and build patterns is up to you but the presets offer a great insight into what's possible, with internal effects processing and parameter tweaking on the fly, just two of a number of hugely creative features. Integration of new

audio material is straightforward too, with live sampling, drag-and-drop placement of audio files, as well as immediate slicing and pad

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assignment of slices is now absolute child's play.

After spending (i.e. wasting) hours chopping and organising samples in Logic's excellent EXS sampler we found the Maschine truly unbeatable for getting samples into kits and into your tunes. Simply add a WAV to the library, open it in the sample editor and hit detect and it instantly pulls apart all the drum hit transients. Drag wave sections to pads and that it: Instant drum kits from all your favourite tunes. Feed it something sparse and sampleable such as a slice of Minimal House and within minutes you'll be making new music with all the production and excitement of the original but with you able to take all the tune-writing credit.

Good things in small packages

Mikro's release will lead to some serious soul-searching in the hearts of those tempted by the Maschine concept. The 'value for money' aspect of knocking £200 off the price, yet still offering a comprehensive control



effectively meaning that you're operating with a quarter of the original's screen acreage. This, I suspect will be the deal-breaker for most of those weighing up which Maschine product to buy as, operationally, the absence of other functions here which are supported by different key switches or buried deeper in menus, are fairly easy to work around.

Having negotiated the hardware options on display, much of the rest of the Maschine concept remains in place. For those unfamiliar, here's a summary of what you get. The native Maschine library bundles over 6GB of content which is comprised of hits, phrases, one-shot effects... you name it. In fact, describing Maschine as a drum machine is disingenuous as it does substantially more than merely throw beats together. Parts you program are multi-tracked into Scenes so that, much like an Ableton Live set, different combinations of those elements can be triggered to allow one section of an arrangement to move deftly from one part to the next. Obviously, the potential is what you make of it and

SPECS

System Requirements
PC: Windows 7 (latest Service Pack, 32/64-bit), Intel Core Duo or AMD Athlon 64, 2GB RAM
Mac: OS X 10.6 (latest update) or 10.7, Intel Core Duo, 2GB RAM

Native 64-bit support for standalone and plug-in versions, USB 2.0 Port, 11GB free disk space for complete installation

Supported Interfaces: Stand-alone, VST, Audio Units, ASIO, Core Audio, WASAPI, RTAS (Pro Tools 8 and higher)

Hardware: One high-contrast black and white display 64 x 128 pixels
 16 illuminated pads with velocity and aftertouch
 One master knob – multi-function control
 28 backlit buttons
 USB 2.0
 Kensington Lock

Dimensions:
320 x 195 x 55mm

Weight:
1.2kg



ALTERNATIVES



Arturia Spark

£419

Physical modeling, 480 instruments, 30 kits, analogue synthesis and samples - and software idiosyncrasies being ironed out all of the time.

www.arturia.com



Dave Smith Instruments Tempest

£1,493

DSI and Roger Linn's dream-team drum station features true analogue synthesis and sounds wonderful but lacks many of Maschine's 'production' features.

www.davesmithinstruments.com



FXpansion Geist

£155

If you don't need the hardware, this is a great option. Packed with sounds, real-time slicing, effects aplenty and an internal sequencer.

www.fxansion.com

surface which aids real-time production, albeit with some sacrifices, is a very attractive proposition indeed.

The software isn't without its flaws. For example the system of kits, groups, samples, instruments, drums, one shots and so on and so on can become confusing. For example after chopping up a loop and making your own unique kit you may assume that these hits are now in your library. Not so. You have simply made reference start and end points for the various hits and all still rely on the larger original file. To actually add them to your 'snare' or 'kicks', say, you have to truncate the file for each hit in turn and save each separately, each time ticking the attribute boxes for whether it's 'hard' or 'dry' etc. Get serious about building your own huge drum collection in Maschine and you'll soon be wishing for some fresh menu options in the next software release! That said for the most part it's hard to imagine an easier way

to put all this sampling and sequencing power in a simpler bit of software.

So, which option to choose? For me, the choice between 'big' Maschine and Mikro Maschine boils down to how much 'performance' control you want Maschine to provide. Live users will certainly miss being able to control multiple parameters simultaneously as, with a single rotary, Mikro provides a limitation here which may prove conclusive. For studio-based musicians who don't need the same level of real-time control (remember, much of Maschine's functionality can be controlled via automation), this won't provide as much heart-break. This is probably true for the screen differences too - you'll be more reliant on the onscreen GUI if you're working in the studio whereas peering into a smaller, single display may prove frustrating in the heat of a live set. As the vast majority of the work I do is studio-based, I'd have no hesitation in

choosing Mikro over Maschine as I'd happily spend £200 less for the vast majority of functions which remain in place. However, I'd strongly recommend getting yourself along to your local hi-tech emporium to A-B the two models before coming to your own conclusion. Either way, it's a lovely problem to have as both of these boxes are winners. **FM**

FutureMusic VERDICT

BUILD [Progress bar: 10/10]

VALUE [Progress bar: 8/10]

EASE OF USE [Progress bar: 7/10]

VERSATILITY [Progress bar: 9/10]

RESULTS [Progress bar: 10/10]

Mikro by name but not by nature. A value-for-money option that gives you all that power at a great price.

Maschine Software

By far the most valuable part of the Maschine experience is the Maschine software itself.

While the aim was always to allow users to consider the Maschine hardware as a self-contained stand-alone system with full access to all of the system's features, in reality this isn't actually so. Many tasks are simply easier on screen and convoluted menus and button presses to access distant features via the hardware are soon forgotten.

Most annoying is the provision of such simple drum machine staples as tuning, level and pan. These three basics are placed far apart on the hardware but are much simpler to find on the software. Albeit with tiny virtual knobs.

In actuality therefore you soon develop your own way of working with some tasks being much quicker on the hardware (hitting pads, auditioning sounds, transport controls etc)



and other easier on the software (building kits and organising samples). We know of some Maschine users who, after trying to get to grips with the hardware, soon consigned it to the store cupboard allowing the software to take the limelight. For this reason Maschine Mikro is a bit of a bargain, offering the same features and sounds as its

much bigger, more expensive older brother.

And we can't stress enough how great the Maschine library is with practically every Dance music genre from Hip Hop to Deep House being ably represented with a huge range of signature kits from star sample makers.

Each kit loads with an example pattern on board

(unless you ask it not to) and hearing the often quirky and unique sounds in a musical context truly makes you open your eyes to sounds that you otherwise wouldn't have considered. Meanwhile, its brilliant transient detect means that sourcing fresh new beats is as simple as dragging and dropping WAVs from iTunes.