

M-Audio Venom £390

An M-Audio keyboard with built-in interface and sounds? **Jono Buchanan** feels Venom in his veins...



WHAT IS IT?

A 49-key performance synth, keyboard controller, USB audio interface and effects processor.

CONTACT

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HIGHLIGHTS

1 Fantastic synth sounds 2 All-round versatility 3 Integration extends through software editor





-Audio have built up a thoroughly deserved reputation for building high-quality keyboard

controllers and whether you're a studio based musician looking to control a raft of DAW plug-ins, or a live player wanting to trigger and drive sounds from a combination of performance controls, there's something among M-Audio's product pages for you.

Click to a different part of M-Audio's website and you'll also see a raft of audio interfaces too. M-Audio made its name producing high-quality, affordable interfaces and, of course, with the success of the M-Powered relationship some of provide highly desirable Pro Tools integration.

M-Audio has experimented with keyboards that also provide audio interfacing before, through products such as the KeyStudio. However when Venom, the subject of this review was unveiled at NAMM, it wasn't the combination of keyboard and audio interface that had everyone buzzing.

The excitement stemmed from the fact that this is no mere keyboard but instead provides M-Audio's first foray into true synthesizer territory.

Here, then, is a keyboard controller, a USB interface, a synth with a collection of sampled onboard synth sounds, audio input, performance dials and lots more besides.

Looking around

Venom features a 49-key keyboard with a nicely weighted touch. The front panel is dominated by a printed matrix of parameter controls with four knobs and one button above to modify the relevant parameter of whichever row (of six) is currently selected. It's a system that has been adopted by other synths and UseAudio's Plugiator immediately springs to mind. To the right, there's a generous and bright LCD display with Mode buttons to toggle between Multi and Single sound modes. Patterns and a Store button to make changes to sounds you've made yourself permanent. The right-hand panel

concerns itself with Multi Control, with buttons to select parts within a Multi-Part arrangement (Venom is a four-part beast), as well as a multifunction button to Mute. Enable or Select parts within a Multi. The far left-hand side provides Pitch Bend and Mod Wheels, Octave Up/Down buttons, On/Off and Tap Tempo buttons for Venom's Arpeggiator as well as five dials. These control the Master volume, the Synth volume, gain controls for the microphone and instrument inputs (both with signal present and clip level LEDs) and a Direct Monitor control to balance input and output signals.

At the back, you'll find the physical ports to enable instrument and microphone inputs as well as Sustain and Expression pedal ports. The MIDI trio of In, Out and Thru are joined by a USB port for audio interfacing and instant DAW integration of keyboard data signals while a 9V power port completes the line up.

Controlled aggression

M-Audio clearly thought long and hard about how to make their first foray into synthesizer production and they've made a sensible choice when deciding how to pack this instrument with great-sounding patches. Each one of the 512 single programs has, at its core, at least one sample of a classic synthesizer or drum machine waveform. The architecture of the synth section is three-oscillator, with each able to access any of the 41 'pitched' samples or 53 drum sounds. It's a potent mix.

The sounds are wonderful but the unique M-Audio twist is that there's a tube saturation stage at the multi-mode filter which can be overdriven. This







means that as well as being able to offer multiple filter modes (low, high and band, 2- and 4-pole, either 12 or 24dB of roll-off per octave) it's possible to internally distort signals. This is reflected though the exceptional presets where the Venom name justifies its presence on the synth casing - these sounds positively burst out of the speakers. There's a collection of speaker-wobbling basslines, an array of piercing and spiky lead sounds and oodles of attractive arpeggiated sequences, most of which ally musically-useful parameters to the modulation wheel and velocity as well as the editing possibilities afforded by the Performance Control set of dials.

It was important M-Audio got the synth side of Venom right and I applaud them long and loud for their efforts. Additionally, each program can access three LFOs, three AHDSR envelopes and 16 separate modulation routing options, while effects provision comes in the form of two buss effects with Reverb, Delay, Chorus, Flanger and Phaser options. If you want to use Venom in multi-timbral mode, you need

Vyzex Software Editor

parameters accessible from the front-panel matrix, serious sound designers will be pleased to discover that Venom benefits from its own software editor, named Vvzex. At launch, this transfers all data from Venom into the application, so you can pick any program, even one you've created from the front-panel alone and begin a more in-depth edit. On the first 'page', you can choose waveforms for each of the three sources at the oscillator stage with graphical displays, as well as much

While there are 30



more easily modify global filter settings and envelopes for amp, filter and pitch. Subsequent pages let you assign and configure LFOs, modulation sources and effects while the Multi Mode editor is similarly comprehensive, with

options to set key ranges for each part graphically, assign different arpeggiator patterns to each part easily and so on – the possibilities are almost endless. Vyzex is well designed and opens Venom up to much more sound programming.

to be aware that polyphony is limited to a slightly disappointing 12 voices, though the effects provision does increase in multi-timbral mode with the addition of one of EQ, Compression, Distortion, Bit Reduction and AutoWah on each part at the Multi stage.

Interface off

Venom's audio interface is also of a very

decent quality. The inputs on the back for microphone and instruments are self-explanatory, while the RCA phono inputs can be used to route any stereo

audio into Venom. The latter option inserts audio before the filter, so effectively replaces the oscillator stage but benefits from Venom's synth engine and all of the effects thereafter.

It's possible to use all four inputs at once, though be aware that as only two inputs are available over USB, any signals coming in via the left side of the stereo input will be mixed with the microphone input, while the right-hand side shares the instrument one. While I can understand the immediacy for DJs of having the audio inputs as RCA connectors, I'd still prefer the audio inputs to be quarter-inch jacks, though this is a minor gripe. Venom spits out audio at highly the respectable quality of 44.1kHz/24-bit and, for Pro Tools users, the good news is that it's

SPECS

System Requirements for Vyzex Venom Editor/Librarian PC: Windows XP, Vista, or Windows 7, P4 equivalent processor Mac: 0S X 10.4, 10.5, or

Mac: OS X 10.4, 10.5, or 10.6, PowerPC G5 or Intel processor

Specifications:

Line Outputs
Max output level: +6dBV
SNR and DR: -99 dB/99dB
THD+N: +/-0.2dB

Line Inputs
Max input level: 2.1dBV
SNR and DR: -96dB/96dB
THD+N: -89dB
Frequency response:
+/-0.2dB

Microphone Input at Minimum Gain, no pad Max input level: -2.2dBu SNR: -96dB Gain range: 35dB Max input level: +10dBV, -95dB

Gain range: 35dB Input impedance: 1m0hms

12-voice polyphony, 41

Features

49-key keyboard

waveforms and 53 drum sounds, PWM, Sync, FM and ring modulation Resonant multi-mode filter with tube saturation limiting 3 LFOs, 3 AHDSR envelopes, 16 modulation routes 512 single patches, 256 multi (layered) patches 2 global buss effects: Reverb, Delay, Chorus, Flanger, Phaser 1 insert effect per multi-timbral part (4 total): Compression, EQ. Distortion, Bit Reduction, AutoWah Arpeggiator USB 2.0 audio/MIDI interface, 24-bit, 44.1kHz operation Stereo main audio outputs (1/4" TS) Stereo headphone output (1/4" TRS) MIDI I/O LCD Display 4 rotary encoders and 1 button for performance control and editing Dual-function octave up/ down and transpose controls Assignable pitch bend and modulation wheels Sustain and Expression (both 1/4" TRS) pedal

Dimensions: 750 x 400 x 150mm Weight: 3kg

inputs

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compatible with M-Powered versions of the software. The lack of hardware restrictions announced with version 9 of Avid's flagship software mean that Venom will operate with that system too but if you're happy with version 8 and would rather spend money on a

rather than being buried in menus, like some other interfaces. You might not need another interface but we predict you'll end up using it somewhere.

Conclusion

I'm going to be honest - Venom

massively exceeded my expectations.

expect the sound set to be anywhere

near this good and I even feared that

the 'synth' part of this instrument might

be tokenistic. M-Audio could have been

bolder with the styling - if you're going

When I first heard about it I didn't

to build an instrument called Venom it should look it might bite you - but it's equally fair to say that once you've used these sounds in your productions or onstage, no one will care what the instrument producing them looks like. Blame their popular Axiom series of

> keyboards for the rather stuffy and neutral appearance. Looks aside the immediacy of accessing the sounds and modifying them in

real-time is intuitive and impressive, while for sound designers, the Vyzex software editor is just for you.

Audio interfacing is a welcome addition and the provision of audio inputs, albeit via phono ports, is a bonus. This is a great instrument that I can even see some people buying just for its sound set alone. For others, it's one you can build your DAW-based studio around. Whatever your needs or intentions. I rather suspect Venom might exceed your expectations too. FM



keyboard/synth than upgrade your

approach to the Venom's audio

be bad news.

software, M-Powered compatibility can't

There's a pleasingly no-nonsense

interfacing, as the instrument and mic

gain dials are mounted on the top panel

There are three arpeggiation modes: Standard, Phrase and Drum, with Standard offering classic up, down, up and down or repeated chord arpeggiation, Phrase triggering a stored Phrase pattern and Drum triggering one of 51 internal patterns.

The extent to which you can modify the Arpeggiator from the front panel is deliberately restricted for ease of use purposes but you can do much more via the Vvzex

Pattern Import About software. However, if transfer the pattern across

you're not sold on the internal patterns, you can import a MIDI file pattern instead. This is done via Venom's Control Panel and it's a fairly simple task to browse to the file of your choice and then

to the synth. You can set the target channel the pattern will send to. choose its start point and duration, even the Root Note of its destination. It's a great system that works verv well.

FutureMusic VERDICT BUILD **FASE OF USE** VERSATILITY

The Venom is a good deal more synth than meets the eye, so be

This is a great instrument that I can even see some people buying just for its sound set alone

£543

Another synth that can be edited over USB, Tetra is a great-sounding option with Dance music in its DNA. No audio interface, mind

ALTERNATIVES

davesmith instruments.com

M-Audio KeyStudio

£170

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If you like the idea of a USB keyboard with built-in audio interfacing but can do without the synth engine and performance tools. M-Audio provide their own alternative There's even a grand piano sound onboard

maudio.co.uk



Novation Ultranova

£499

More Dance-friendly patches than you can shake a stick at a 2-in 4-out USB interface and integrated goose-neck mic too

novationmusic.com

