Korg miniKaoss Pad 2 and Kaossilator 2 | £168 each

Bigger isn't always better. *Greg Scarth* checks out the two newest additions to Korg's line up of powerful pocket music makers

At the rate Korg have been miniaturising their product range recently, we might soon need magnifying glasses to make music. Since the release of the microKorg a decade ago this year, it seems like every generation of Korg product has gone one step smaller than the last, from the miniKP to the portable LPD and MPK controllers, right through to the positively minuscule Monotrons. The latest diminutive dance tools to hit the Korg line-up are the miniKaoss Pad 2 and Kaossilator 2, announced at the NAMM trade show in California earlier this year. The naming is slightly confusing, perhaps implying that these are second generation products. That's not quite the case; these are actually the first generation of products in this form factor, with slightly different feature sets to their larger siblings. Ignoring the potentially confusing suffixes, the simple bottom line is that the MKP2 and KO2 (as we'll abbreviate their rather clunky names) are the smallest Kaoss Pad and the smallest Kaossilator in their respective ranges. But can they pack the same punch as their bigger brothers?

Concept

Korg's original Kaoss Pad way back in 1999 was a revolutionary product. Essentially a digital multi-effect unit

OLED Display

Nowhere near as impressive as the OLEDs on pricier gear, but still a clear, readable screen.

XY Touchpad

Smaller than the pad found on the Kaossilator or miniKP, but with a similar feel. No visual feedback.

with loop sampling capabilities, the unique selling point of the KP was its square touchpad, which allowed for real-time hands-on control of effect parameters. The KP has since been upgraded a handful of times, adding new effects, basic synth options, bare-bones drum machine functionality and improved loop sampling options. As a result of their ease of use, intuitive control and great sound, Kaoss Pads have won fans from producers to DJs and live guitarists.

Mini me

On unboxing the new Korgs, there are very few surprises; these devices are pretty much exactly what you'd expect from a pocket-sized Kaoss Pad and Kaossilator. Both are housed in practically identical plastic cases, with all the controls on the front panel and

per sound on the Y-axis. Loops can be recorded, layered over each other and retriggered to build full arrangements live and on the fly.

but it's not included as standard so if you want to run from mains power you'll have to buy one separately.

Build quality feels good as far as the solidity of the buttons and touchpad go, but the case itself feels nowhere near as solid as the full-size Kaossilator Pro or Kaoss Pad, and isn't even comparable to the miniKP or standard Kaossilator. Although we probably wouldn't expect bomb-proof build quality at this price point, the fragile feel to the cases doesn't inspire confidence for a pair of devices designed to be portable. It's a worrying sign as far as longevity goes. We weren't exactly impressed with the build quality of the Kaoss Pad Quad last year, but you'd hope for pocket-sized portable devices like these to be able to withstand the abuse DJs and live musicians are likely to throw at them. Time will tell whether they can stand up to the rigours of live use, but we'd like to see the option of a protective carry case at least.

> ## "Little bigger than an iPhone, these are truly portable devices that won't weigh you down, even with batteries"

Despite visual similarities, the Kaossilator is a different beast altogether. Joining the Korg range in 2007, the original KO-1 adopted the form factor of the stripped-down miniKaoss Pad. As a 'dynamic phrase synthesizer', the focus this time was solely on generating loops and riffs from scratch using a range of synth sounds. On the Kaossilator, the XY pad is used to control pitch via the X-axis and one synth parameter (such as filter cutoff)

three sockets on the top edge. The back cover – red for the MKP2, yellow for the KO2 – easily unclips, revealing the battery compartment and a slot for an optional microSD card. Little bigger than an iPhone, these are truly portable devices; at a weight of 105g each, they're not exactly going to weigh you down – even when you've inserted the included pair of AA batteries. For sustained studio use, there's also a socket for an optional DC power supply,

Kaoss theory

The MKP2 distils the Kaoss Pad formula into a pocket-sized format, but the same key features found in the miniKP are all included, with a few additions for good measure. We don't have space to list the full feature set here (check out our specification list) but Korg have managed to include just about all of the features of the larger miniKP. The smaller touchpad offers none of the visual feedback found on the full-size Kaoss Pad, but it's big enough to offer versatile hands-on control of effects.

Sounds to be processed can be played directly from the internal MP3/WAV audio player, captured via the built-in microphone or hooked up to the stereo line input. The optional microSD

Kaoss in the Box?

We usually try to give an example of a software alternative to the hardware we review but that's not easy here. To achieve anything like the Kaossilator's hands-on simplicity, you'd have to hook an XY pad controller up to your DAW, assign it to a soft synth's parameters and figure out a way to map the

incoming CC data to a chosen scale. Even then, recording and retriggering loops on the fly is still a major effort.

It's a similar story with the Kaoss Pads. One of the ironies of the powerful sampler plug-ins found in DAWs is that very few can actually sample.

Even when you've got sampled loops set up,

software doesn't really offer the real-time effect options of the Kaoss Pad.

Perhaps the enduring popularity of the Kaoss range has something to do with the fact that Korg have pinpointed one of the very few market sectors where hardware still offers greater power and flexibility than software.

Kaoss vs the iOS Revolution

The most obvious rivals to the MKP2 and KO2 may well come from Korg's own range in the form of the larger models, but the music production world has changed dramatically since the introduction of the first Kaoss Pad 13 years ago.

Most notably, the mobile music sector has exploded in popularity, with Apple's iOS devices leading the charge. Multi-touch functionality, relatively powerful processors and an open coding environment make the iOS highly capable. Add a basic audio interface and you've got the perfect platform for portable effects and grooveboxes similar to the Kaoss Pad and Kaossilator.

The potential of the iOS platform hasn't gone unnoticed by Korg, who released their own iKaossilator app in October last year. Now updated to version 2.1 and priced at £13.99, iKaossilator is a virtual version of the hardware.

If you don't already own an iOS device, the basic 8GB iPod Touch (£169) is the cheapest way into the game. Sure, it all works out a little more expensive than the Kaossilator 2 on test here, but the iPod would also allow you to use all the other music apps on the market, so it has to be considered as an option.

The Kaoss Pad has less obvious competition on the iOS platform. There are no signs yet of a Kaoss Pad app and there aren't any strong direct rivals. You can take your pick from plenty of iOS samplers and a handful of great effect apps, but there's nothing which offers the complete package as well as Korg's hardware.

card is used as storage for the audio player and as a location for storing performances using the Master Recorder feature.

Sound quality is impressive for the price and the effects are easily good enough to be used in a live setting or even in the studio. Although the only wired output is via a headphone socket (which automatically mutes the internal speaker when a plug is inserted), sound quality is good enough for recording purposes. Thankfully, neither the MKP2 nor the KO2 are plagued by the noisy headphone output found on Korg's similarly pocket-sized Monotrons.

Both devices also feature the same OLED screen. It's a big improvement over the disappointing LCD screens on the other Kaoss Pads and Kaossilators, but not quite as impressive as we'd hoped. The OLED screens we've seen on products like the Teenage Engineering OP-1 and DSI Tempest are bright, exceptionally clear and detailed, but the displays here are closer to a very good quality LCD. That's not to say they're bad, they're just not the improvement over LCD that you might expect from an OLED.

Added extras

To a large extent, the KO2 is a smaller version of the original Kaossilator, although again there are a few new features, some of them borrowed from the range-topping Kaossilator Pro. Most notably, the optional microSD card here is used for recording and replaying loops or entire performances. External microphone connection comes via a 3.5mm socket, which might limit your mic options without resorting to adapters but improves sound quality over the built-in mic.

As we've already seen with the MKP2, the XY pad is slightly smaller than the one found on the Kaossilator, and the rotary encoder has been replaced with a ribbon slider for selecting sounds. The selection of 150 programs on offer includes a comprehensive range of synth sounds, acoustic instrument emulations, FX and drum patterns. As with other Kaossilators, each patch has just one user controllable parameter, adjusted by sliding up and down the Y-axis. Effects
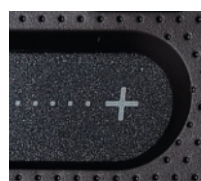
The Good and Great

Three reasons to love Korg's mini pocket powerhouses…

> Alongside the Kaossilator Pro and Kaoss Pad 3, these two new devices seem absolutely tiny. We've seen miniature products which don't do enough to justify the shrinking but Korg have crammed in enough features to ensure they retain their appeal.

> **Portability is great, but we don't want to sacrifice sound quality to achieve it. Thankfully, that's not the case here. The sounds of both units are recognisably Kaotic and high enough quality to use live or in the studio.**

> Say what you like about the functionality of DAWs, we still think hands-on control is better. You could mess about with pad controllers and MIDI mapping for vaguely similar results in the box, but the Korgs' immediacy makes them much more appealing.

are also still pre-defined, meaning that if, say, your chosen lead sound has reverb applied then there's no way you can disable it.

As with the other Kaossilators, the arp is a gate rather than a note

they'll no doubt offer a better all-round package than the mid-range options. The portability alone is a big improvement over the larger models, while the feature set is surprisingly comprehensive for miniaturised models.

in terms of price and sound quality to the Kaossilator, but we still haven't seen anything which can quite compare to the versatility, immediacy and sound quality of the Kaoss Pad at this price. Korg have struck a fine balance between

> ## " Sound quality is impressive for the price and the effects are easily good enough to be used in a live setting "

features and portability, delivering two products which may not dramatically update the basic concepts but bring them up to date

arpeggiator. The XY pad doesn't recognise multiple finger touches, so you can't hold multiple notes and play them back in a rhythmic sequence like you could with a standard arpeggiator. Despite the absence of the MIDI control as found on the Kaossilator Pro, the touchpad – in conjunction with 50 scales accessible via the 'fnc' (function) button – offers surprisingly accurate control for live performance or recording. Unfortunately, there's one serious omission: the undo function found on the full-size Kaossilator is missing, meaning that if you don't get your pitch or timing just right while recording an overdubbed phrase, you'll have to delete the part and start again.

These two devices may nominally be positioned at the bottom end of their respective ranges, but for many users

Realistically, the RRPs already translate to a street price of about £130. That's good value for the MKP2, but not quite as good for the less versatile (though impressive) KO2. There are plenty of options which are comparable

effectively. We'd have no problem recommending the Kaoss Pad 2. We're slightly less convinced by the Kaossilator 2, but it's still an interesting option for live performance, studio inspiration or just noodling on the bus. **FM**

FutureMusic **VERDICT: KAOSS PAD**

BUILD

VALUE

EASE OF USE

VERSATILITY

RESULTS
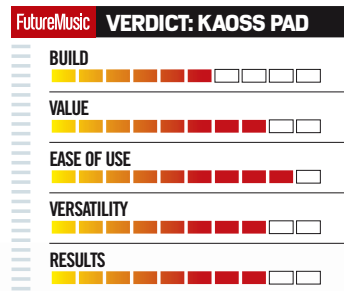
Possibly the smallest multi-effect unit ever made? True portability with classic Kaoss Pad sounds.

FutureMusic **VERDICT: KAOSSILATOR**

BUILD

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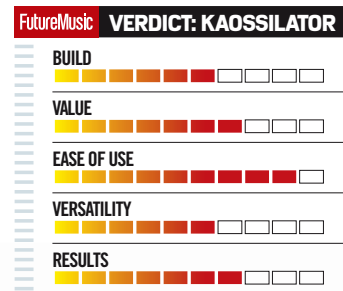
Good fun, but not a great deal cheaper than an iPod Touch plus Korg's own iKaossilator app.

Storage Slot

Storage comes via a hidden microSD slot. Cards up to 16GB are supported.

Onboard Speaker

Don't expect audiophile sound quality from the onboard speaker, but it actually sounds pretty good for what it is.