Arturia
MiniLab £89 PC MAC

This compact controller comes with a library of 5000 vintage synth sounds to sweeten the deal – let's get down to the lab and test it out

> Arturia's MiniLab is a two-piece package comprising a USB MIDI keyboard controller and the Arturia Analog Lab vintage synth instrument (VST/AU/RTAS/standalone). Delivering over 5000 presets from Arturia's collection of virtual vintage analogue synths, it includes sounds from modeled emulations of such classics as the Moog Modular, ARP 2600, Yamaha CS-80, Oberheim SEM and Sequential Circuits Prophet VS, among others.

A cute condition

The MiniLab keyboard might just be the cutest thing we've ever had on our test bench. Squeezed into its miniature footprint are 25 mini velocity-sensitive keys (16 of which double as MIDI channel select buttons), 16 rotary encoders, eight pads (responding to velocity and pressure) for inputting drum sounds or preset chords, a pair of touchstrip pitchbend and modulation controllers, and four multifunction buttons for performing tasks like octave shifting and pad bank selection.

Full marks go to the design team for the look of the controller. It's a handsome wee beastie and no mistake, decked out in smart white plastic and fake walnut end cheeks (they're plastic too, but you'd never know from a

distance), and the overall effect is sleek, modern and purposeful. The build quality is good, too – the knobs have a nicely grabbable, rubbery texture and you get the impression that, despite weighing only 1kg, the unit will take a decent amount of hefting around. There are only two connectors onboard: a USB socket and a sustain pedal jack, both recessed into the left-hand end panel. MiniLab fits snugly into our 13" laptop bag alongside our MacBook Pro, making it perfect for music-making on the move – great late-night hotel room writing sessions!

The 25 mini keys boast a decent amount of travel and are actually very playable despite their low profile. The touchstrip pitch and

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modulation controls take some getting used to, but we found the pitchbend strip instantly useful for achieving trills by rapidly tapping on its upper or lower extremes. Both controller strips have a Data Hold mode, in which the controller data levels remain at the point at which your finger is removed, necessitating an extra downward swipe or accurate stab at the zero point to turn it off again. In mid-solo, this is a good deal less instinctive than flicking a physical wheel back to its origin, so we were happy to discover that these settings, along with other parameters affecting the behaviour of the rotary encoders, pads and any connected pedals, can be adjusted in the Arturia MIDI Control Centre application that comes as part of the package.

Lab testing

A thin plastic overlay is included for when using the controller with the Analog Lab software, indicating the default functions of each knob – filter cutoff and resonance, LFO rate and depth, and ADSR envelope controls. Knob 9 assumes preset scrolling and selection duties, while the pad bank select button switches between chord triggers on 1-8 and preset recall snapshots on 9-16.

Once loaded, the first thing you'll want to do

Quickly search for sounds from a particular synth by clicking on it in the sumptuous Studio View

The man with 5000 voices

The Analog Lab software puts 5000 vintage synth presets at your disposal via an attractive interface that matches the look of the controller. The various synths on offer are displayed in a virtual studio that, if it were real, would have analogue synth fans drooling. In Filter View, you can home in on a particular sound by applying search filters such as instrument, sound type and characteristic.

The sounds themselves use the same TAE (Total Analog Emulation) technology as found in Arturia's V Collection range of virtual instruments, but the scope for editing is extremely limited compared to the full versions, as you'd expect. Some fixed parameters

linked to the hardware controls on the MiniLab can be tweaked, and you can choose to assign other parameters to each control via popup menus, the contents of which change according to whichever synth is currently loaded with the selected preset.

Assigning chords to the first bank of eight pads is done by simply picking the root note and chord type from a popup menu. We would like a bit more control over the voicings, however, as there isn't really any scope for customising the chord shapes on the list. You can, however, drag presets onto the second bank of pads (accessed via the pad bank select button) to store your favourite sounds for rapid recall.

with the software is dive into those presets and have a swim around. Much has been made of the quality of these sounds, but unfortunately, we were left a little underwhelmed with the selection. Flicking through randomly, the quality was surprisingly hit and miss, and while there are certainly some fine sounds to be found, it seemed to take a while before we landed on something that could be considered usable. Not only that, but the variation in output level between the presets makes auditioning on headphones a bit like an audio version of Russian roulette – if you're using the plugin version, we'd recommend placing a limiter over the channel to protect your eardrums.

Heavy load

When testing the plugin in various DAWs, we found that some sounds used an extraordinarily large amount of CPU, and the controls were at times unpredictable, requiring multiple turns to increase values by small amounts, or operating in a reverse direction to that which we expected.

These quirks aside, however, the price of

Arturia MiniLab still makes it a very appealing proposition. For a high-quality, ultra-portable keyboard controller, £89 is already more than reasonable. Throw in the huge library of bundled sounds as a bonus, and you have a seriously attractive package for those seeking a comprehensive solution for the small project studio, hotel or tour bus. It's not without its foibles, but these are mainly software issues that will hopefully be ironed out by updates as time goes on, and in terms of value for money just as a controller, the Arturia MiniLab is hard to beat. **cm**

Web www.arturia.com

Alternatively

Akai MPK Mini
cm161 » 8/10 » £69
Cheaper 25-key mini controller, but lacks pitchbend and mod controls

M-Audio Oxygen 25
N/A » N/A » £89
Full-size keys but a larger footprint, and it ships with Ableton Live Lite

Verdict

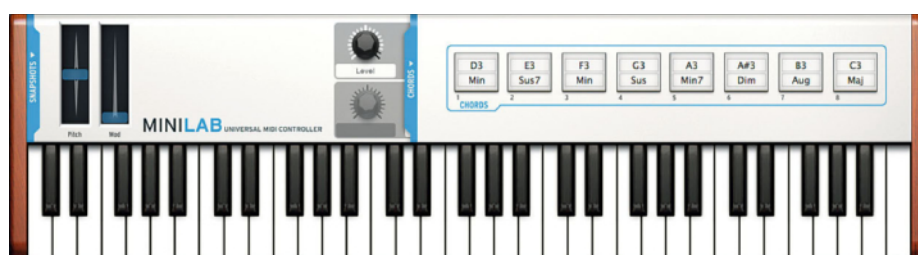| For	Great value bundle
	Controller looks stunning
	5000-strong preset library
	Incredibly portable
	Plenty of knobs and buttons

Against	Slightly disappointing sounds

An outwardly attractive package with some creases still to be ironed out, but at this price, MiniLab is still quite a steal.

8/10

Using this software editor, you can store up to eight chords of your own choosing to be triggered by MiniLab's pads