

Mac PC What is it? An intelligent plug-in controller
PRICE: £69

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# NOVATION Nocturn



Novation have been working into the small hours creating this glow-in-the-dark 'intelligent' controller. What's more, it's one of their cheapest and most innovative devices yet...

- ▶ **SYSTEM REQUIREMENTS**  
**PC:** Pentium III 1GHz, 256MB RAM, XP SP2/64 or Vista 32/64 (Vista machines will require higher spec), USB port  
**Mac:** G4 1GHz, 256MB RAM, OS X 10.4, USB port
- ▶ **TEST SYSTEM**  
**PC:** 3.2GHz CPU, 1GB RAM, Windows Vista, Ableton Live 6/7, Renoise, Cubase SX3

**W**orking with hardware controllers isn't always a quick and easy process, and just setting one up to integrate smoothly with your sequencers, plug-ins and soft synths can be a time-consuming operation in itself. Great concentration is often needed to keep track of which dials, buttons and sliders correspond to which filter cutoffs, compression ratio values, and so on.

Novation's Automap technology was designed to rectify this by offering more intelligent ways for controllers to interact with software. It debuted with Novation's SL series, enabling the controllers to operate more intuitively

by mapping plug-in/mixer parameters automatically. Automap Universal then took things to the next level, being essentially a software 'hub' sitting between your plug-ins and the controller, adding integrated mapping/learning functions to the plug-ins' interfaces via its wrapper system.

Automap previously relied on LCD display strips on the controller to relay information to the user as to which controls were mapped to what, but with the all-new Automap Universal 2.0, the whole system basically resides in software. Furthermore, the LCD display is no longer necessary, which brings us to Novation's latest controller, the sexy,

bargain-priced Nocturn.

**Light up, light up**  
 Out of the box, the Nocturn is compact, lightweight and uncluttered, yet eminently well constructed. Nine touch-sensitive, LED-encircled rotary dials and a DJ-style crossfader – also touch-sensitive – are ergonomically arranged for easy access, while eight red-illuminated rubber buttons deal with controlling switched parameters, and eight green ones provide access to various functions and displays. Novation say the Nocturn is so named because you can use it in the dark, and that's certainly the case!

After installing the Automap

Universal 2.0 software and connecting the unit via USB (it's bus-powered), you're presented with the Plug-in Manager. Here you select and wrap effects and instruments from your plug-ins folder, creating additional 'Automap-enabled' versions that are ready to use with the controller.

In Automap parlance, any controllable entity is a 'client', so that's any wrapped instruments and effects (VST, AU, RTAS and TDM formats are supported), compatible sequencer mixers (Sonar, Tracktion, Cubase and Nuendo), and the Automap MIDI Client, which is used for normal MIDI control and is handy with apps that don't directly support Automap (see *Live and Learn* boxout).

## All mapped out

The biggest innovation with AU 2.0 is that controller assignments are displayed, assigned, edited and renamed via a novel 'heads-up'

Control Map can be saved as the plug-in's default mapping (otherwise it's saved with the current project).

Pressing Learn twice in succession enables the mapping of multiple controls successively, meaning it's very quick to map a 12-band EQ or an FM synth. Despite the hardware having just 17 assignable controls, you aren't limited to mapping only 17 parameters – unlimited pages of assignments can be created and accessed via the Page +/- buttons.

One of the rotary encoders on Nocturn's hardware is not assignable, and that's the central Speed Dial, which is surrounded by green LEDs. This can take control of whatever your mouse pointer rests over – music software or otherwise. It basically hijacks control of the mouse, acting as though you're holding the mouse button down and moving the rodent. The Speed Dial has a notched action – the other knobs are entirely smooth



▲ It's never been easier to keep tabs on your controller assignments, thanks to Automap Universal 2.0's semi-transparent pop-up GUI

“THE NOCTURN IS IDEAL FOR ANYONE WANTING A COMPACT, EASY-TO-USE YET HIGHLY-FLEXIBLE CONTROL SURFACE”

semi-transparent (but optionally opaque) GUI, which is summoned and dismissed with Nocturn's View button. This displays a simple map of the device's controls, with relevant mapping information beneath each.

The speed at which controls can be mapped to plug-ins using AU 2.0 is most impressive. Press the Learn button, move the target plug-in parameter with the mouse, and stroke the appropriate control on Nocturn – since the rotary encoders and crossfader are touch-sensitive, a mere touch does it. Normal use can immediately be resumed and the new

in operation – and can be pushed in and turned for further functionality.

Switching between clients is handled within the Browser – tap the FX button and a display of wrapped effects used in the current project pops up, with a touch of the corresponding dial calling that plug-in to the fore and placing it under control. Instrument, Mixer and User buttons enable you to do the same with plug-in instruments, sequencer controls and MIDI Control Maps.

The Nocturn is extremely quick to get up and running. It takes only a short while to become comfortable

with the heads-up display, and in no time at all we were using it to control the bulk of our plug-ins. You can even use it to control hardware, by piping its MIDI to an appropriate output, with no need to run any DAW software.

The only problem we ran into was that the Nocturn 'froze' once or twice, requiring us to reconnect it. Novation assure us, however, that a fix has now been administered via a firmware update, so this should be a non-issue.

## Take control?

The Nocturn is ideal for anyone wanting a compact, easy-to-use yet highly-flexible control surface for studio or live use, and the software 'brain' should ensure a future-proof, upgradeable system (we'd like to be able to map multiple parameters to a single control in a future version). Those who may have been put off in the past due to the perceived difficulties of getting a controller to play ball should try it out, as its software-centric approach is bound to make a lot of sense to computer musicians. On top of all that, at just £69, the Novation Nocturn has got to be the bargain of the year, and we've already got our orders in... **cm**

### ▶ ALTERNATIVELY

**Novation ReMOTE SL Zero**  
cm105 >> 8/10 >> £229

The Nocturn's bigger brother. More controls, a neat LCD display and fully-compatible with AU 2.0, but it'll set you back a fair bit more

**Behringer BCR2000**

cm78 >> 9/10 >> £140

A great budget controller from Behringer. More physical controls than the Nocturn, though it's certainly not as easy to use

## VERDICT

### FOR

- + Easy to use
- + Ergonomic design
- + Innovative heads-up display
- + Outstanding value for money
- + Future-proof software 'brain'
- + Ideal for laptop DJs and live work

### AGAINST

- Not all sequencers support Mixer Control

The Nocturn is a joy to use, being a slick, forward-thinking product that combines ease of use with flexibility. What's more, at this price, there's no reason for anyone not to own a cutting-edge controller any more

### RATING



## Live and Learn

Despite the Live-esque appearance of Automap Universal 2.0's GUI, Ableton's sequencer doesn't currently support Automap Universal Mixer Control. Using the Automap MIDI Client and a supplied virtual MIDI driver, though, you can interface with apps like Live via MIDI. With programs that offer MIDI feedback, the LED rings can reflect parameter positions, and the Learn functionality becomes operable too.

It took us no time at all to rig up a simple DJing setup using Live and Nocturn, controlling two instances of EQ3 (ie, three pots for low/mid/high, and three buttons for killswitches), track levels and the master crossfader. A further page could be used to launch clips, manipulate effects, etc.

And of course, any Automap-enabled plug-ins will work fine within Live or any other music app.

A version of AU 2.0 that works with SL series controllers should also be available by the time you read this. We tested a preliminary version, and despite our ReMOTE SL ZeRO having many more controls than the Nocturn, the heads-up GUI remained perfectly legible.



▲ AU 2.0 running with a ReMOTE SL ZeRO! The GUI uses vector graphics, and so retains clarity when resized, and it can also be made opaque