



# Native Instruments PC MAC Maschine €599



In the current crusade for groove, Native Instruments weigh in with a software/hardware hybrid that could rival the MPC's dominance

## System requirements

**PC** Pentium/Athlon XP 2GHz, 2GB RAM, Windows XP SP2/Vista SP1 (32-/64-bit), USB 2.0 port, DVD drive, 5GB HD space

**Mac** Intel Core Duo 2GHz, 2GB RAM, OS X 10.4, USB 2.0 port, DVD drive, 5GB HD space

## Test system

**Mac** Mac Pro 2.66GHz, 4GB RAM, OS X 10.5.6, Ableton Live 7, Logic Pro 8

**Mac** MacBook Pro 2.53GHz, 4GB RAM, OS X 10.5.6, Ableton Live 7, Logic Pro 8

> NI's latest is, at heart, a groovebox in the Akai MPC vein, but with all the benefits that only a computer-based system can bring. The idea is that the USB hardware controller (and it is just a controller - there's no audio I/O) interfaces with the Maschine software so completely that the only things you'd ever need the keyboard and mouse for are file naming and tagging, sample layering, and the fiddlier side of event editing.

To facilitate this, the controller boasts two graphical LCD displays, a sizeable array of buttons and knobs, and a backlit 16-pad playing surface. The pads are velocity-sensitive and play beautifully. The buttons and knobs around the displays are contextual, operating whatever's currently showing in line with them. The hardware can also be used as a regular MIDI controller in any DAW that accepts standard CCs (ie, all of them), and you can switch between the two modes at the touch of a button, controlling Maschine one minute and anything else you like the next. Oh, and there are MIDI In and Out ports onboard, too, for connecting a keyboard, etc.

The software, which runs standalone or as a VST/AU/RTAS plug-in, is a self-contained DAW

aimed specifically at the creation of beats and grooves. The left-hand side of the GUI houses a browser, in which samples, parts, patterns, FX presets and projects are loaded. Sounds are filterable by instrument type, genre, sonic characteristics and all the rest of it, via a powerful tagging system. Speaking of which, Maschine ships with just over 5GB of content, from a ton of drums and percussion (30% have been reworked from NI's Battery drum machine) to synths, electric and acoustic instruments, FX and more. It's a thoroughly comprehensive library, and adding your own samples is as simple as selecting them, hitting Import and choosing a few tags to give them a place in Maschine's filtering system. The browser itself is navigable using the knobs and buttons on the hardware controller, although this is one of the few areas where it's quicker to mouse it.

## Slot machine

Maschine gives you eight Groups of 16 Sound Slots each to work with - each Slot holds a single sample or a set of them mapped across the keyboard. A Group can be thought of primarily

as a 16-part drum kit, but any sounds you like can be assigned to the Slots, of course. Plenty of preset Groups are included, as you'd expect, and you could cheerfully make a lifetime's worth of noise without ever going beyond them.

Sampled loops can be sliced (again, all fully editable on the hardware controller!) and laid out chromatically, REX file-style, for triggering via the pads. Impressively, Maschine can also record up to 16 bars of its own output (or, indeed, any external source) straight into a Sound Slot, so you can build a groove from scratch, record it straight back in, slice it up and 'remix' it on the pads without stopping the music

**"The tactile nature of it creates a connection with the instrument"**

or even looking at your computer monitor.

So, with a Group loaded, hit record, hammer away on the pads and everything's placed into Maschine's sequencer, which is always in cycle mode, enabling you to layer up parts at your leisure. If your timing's off, just hit Shift and Pad 5 to apply quantise, and if your groove's too straight, apply non-destructive shuffle with the Swing knob. Switching Groups is done with the Group buttons, and to replace a sound, simply enter Quick Browse mode and scroll to a new one. Automating effects parameters is similarly straightforward, and just about all of them are up for grabs: hold the F2 button and twist!

There's also a Step Sequencer mode, where the pads switch to represent the 16 steps of a bar (longer patterns are dealt with by flipping between banks of pads), enabling you to change sounds and enter hits entirely at your own pace.

Song construction is achieved by laying out Scenes of Patterns, of which each Group has a total of 64. This is at times better tackled onscreen - it's certainly easy to place patterns and switch between them on the controller, but with long, complex projects, the convenience of the mouse becomes very tempting.

### Plugging the gaps

The Maschine plug-in is identical to the standalone version, but comes with a few caveats. Pattern and Scene changes can't be

**BROWSER**  
Search through sounds, Groups, projects, patterns and FX presets, all tagged and filtered

**ARRANGER**  
Lay out patterns in Scenes - you've got 64 of them with which to build your song

**CONTROL AREA**  
Set inputs and outputs here, and operate Maschine's copious collection of effects processors

**MASTER VOLUME**  
Adjust your final output volume here, and keep an eye on your system's processor usage



**GROUP LIST**  
Each of Maschine's eight Groups contains 16 Sound Slots

**AUTOMATION**  
Just about everything in Maschine's software can be automated

**PATTERN EDITOR**  
Beat those pads and see the results appear here

recorded into the host from the controller, although Program Change messages can be sent from the host to the plug-in to trigger them. Also, automation is handled within Maschine itself, with none of its parameters available to the host. And, annoyingly, empty Scenes are simply 'jumped' in the Maschine timeline, so at points in your project where you don't want it to play, empty patterns have to be inserted. Other than that, though, it's every bit as great in plug-in mode as standalone.

What this all adds up to is an incredibly fluid, fast workflow - all the vibe and spontaneity of an MPC, but with a limitless, categorised library of sounds at your fingertips, and a much better view of everything via the software interface. NI's marketing tagline, "Get lost in the flow", sums the Maschine experience up perfectly. Limiting yourself to a couple of small displays when you've got a more immediately intuitive onscreen GUI in front of you might seem like a step backwards, but that's the point - once you

know where everything is, which doesn't take long, you find yourself positively flying around it, and the tactile nature of it all creates a real connection with the instrument.

It's everything that's great about old-school grooveboxes in a thoroughly new-school package, and it offers more sheer fun factor than we can remember having with anything else we've ever plugged into a computer. **cm**

Contact Via website  
Web [www.native-instruments.com](http://www.native-instruments.com)

### Alternatively

**FXpansion Guru**  
**cm89 >> 10/10 >> £157**  
Innovative software groovebox with a top quality sound library

**Akai MPC2500**  
**N/A >> N/A >> £999**  
Industry standard, self-contained groovebox for computer-free beats

### Verdict

**For** Incredibly creative and fun to use  
Near-as-dammit total hardware control  
Excellent library  
Awe-inspiring effects  
Instant switching from Maschine to MIDI  
Superb build quality

**Against** Could be less 'self-contained' when used as a plug-in

The perfect combination of software and controller for groove production and performance, Maschine is just awesome

**9/10**

### FX Maschine

**Maschine has 21 onboard effects, designed by Mike Daliot, who built NI's Massive synth, and they range from all your studio/stage favourites to rather more outlandish processors. Compressors, EQs, reverbs, delays, distortion, filters and the like are in good supply, but it's the weirder ones that capture the imagination. Ice, for example, uses a set of self-oscillating filters to turn any signal into a cold, barren soundscape, while Resochord comprises six comb filters that 'quasi-harmonise' the incoming audio.**

**Each individual sound can have two effects applied, as can each Group and the**

**master bus. Send effects are set up by using a group as an auxiliary 'channel', again loaded with up to two effects per slot, to which all sounds/Groups can be sent. It's a bit of a faff, but once it's done, it's done (and saveable, of course), ready for send levels to be adjusted on the fly.**

**The effects can also be used on external signals, which DJs should find helpful.**

**Finally - although not actually an effect - fills can be created by holding down Note Repeat, which simply duplicates the current sound at whatever note value you choose, complete with pad pressure volume control.**