

£175 **PC** **MAC**

# Native Instruments Traktor Kontrol X1

Some things are worth waiting for, but will Native Instruments' first DJ controller prove to be one of them?

> Native Instruments have been one of the most pivotal companies in digital DJing's short history, doing, arguably, more to bring it to the mainstream than any other developer, with their Traktor DJing software being pretty much the best out there. It's perhaps surprising, then, that they've never released a DJ controller, and there's a lot of pressure on them to get it right with their first attempt, the brand new Traktor Kontrol X1.

First impressions are excellent. No amount of tech spec can convey how something feels, but we can tell you that Kontrol X1 features the same rugged build as recent NI hardware like Maschine. It's sturdy, the buttons respond well to touch, the control knobs are solid, and the non-slip feet keep the unit in place. Only time will tell how durable it is, but it certainly feels like it should give years of trouble-free service, even if carted around in a rucksack regularly.

It's a standard bus-powered USB device, and installation is as simple as can be. Once we'd installed the latest update of Traktor (which includes the drivers for the X1), Traktor informed us that it had detected the unit, asking if we'd like to change the preset settings to match – we did, and it worked perfectly.

## Going Native

We should point out that all of this applies to Native NHL mode – a method by which the X1 can communicate directly with Traktor via USB providing higher knob resolution than MIDI. Versions of Traktor prior to 1.2.3 can only use the X1 in MIDI mode, which is toggled by pressing Shift and HotCue. While the MIDI mode might at first seem like little more than a legacy feature, it actually offers the rather exciting ability to use the X1 in two modes simultaneously, as you can switch over to MIDI mode at any time to control other hardware or software, without affecting



## System requirements

**PC** P4/Athlon 1.4GHz SSE-compatible CPU, 1GB RAM, Windows XP (32-bit)/Vista (32/64-bit)/7 (32/64-bit)

**Mac** G4 1.4GHz/Intel Core Duo 1.66GHz, 1GB RAM, OS X 10.5

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the NHL mode’s signal, and vice versa. And since two X1s can be attached at the same time (indeed, two are required for full control of a four-deck Traktor setup), the power this places in your hands is potentially huge.

## Taking sides

So what do you get for your money? Well, the whole thing is split into two, with each side hosting 14 buttons, four control knobs and two push-button encoders that click in increments to assist in browsing for tracks. Two central buttons complete the package, and apart from the USB slot, that’s everything.

It’s all sensibly laid out, with the main functions for Traktor use printed on the buttons. Each lights up brightly and is very responsive, with dual-functionality provided by the central Shift key, with all the secondary functions printed beneath each control.

Operation of the FX section is straightforward enough, giving hands-on access to Traktor’s dual effects banks, each of which works in Chained or Advanced mode. The top knob controls the wet/dry balance, and the neighbouring button is a bypass for the effect when in Advanced mode. When working in chained mode, Traktor has three one-parameter effects per bank, so the X1’s numbered FX buttons toggle them on and off, and each adjacent knob controls the parameter of its respective effect. Advanced mode gives you one effect per rack, but with three knobs and three buttons worth of control. On top of that, the secondary functions (accessed using the central Shift key) enable you to change the effects themselves from the device.

The Browse section is next, and it gives you rotary push-button encoders for browsing your tunes and seeking through them once loaded. The remaining two sections offer control over loops (with encoders for adjusting them) and the transport.

## Kontrolled experiments

So how is it in use? One word: awesome. It’s versatile without trying to be a jack of all trades. Too many DJ controllers clutter the front panel with an array of hands-on goodies made to make them look like DJ mixers, but NI have quite rightly assumed that a good number of their users will be mixing externally with a traditional DJ mixer hooked up to their audio interface, so there are no largely unrequired faders eating up space.

The Traktor integration is, as you’d expect, very tight indeed – little features like flashing LEDs to let you know when two tracks are drifting out of sync blow your mind when you actually use them. One of our favourites is that you can set the brightness of the LEDs for both on and off states, enabling you to still be able to see and read inactive buttons by their soft glow – very cool indeed!



Here we’re setting up Traktor for MIDI control via the X1

## Global control

As with any dedicated controller, is the X1 even worth contemplating if you don’t use the software that it’s designed for? This is one case in which we’d say yes, it absolutely is. At a fundamental level, the build quality and layout make it attractive as a controller, and it works perfectly well in MIDI mode, with a decent assignment editing utility included.

In fact, the X1 comes with Traktor LE anyway, which is well worth a go if you don’t have Traktor, and there’s also a plastic overlay in the box that represents a control layout for Serato Scratch users. As we were completing the review, NI let us know that they’re

working on an integration template for Scratch 2 (currently in public beta) with which we’ll be able to control the more advanced features in the software from the X1. Interestingly, the aforementioned overlay has blank spaces on the flip-side, so it’s clear that NI expect users to really explore the unit’s potential with other software.

One last point of interest regarding the MIDI mode: As noted in the main review, you can switch between NHL and MIDI mode on the fly, but as well as using Traktor in conjunction with other software/hardware, it’s perfectly possible to use the X1’s MIDI to control further functions of Traktor.

The standard track browsing and FX functions put the kind of controls you’d normally need to use a mouse for right in front of you, which is a godsend, especially for users of NI’s timecode vinyl-based Traktor Scratch, most of whom are averse to fiddling on-screen during a set. You can set up loops, select and load tracks, and play with effects, all from the X1. It really does complement and speed up the way you work, and fairly soon, you’ll wonder how you managed without it. Not only that, but it looks better for the crowd, too, as you aren’t hunched over the screen so much.

Ultimately, while Native Instruments’ first ever DJ controller might have been a long time coming, it’s certainly been worth the wait. None of our regular complaints about the many DJ controllers we’ve seen over the last few years apply. NI have taken a step back, waited for digital DJing to mature and created a near-perfect product. Only time and a lot more live use will show if we’re oversteating things, but in the time we’ve had the X1, we’ve felt like a new benchmark has been set. **cm**

**Contact** [www.native-instruments.com](http://www.native-instruments.com)  
**Web** via website  
**Info** Traktor Kontrol X1 bag, £35

## Alternatively

**M-Audio X-Session Pro**  
**cm108 >> 6/10 >> £79**

If all you need is levels and knobs, this is a popular choice

**Faderfox DJ2**  
**N/A >> N/A >> £250**

Designed for Traktor, this is good, too, but we’d still go for the X1

## Verdict

**For** Rugged build and great design  
Awesome Traktor integration  
Versatile and genuinely useful  
Fantastic browsing rotaries  
Seamless installation  
Good value

**Against** Nothing!

The X1 is a supremely well designed piece of kit that will delight Traktor-wielding DJs

**10/10**