Akai
APC40 MkII £290 PC MAC

It's hard to improve on a MIDI controller classic, but that's exactly what Akai claim to have done five years on. Let's have a look

> Five years ago, Akai, in consultation with Ableton, produced the APC40 (**cm**141, 10/10), the definitive live performance control surface for Ableton Live, if not one of the finest MIDI controllers ever made in general – an accolade that still stands today. Contenders from Novation and other manufacturers have failed to topple it as the ultimate on-stage tool for Live users – not even Ableton's sublime Push (the perfect APC40 companion, incidentally, being superior in a studio capacity, and overall the better all-rounder) matches it for on-the-fly arrangement potential. So, can the long-awaited "MkII" successor outdo the original classic?

Before we start, we should quickly explain the fundamental APC concept. The APC40 (both original and MkII) features an 8x5 clip-triggering button matrix (with the ability to jump between contiguous banks); Scene trigger buttons; eight channel strips with volume, mute, solo, send and pan controls; eight dedicated device

(instrument/effect) knobs; transport controls; nudge controls for beat-matching your set to sync to a DJ; and various other controls tailored for taking Live onstage. Crucially, it's not really a studio-orientated music production tool, so if you don't play live, it's probably not for you.

Two steps back
The first thing that strikes you about the APC40 MkII is how – functionally, at least – it's almost identical to its predecessor. The most significant major change is the design of the casing and the layout. The old APC40 was a bit of a beast, but that size and weight was justified by its brick-privy build quality: every button, knob and fader felt like it was built to last (and, indeed, they all have on our heavily used unit).

The MkII is a more slimline affair – narrower, thinner and lighter – but it doesn't come across as quite as sturdy or, frankly, nice. The faders, triggers and rotaries are chunkier, more

cramped and less distinct, and the triggers require noticeably more pressure to activate than before. Unlike Akai's beautifully built Push and APC40 MkI, the MkII feels like many other budget-to-mid-priced controllers: a bit plasticky and extravagantly futuristic, rather than a potential music technology design classic.

It's also much harder to see at a glance what's going on now, with the solo, mute, record and (newly added) crossfader assign buttons for each channel packed into a squashed, tight square arrangement, rather than the well-spaced vertical layout of MkI.

Another change is the repositioning of the per-channel send/pan knobs from their own dedicated section to above their respective channels. While this might sound like the more logical place for them, in this already cramped, dark interface, we find it just adds to the clutter. On the plus side, though, the new User button switches said rotaries over to control eight

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The bundled samples and plugins – such as Hybrid 3 – are good but not a reason to buy

customisable parameters, which is a very useful feature indeed.

Ultimately, while the design remit may have been to make the APC40 MkII more portable and ergonomic, the actual impression you get is, sadly, more one of cost-cutting.

One step forward

Moving beyond the construction and layout, things start to look up. Perhaps the most obvious upgrade is that the clip launchers are now RGB backlit, enabling them to be matched to the corresponding clips onscreen, which really aids navigation around larger sessions.

Another definite improvement over the MkI is that the MkII is USB bus powered (the original required a DC adapter), which is obviously a great convenience. Then there are the clip launch quantise controls, which can now be set easily from the front panel using the Shift modifier with the Channel Select buttons.

There are also a few less profound advances worthy of mention, like Device Lock, for freely navigating your Live project while keeping the eight Device Control rotaries locked to a particular device; and the separate Session and Arrange record buttons, reflecting recent improvements made by Ableton to Live itself, such as automation recording in Session view.

Missed opportunities

The APC40 MkII works hard to solve a range of problems that most users didn't really have with the MkI, but in doing so, it actually creates a whole host of new ones. We're sorry to say that we think it could and should have offered so much more.

For a start, an LCD screen might have helped ease the burden on that cluttered front panel. Group expand/collapse buttons would've been excellent, too. And we'd rather have the number of clip triggers increased than the Sends rearranged. Then there are some useful controls in Live that still aren't covered by the hardware, such as the Back To Arrange button (for

Value added packs

All of Akai's recent controllers have included various deal-sweetening bits of software, and in the case of the APC40 MkII, they take the form of Ableton Live Lite, some sound libraries, a pair of synths and an effects suite.

The audio libraries are the same as those that come with the recent Trigger Finger Pro, including some excellent sounds from Toolroom and Prime Loops. For dance styles, the former are great, but obviously not reason in themselves to invest. Likewise, Hybrid 3, AIR Music Technology's dance-focused virtual analogue synth, offers excellent EDM and tech-house staples but few surprises.

Then there's a suite of effects from Puremagnetik and SONiVOX Twist (a "spectral morphing synthesiser").

Neither the original APC40 nor Push needed to offer a big bundle of software and samples to entice buyers, and while we never turn our nose up at a good selection of sounds and plugins, we do think the priority with the MkII should have been on delivering an excellent product that sells itself, rather than throwing in free add-ons that – however good – don't partner especially meaningfully with the live performance product they're supposed to complement.

switching back to Arrange playback after manually triggering in Session view). An integrated audio interface would have excited us, too, as would a more radical step sequencing mode, like that on Push. And finally, in this day and age, LED channel level meters should be a given, no?

As it is, the MkII offers little new functionality and takes a major step backwards in terms of its interface. It's not, of course, completely fair to judge it on what it *isn't*, but we can't pretend to be anything less than highly disappointed by what it *is*. The improvements are minor and come at the expense of downgrades in build-quality, ergonomics and feel. If you've been holding off buying the MkI under the assumption that the MkII would top it, we'd seriously suggest taking advantage of the current clearance price of the original instead.

The APC40 MkII certainly isn't a bad controller – it's perhaps the third best performance controller for Live on the market – but its predecessor is still king. **cm**

The new chassis was meant to be ergonomic, but it just feels a tad cheap

Alternatively

Akai APC40 Mk I
cm141 » 10/10 » £200 approx.
We don't usually recommend discontinued models, but if you're quick, you can still grab an original APC – at a clearance price!

Ableton Push
cm191 » 10/10 » £429
Not quite as good for performance; unrivalled for in-studio creativity

Verdict

For	RGB clip launch buttons
	USB powered
	Launch quantise controls

Against	Plasticky build
	No LCD display or LED meters
	Cramped interface
	Functionally almost unchanged

Similar in ability to MkI, but inferior in feel and structure. The APC40 MkII's small advances can't disguise its overall regression

7/10