

# Akai APC20 | £170

Akai have taken a chainsaw to their successful APC40, and made the APC20. **Martin Delaney** wonders if it'll finally fit into his man-bag...



## WHAT IS IT?

Hardware interface dedicated to controlling Ableton Live.

## CONTACT

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## HIGHLIGHTS

- 1 Effective control of Live's Session View
- 2 More portable (and bargain-priced) than the full-size APC40
- 3 New Notes mode

**A**kai's APC40, released last year, was the first 'official' Ableton Live controller, which gave it the right to carry the Ableton logo, as well as out-of-the box control that other MIDI gadgets could only dream of. The APC40 was well-designed, well-built, and easy to use – though there was a feeling that it was somewhat chunky for live gigs.

Novation (not coincidentally Ableton's UK distributors) retaliated with the Launchpad, a cheaper, smaller,

USB-bus powered unit which gave the bare bones of Live Session View control, with the benefit of compatibility with other music apps through the Automap software. Now, instead of coming out with something 'new', Akai have adapted the APC40, virtually cutting it in half and apparently shedding some of the functionality. Enter the APC20.

## Grid iron

Retaining the metal base and ABS plastic upper casing of the APC40, the first things you notice about the APC20

are things that are missing – like all of the buttons and knobs on the right-hand side, and the two footswitch inputs. That said the nine faders, 40 clip buttons, scene select buttons, and track buttons for activation, solo/cue and record arm remain from the '40.

In an attempt to compensate for the 'lost' physical controls, the APC20 has a Shift button, which gives dual functions to many of the other buttons, and, critically, to the eight channel faders. But the thing that'll get existing APC40 users going is the new Note Mode button. Now the clip launch buttons can send notes directly to slots in Live Drum Racks (the Launchpad does this too). The Note Mode button also toggles the Track Selection buttons for transport functions, MIDI Overdub and grid navigation.

The box includes Ableton Live Akai Professional APC Edition so you can start to jam immediately and the '20 is physically as close to the '40 as possible. It's the same height and depth, and logically uses the same parts and materials. The smaller size means



this is a lot easier to find room for than the APC40, in a studio or a DJ booth.

Some folks will be disappointed that mains power is still required, considering that Novation have managed to get the Launchpad running off USB – I'm guessing that a move over to USB power would require a major overhaul, and that effort would be reflected in the price.

### Plug in baby

Plug the APC20 into the mains, turn it on, hook up the USB cable, launch Live, select it as a control surface in Live's MIDI Preferences, and the familiar red Session View rectangle appears. For APC40 users – because they're so alike, it's easy to load a Live set that you built for the '40 and use it straight away – this might put it into your head that you can use the '40 in the studio, and use the '20 as your takeout version... And why not?

The APC20 looks and feels like the APC40. It works the same with Live, as far as clip/scene launching, and grid navigation goes. It also works with Max For Live in the same way. The Shift button feels like what it is: a workaround to retain the APC40's control functions with less buttons.

### Excess Means Success

When you connect an APC20 and an APC40 to your computer, launch Live, and select them in MIDI Preferences, you'll get two of those coloured rectangles on screen, surrounding the relevant Session View clips, and something quite awesome happens: the APC20 slaves to the APC40, so as you navigate the rectangle around the Session View, both devices change their focus across 16 tracks!

This is an awesome feature, and really makes the APC20 work as an extension of the APC40. Akai really should make more of this in the APC20 promo material! I'm

waiting for the first 'APC60' photos to appear online, as somebody unscrews the end panels and joins 'em up! There are also no compatibility issues between the APCs and the Launchpad – add it, and it'll also get its own rectangle. Novation's Automap software lets the Launchpad do things the APCs don't, including

sending keyboard commands, and interacting with other music applications.

When Akai or Novation talk about adding up to six of their controllers, that would be in any combination, so you could have four Launchpads, an APC20, and an APC40, for the setup of your dreams. Nice.



Send 1, Send 2, Send 3, User 1, User 2, or User 3. So far so fair enough but the Mode buttons don't stay lit to remind you of your selection, and it feels unnatural to switch from making a

format of the original APC40 and I wonder how they feel about these design compromises? Still, at least it has faders, and they are solid and great for levels. In fact, apart from the

mode-related problems, the APC20 works just as well as the APC40. If you wanted a backpack-friendly, cheaper APC40 then this is it.

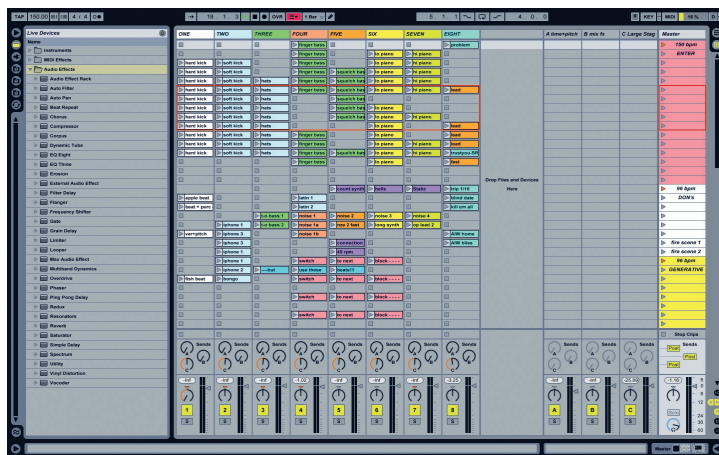
Likewise if you wanted a Launchpad with faders, this is it. But if you want a controller interface that lays everything out clearly in front of you, this isn't it then you're better off with a '40.

Try to get hands-on with the APC20 before you buy it. If you're cool with the Shift button and multifunction faders, then what's not to like? **FM**

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Inescapable I guess but I struggled with the multifunction faders. You assign these by holding Shift, then pressing one of the Record Arm/Fader Mode buttons, to select either Volume, Pan,

volume fade to a send effect for the same track. It works and if you're not ducking and diving between sends and pans it's find. But it's kludgy, at best. Ableton were very involved with the



Ableton Live uses a red outlining in its scene view to indicate which section of clips are currently visible in the APC20's clip launch section. OK, so you still can't see their names but what do you want? Blood?

### SPECS

**PC:** 1.5GHz, Windows XP or Vista, soundcard. ASIO driver support recommended

**Mac:** G4/Intel, OS X 10.3.9/10.4+ recommended 512MB RAM/1GB recommended, QuickTime 6.5 or higher DVD-ROM drive, USB port Ableton Live 7 or 8

**Hardware:** USB port Mains power connector (included) 40 clip launch buttons with green/red/amber LEDs 5 scene launch buttons 8 clip stop buttons 8 track activator buttons 8 solo/cue buttons 8 arm/fader mode buttons Note mode button Shift button 9 multi-function faders

**Dimensions:** 295 x 333 x 57mm

**Weight:** 1.7kgs

### ALTERNATIVES



**Akai APC40**

**£350**

Needing no introduction. Features a ton of knobs and less shift-ing to access features. Not so portable.

[akaipro.com](http://akaipro.com)



**Novation Launchpad**

**£149**

Same visual feedback, more mobile, and USB powered. No knobs or faders, though.

[novationmusic.com](http://novationmusic.com)



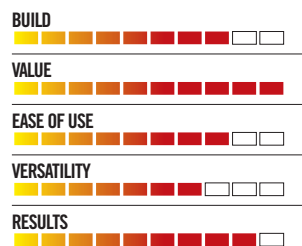
**Apple iPad**

**£TBC**

It's just a matter of time before the iPad hosts awesome controllers for Live.

[apple.com](http://apple.com)

### FutureMusic VERDICT



The APC20 is a seriously useful Live controller. But if you need more, spring for the '40 instead.