

NI Traktor Kontrol S8

| £999

Native Instruments unleash their most expansive, feature-packed DJ device yet. **Si Truss** takes Kontrol

INCLUDES AUDIO

WHAT IS IT?

Four track controller for Traktor Pro with an independent four channel analogue mixer

CONTACT

Who: Native Instruments
Web: www.native-instruments.com

HIGHLIGHTS

- 1 Flexible range of I/O
- 2 Massively intuitive control of Traktor's 'deep' features
- 3 Screens and touch-sensitive controls shift focus away from the laptop



Performance Pads

Launch samples, set up cues, jump around loops and access the new Freeze Mode.

Faders

The new replaceable fader section features a unique inverse design to offer maximum durability.

Hi-Res Screens

These endlessly useful, clear screens are hands-down the S8's best feature.

Touchstrips

Multi-purpose touchstrips work as scratch or seek controls when a track is stopped, or pitchbend when it's playing.

When, back in 2013, Native Instruments announced the forthcoming MKII versions of their S2 and S4 Traktor controllers, the ever-speculative population of the internet's various DJ forums set about creating a wish-list of new and revamped features they'd like to see. While ideas ranged from sensible workflow tweaks to outlandish new capabilities, on the whole the wish-list displayed a desire for deeper control of the software's Remix Decks and a shift in focus away from the laptop screen.

When the updated controllers arrived they were met, perhaps unfairly, with a certain amount of disappointment. Although both are still great, and despite some well-placed new features (notably the excellent iOS integration), it was clear that NI had opted for refinements rather than reinvention.

Fortunately, this isn't where the story ends. It transpires that NI weren't throwing everything and the kitchen sink at their range because they had something newer, more feature-packed, and more ambitious in the works. Enter the Traktor Kontrol S8.

Size matters

The S8 is Native Instruments' most expansive piece of DJ hardware to-date, both in terms of its features and its sheer size. It's significantly larger than the S4 in both depth and width and, although it's actually more lightweight than it looks, it's not the sort of thing you could simply bring to a club without prior warning and hope there's room in the DJ booth. Given that, even once you've made space for the S8 itself, you'll still need a laptop and possibly some additional gear (more on this later), I'd suggest that the space-conscious look elsewhere.

The S8 is clearly a quality piece of kit, however. It looks fantastic and feels very well built. The quality of pads and knobs will be familiar to anyone who has tried the S4 MKII or Maschine Studio, while the new replaceable fader section – which we're told uses a special inverted design to offer maximum durability – is the sort of properly 'pro level' touch that we'd expect at this price point. With its backlit controls, LED-lined touchstrips and hi-res displays, the controller really looks the business in a darkened club environment and proves easy to navigate under all lighting conditions. Which is



Booth Out

A booth monitor output comes in the form of balanced 1/4-inch jack outs with an independent top panel volume control.

MIDI In/Out

MIDI connections allow the S8 to sync with a whole assortment of external gear.

lucky, because the S8 really does have a lot going on.

The unit is centred around a four channel mixer that can control a quartet of software channels, act as a standalone analogue mixer, or any combination of these two options. Flipping between digital and analogue mode is as simple as pushing the Traktor Mode button located at the top of each channel and, with built-in digital vinyl support and an impressive range of I/O (see *In & Out*), this makes the S8 a truly flexible modern DJ 'hub'. Aside from the redesigned faders, the most notable feature of this mixer's channels is the addition of backlit on/off switches for each of the bi-directional filters; something which was a notable omission from earlier NI controllers.

To either side of the mixer is a pair of deck controllers. Along the bottom of each is the transport section, with Play, Cue, Shift, Sync, Deck select and a

In & Out

An impressive range of included inputs and outputs is one of the S8's best features, adding massively to its flexibility and potential. Each channel on the mixer has a RCA input, switchable between line and phono. The S8 features built-in timecode converters too, meaning all four main inputs can accept control CD/vinyl signals. There's also a pair of Mic inputs, one 1/4-inch jack and a

second XLR/jack, which can both be assigned to any mixer channel.

There are two sets of main outputs, balanced XLR and unbalanced RCA. The S8 also adds a booth out (missing from the S2 and S4), which is a balanced pair of jack outs with an independent volume control on the master mixer section.

As with its predecessors, the S8's headphone out is on the

front edge (as are the crossfader's curve control and channel selectors), which may irritate those who want to 'install' the controller. However, the addition of both 1/4-inch and 3.5mm headphone jacks is a godsend for those of us who regularly lose adaptors! They output louder than those on the S2/S4 too.

Finally, MIDI In and Out round off the unit's range of I/O.

SPECS

Included software: Traktor Scratch Pro 2

Audio inputs

Channels: 4 Stereo
Sample Rate: 48kHz
Bit Resolution: 24-bit
Converter: Cirrus Logic
4x RCA Line/Phone Inputs
2x Mic Input (Jack + XLR/Jack)

Audio outputs

Channels: 2 Stereo
Sample Rate: 48kHz
Bit Resolution: 24-bit
Converter: Cirrus Logic
3x Line Outputs (balanced XLR & 1/4" Booth + unbalanced RCA)
Headphone Output (Jack + Mini Jack)

Dimensions:

38.7 x 6.6 x 58.5cm

Weight:

5kg

button for toggling Traktor's beat-locked Flux mode on and off. Above this is a grid of eight pads, the functions of which can be changed via a strip of buttons along the outside edge. In Hotcue mode the pads are used to assign and jump between eight cue points, while Loop mode allows the user to create a loop and trigger beat jumps. In Remix mode the pads trigger eight of the software's 64 available Remix Deck sample slots. Finally, Freeze mode adds a feature from NI's iOS app Traktor DJ, which instantly 'grabs' a loop from the current track, slices it into eight and allows each slice to be triggered as a one shot sample.

Above this sit four faders, which control the volume of the four Remix Deck slots, along with a large rotary that serves a number of purposes – it's primarily used for selecting and editing the size of loops, but also handles scrolling through the bank of Remix Deck filters, effects sends and pitch, each with On/Off buttons. Finally, along the very top is a row of four effects rotaries, plus an FX Select button, offering control over the software's effects.

Jog off

There is, however, a pair of very noticeable omissions from the S8's control set: jog wheels. I'll lay my cards

on the table – when I first caught sight of the S8, this was something of a concern. I like jog wheels, or more accurately, I like to have something spherical that at least tries to replicate the feel of a turntable. I'm no DMC champion, but I am the sort of semi-Luddite who will turn off sync when DJing with the S4. It's not that Traktor's beat detection algorithms don't work – they're great, as are all the tempo sync'd performance features – but personally I tend to get bored quickly if everything feels too 'on the rails'.

NI claim that the new touchstrips can be used in place of jog wheels and there's *some* truth in this. With a track stopped, these can be used to 'scratch' the current track, while holding down Shift puts them into Seek mode, allowing the user to jump to any part of the track. With the track playing, these become Pitchbend controls, which – to be fair – are surprisingly well implemented and can be used for basic, 'nudge'-style beat-matching. The absence of pitch faders rules out any serious beat-matching though. Tempo adjustments are all performed via a single central tempo rotary, which by default slowly fades between bpm's and requires a Shift press to make quick adjustments.

Outside the realms of basic House and Techno, this is all too fiddly, and does seriously hamper the idea of the S8 as an 'all-in-one' controller if you

Faders

Control the volume of individual Remix Deck slots.

ALTERNATIVES



Native Instruments Traktor Kontrol S4

£569

It lacks the depth and flexibility of the S8, but it's more standalone and still digital vinyl compatible.

www.native-instruments.com



Numark NS7 II

£999

Numark's flagship Serato controller is built like a tank and packed with features, including vinyl-style jog wheels.

www.numark.com



Novation Twitch

£299

Released back in 2011, Novation's Serato controller was the first to replace jog wheels with touchstrips.

www.novationmusic.com

want to mix with less 'rigid' genres like Funk or Soul.

Which brings me to probably the main point of this review: despite what NI say on the box, it's best not to think of the S8 as an 'all-in-one' device. The

area the controller is a serious joy to work with, thanks primarily to its best feature – the pair of screens. While they're not particularly large, the implementation of these screens, coupled with the touch-sensitive

While it's lacking a little in the beat-matching department, the S8's intuitive control over Traktor's deeper features is absolutely unrivalled.

Plugging a bit of extra 'analogue' gear into it transforms it from an interesting

controller into a next-level hybrid DJ set-up. In my tests I used a pair of turntables, plus a drum machine on a third input, sync'd via the MIDI out. In this

state, the S8 is probably the best digital DJ device I've ever used. The ability to flip seamlessly between real and control vinyl, analogue and digital sources, live sampling and looping from the inputs, all easily and intuitively, is so much fun and inspires real creativity. If you're after an all-in-one controller for casual use, the S2 or S4 may still be your best option, but if you're willing to commit to the whole space and wallet-sapping package, the S8 is the real deal. **FM**

In Touch With The Groove

A number of the S8's knobs and faders are touch-sensitive, meaning that, as soon as you start to interact with the control, the relevant screen will switch to a 'smart view' displaying precise information about whatever it is you're tweaking. This functionality is really nicely implemented, to the extent that – in a positive way – you barely even notice it's there.

As a result, the relationship between the controls and the screen just works, and all makes sense. Touch an effect control and a drop-down will appear displaying all the relevant info about its parameters. Touch the Browser dial and the screen will immediately flip to display whatever playlist you're currently working from. Touch a fader or rotary related to the Remix Deck and that

view will appear – and so on and so forth.

When I first got my hands on the S8 I felt NI might have missed a trick by not making the displays themselves touchscreens (using the iPad screen as an X/Y effect pad is the highlight of NI's Traktor DJ app) but on reflection this could have proved fiddly. These touch-sensitive controls seem like a sensible choice.

FutureMusic **VERDICT**

Category	Score (out of 10)
BUILD	8
VALUE	7
EASE OF USE	9
VERSATILITY	8
RESULTS	10

Possibly the best DJ controller out there, but you'll want some extra gear to get the most out of it.

