



Native Instruments PC MAC Maschine Mk2 £469

With its much-improved controls and intuitive colour-coding system, this is one Maschine you won't want to rage against

> Anybody who's ever used a so-called groovebox - such as those in the Akai MPC range - knows how quick, fun and creative they are. Native Instruments latched onto this fact a few years ago and revitalised the groovebox concept with Maschine. Combining the power, sample library capacity and easy integration of software with the immediacy and performance sensibility of an MPC-style pad set, it uses a supremely well-conceived hardware controller to trigger a virtual instrument that runs standalone or as a plugin (VST/AU/RTAS).

Like the grooveboxes that inspired it, Maschine isn't quite a DAW - rather, it's a sample- and synthesis-based music production workstation that enables you to create instrument groups and build patterns that can be sequenced into complete tracks on their own or used within your DAW. Crucially, just about every element of the software can be controlled directly from the hardware.

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Last year's 1.5 update was a big one, bringing third-party plugin support and some truly glorious emulation modes to mimic the sound of the old Akai MPC60 and E-MU SP1200 grooveboxes. The latest free update to the software takes it to version 1.8 - see *The 1.8 Update*, opposite, for more on this - but more importantly, the Maschine controller has been

updated to Mk2, and that's primarily what we're here to tell you about.

Control freaks

At first glance, you could be forgiven for thinking the only real change that's been made to the hardware is the casing - and even then, only if you have the white model (black still being the other option) or one fitted with any of the five coloured Maschine Custom Kits, each comprising a replacement faceplate and a full set of knobs (available for £55 each).

A longer look reveals very slightly modified knob and button placements - but the real shocker comes when you plug it into your Mac or PC's USB port and are greeted by a dazzling wave of RGB LEDs. This is by no means a shallow cosmetic tweak: in conjunction with the software, the scenes, groups, patterns and sounds that make up the Maschine architecture can all now be assigned their own colours.

“Maschine’s new buttons are just as bashable in an exuberant live context as ever”

It’s hard to explain to somebody who hasn’t used Maschine before (or who’s only used Mk1) what a huge boon this is. Apart from making everything much more visually enticing, being able to read the layout of your active pad group at a glance takes a huge amount of potential pant-soiling out of live performance and means increased intricacy and less subsequent editing in the studio.

Suddenly, the sleek conceptual design at the heart of Maschine is brought to life in a way you didn’t realise you wanted or needed until it arrived. This will be particularly pronounced for casual Maschine users, as previously it could be difficult to tell at a glance what mode the pads were in, and even experienced users could be confused as to which pad represented which scene when triggering and arranging them using just the controller.

Also, with no frame of reference, Maschine newbies will never appreciate how colour-coding crushes an already shallow learning curve until it’s as flat as the multicoloured light-up dancefloor in *Saturday Night Fever* that Mk2 so closely resembles. By colour-coding different parts, you’ll get to grips with the software architecture and the differences between patterns, scenes and groups far more quickly than before.

Hit the button

There are a few other changes to the hardware, too. The new single Master section knob for swing, tempo and volume adjustment is far more practical than the previous set of three, eliminating any danger of accidentally catching the tempo knob, say, when simply aiming to lower the volume. Also, the new larger stepped dial is more precise. Maschine’s new buttons are just as bashable in an exuberant live context as ever, but they now feel smoother and click pleasingly to the touch, so you really know when you’ve pressed them.

The new hardware also brings some workflow improvements. Without doubt, our favourite is the ability to use the transport controls to stop and start your host DAW while the rest of the controls remain locked to the Maschine plug-in.

Is there anything we don’t like about Mk2? Not really. Some have argued that the two-

colour LCD screen is dated – its two tones have been reversed, which actually makes it a bit easier on the eye and nicer to use, but it’s not the high-res, multicolour, multitouch monster that some suggest it should be. To our mind, though, this would just up the price without giving any meaningful benefit, so we don’t see it as an issue.

So, is Maschine Mk2 an essential upgrade? In truth, not quite – at least not for studio use. The core functionality is arguably not improved enough to really warrant ditching your trusty Mk1. For newcomers and those who take their beloved boxes out live, however, cancel that extra pint of milk and start saving now – you absolutely need Maschine Mk2 in your life. **cm**

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The colour of clips in the Maschine software is directly reflected in the new hardware

The 1.8 update

The free Maschine 1.8 software update won’t be remembered as one of the landmark versions, but it does contain a few useful bits and pieces. Many of the new features are geared towards the Mk2 hardware, such as colour assignments for scenes, patterns and groups, and the ability to run multiple instances of Maschine, each with its own controller – an obvious (and persuasive, in our case) way to convince people to buy a new Mk2 without flooding the market with cheap second-hand Mk1s.

There are several benefits for Mk1 users, too: the new offline pitchshift and timestretch facility enables you to alter both effects independently, rather than just using the classic transposition shifting method.

Then there are two new Saturator models: Tape and Tube. Tape is ported over from Kontakt, while Tube is entirely new. Both sound so lush that we’ve already routed audio through Maschine for no other reason than to use them. The other newly added effect is Transient Master (NI’s take on SPL’s Transient Designer), which works well for taming or enhancing the transients of any audio, but particularly drums. Of the less headline-grabbing tweaks, we particularly welcome the playhead position indicator in sampler editor mode – very handy.

Finally, Maschine now comes with a free copy of NI’s Massive synth, which has established itself as an industry standard for pop and dance production over the last few years. Very nice!

Alternatively

Akai MPC Studio
N/A » N/A » £379

If you appreciate MPC hardware, try this hybrid offering

Ableton Live 8
cm139 » 9/10 » \$449

Great combined with a drum pad controller, and flip to p24 for details on the tantalising Push controller!

Verdict

For Everything that made the old Maschine awesome is still here
RGB colour-coding transforms workflow
New buttons feel great
Great new Saturator models
Much easier to use live

Against New faceplates and dials are rather expensive

NI’s essential hybrid groovebox just got even more essential!



From its durable casing to the satisfying click of its buttons, Maschine Mk2 simply screams build quality

10/10