



Native Instruments PC MAC Traktor Kontrol S4 £749

The creators of arguably the most powerful DJ software on the planet have built a similarly capable controller for it. But is it all too much?

> Music software giants Native Instruments pushed laptop DJing forward with their Traktor software, which first appeared back in 2000. The market is now much more crowded, and features like virtual vinyl control, effects, auto-beatmatching and control hardware options have become the norm, but it's fair to say Traktor's kept its nose in front. With Traktor Kontrol S4, NI have their sights set on the digital DJ's Holy Grail: an all-in-one hardware/software solution, offering a full-on controller, audio interface and feature-packed software.

Connection is via USB and it's designed to run off a supplied PSU. It can use bus power, but the LEDs will be dimmer and the headphone output not as loud. The main stereo out is available on RCA and balanced 1/4" jack connections. You get a couple of stereo inputs on RCA plugs, for a line level device or turntable. The first stereo input offers further features: a 'thru' mode that runs

the signal direct to the main outs (facilitating changeovers to the next DJ's laptop without the sound dropping out), and a mic input. Round the front, there's a headphones output, with knobs for master level and cue mix balance.

Taking Control

In pictures, the S4 looks crowded; however, the generous size of the unit (about 20" wide, 13" deep, and 2" high) means it doesn't feel cramped at all. Knobs and faders are firm and responsive, with some doubling as push-button controls. Some buttons are small and recessed, to prevent accidental triggering. On the flip side, the chunky cue, play and sample trigger buttons are clearly meant to be bashed in earnest.

As for what all those controls actually do, on the DVD you'll find NI's 'overview' PDF (in the **Manuals** folder) - check it out for full details.

Physically, the whole thing is very, very

impressive apart from a few baffling oversights. First off, there are the short faders - just 45mm - which don't offer enough travel to allow subtle mixing in an energetic environment. The Tempo slider is more generously proportioned (but how many digital DJs will use it?). Then there are the slightly flimsy jog wheels and mic and headphone volume knobs, which feel loose and vulnerable. Thankfully, the latter can be clicked in and out, to keep them out of harm's way.

Those issues aside, it is a brilliantly laid-out interface with generally awesome build quality. But the key to controllers is, well, control, so we fired up the Traktor S4 software, plumbed the S4 through our sound system and plugged in our headphones. And for the next three hours, we don't remember much, except a sensation of sheer joy and unfettered creativity. We recall music - *loud* music. And lots of it. Lights flashed, fingers danced, wrists flicked and heads nodded.



Four sample decks are located under each main deck

Sample magic

The big new feature in the Traktor S4 software is the sampler function, and it really is pretty amazing. There are a total of eight sample slots. Each can be approached as either a one-shot or a loop, and they can be synced and triggered with ease. Any loops created from either deck or the main loop function on the mixer can be loaded into any sample deck, right from the S4 hardware, and the implementation is so simple and intuitive that if you don't figure out on your own, you only need to skim the tutorials in the manual and you'll be looping like a loon in no time.

In terms of assigning these samples, they come in two pairs, one on either

side, which can be routed to a free channel - a template offers two decks on the centre two mixer channels, with the two groups of four samplers on the outer two channels.

Needless to say, you can scratch the samples using the jogwheels and have all eight slots running simultaneously. The power to remix on the fly and create almost Ableton Live-like live performances is truly stunning, and so simple and effective that there's no danger of it being dismissed as a gimmick - it has no 'signature sound', after all. It positively dares you to be as creative as you can, and you'll struggle to resist the challenge.

It really is hard to be more specific about our experience. Just about everything was perfect.

Soft machine

We've covered the Traktor software before, so we won't go into great detail, but needless to say that the two effects banks are hugely customisable. Then there are the three-band EQs and Allen & Heath-style one-knob filter per channel. Looping is a button-push away, and you can change the length and start point, with the values shown on-screen *and* on-controller.

At the end of our first session, we realised we'd had no need to touch the laptop. We barely needed to look at it either. All of the knobs and faders have their own LEDs and level meters, so you really only have to look up to browse tracks.

Our only concern about the S4 is that lingering doubt about its durability, so anybody considering using it in a club must fork out £130 for the official flight-case (which isn't so bad, considering it doubles as a laptop stand).

One rig to rule them all

The sheer convenience and performance of Traktor Kontrol S4 makes it the first full-on 'jog wheels and mixer' DJ controller system we've been genuinely impressed with. Even though

the jog wheels don't feel as robust as we'd like, they're great to use and are nicely calibrated and very sensitive (the whole thing runs at 30 times standard MIDI resolution). You can scratch fairly competently with them (though not for long, as their size can induce wrist strain), and if you eschew the auto-syncing, they're as satisfying as CDJ1000s for manual beat-mixing.

We wouldn't recommend S4 for turntablists, naturally (but note that all S4 owners get a free upgrade to the forthcoming Traktor Pro 2, which has an optional timecode control upgrade). But for everybody else, it's hard to resist the allure of industry-leading software, innovative sampling, an unrivalled controller and total integration. This has to be one of the best DJing packages we've seen, and arguably the best value. It's also easy to learn, requiring about 30 minutes to cover all the tutorials.

We think any DJ would be crazy not to try this system out. A lot of DJs we know never thought they'd sell their Technics SL1200s, only to replace them with CDJ1000s. Likewise, expect to see Pioneer CD decks populating eBay as the word about S4 spreads. **cm**

Web www.native-instruments.com
Contact via website

Alternatively

NI Traktor X1 Kontrol
cm150 >> 10/10 >> £171

Perfect for extra control over an existing Traktor Scratch Pro setup

Pioneer DDJ-T1
N/A >> N/A >> £899

It's not out yet, but this is the nearest thing to the S4 we've seen

Verdict

For Excellent hardware
Superb hardware/software integration
Most advanced DJing software around
Rock-solid reliability
Intuitive and useful sampling

Against Short faders
Some knobs not as sturdy as others

Traktor Kontrol S4 is the first truly satisfying DJ controller system we've encountered. Bravo, Native Instruments!

9/10