



Ableton Push 2

£499

PC MAC

The original version of this bespoke controller for Live was no slouch, but the second edition sees its underlying concept realised to near-perfection

> With the release of Push in 2013, Ableton took quite a risk, serving up a 64-pad USB hardware controller for Live positioned as a music creation instrument and Session view launcher, rather than a conventional MIDI control surface. We loved it, scoring it 10/10 in **cmj**91's review and lauding its innovative Scales mode, excellent step sequencing, inspiring hands-on device control, and exceptional build quality. Imagine our surprise, then, to find that next to Push 2, it seems positively clunky

To quickly summarise the idea behind Push (1 and 2), the 64-pad grid is used to play and record melodic MIDI clips and Drum Rack beats, either 'live' or through an ingenious step sequencing system. It also facilitates browsing for devices, presets and sounds, which can be loaded onto tracks in Live, and controlled and automated using the eight rotary encoders; and even offers basic mixing operation.

Bigger and better

Push 1 was made in partnership with Akai, but Push 2 is 100% Ableton. The redesigned casing is lower in profile (26mm - and 42mm with the encoders) but longer (304mm) and wider (378mm), with an aluminium top surface, rather than the previous peel-prone rubberised plastic; and it feels every bit as solid and sturdy as the original, if not more so.

The new low-profile, wobble-free buttons give a much more positive response than those of Push 1 - a clean, solid click, rather than the rubbery squelch that we previously knew and thought we loved - and boast far brighter backlights. One of the two rows of contextual buttons below Push 1's screen has been moved above it, and both now incorporate RGB LEDs.

The headline improvement to Push 2 is, of course, that gorgeous display: a bright, full-colour, high-resolution (albeit not 'retina') screen with exceptionally wide viewing angles that

makes Push 1's orange dot matrix look - charmingly, it could be argued - archaic.

For many users, though, it'll actually be the new pads that most justify the upgrade. Push 1's pads were great, but these really are something else. The RGB backlighting is better distributed and perfectly consistent - gone are the uneven whites that plagued many users - but more importantly, they're an absolute dream to play, being fabulously responsive across the velocity range and demonstrating none of the variation between pads often noted with Push 1.

The only trade-off in the transformation is that the new display draws way more juice than the old one, so while you *can* use Push 2 over USB without mains power, the display and pads become so dim that you probably won't want to.

Getting things done

The combination of Push 2's new button layout (some gone, some added, some relocated),

“Its operational clarity and more focused proposition will make it very hard to resist”

display and use of colour greatly streamlines its workflow. Previously, you were either working at ‘track’ or ‘device’ level, but now the buttons below the display make selection of tracks, Chains within Drum Racks (folding and unfolding them in Live) or pages of parameters within devices constantly available, while the buttons above are used to select devices on the current track. Getting to where you want to be is so much faster than before, and helpfully, the pads, display contents (controls, waveform, etc) and contextual selection button LEDs always mirror the colour of the selected track.

The display also makes device control more enjoyable and productive, via crystal-clear text, clever iconography, and intuitive parameter mapping. We’ve never felt as in command of Live’s instruments and effects.

Then there’s the obvious benefits the display brings to the Push Browser, with categorisation and icons aping Live’s sidebar, and space for eight hierarchical columns. Live 9.5 also introduced the ability to browse and control VST/AU plugins, samples and your own User library, plus context-awareness, so that only relevant ‘things’ are shown - ie, no instruments when you’re on an audio track - all to the benefit of both Push 1 and 2 users.

Without dedicated faders and many more knobs, mixing is always going to be a secondary consideration for Push, but at least the new Mix view brings the process into one ‘space’, with combined peak/RMS metering of eight channels at once, and top-button access to levels, pans and sends. Now, rather than switching between mute and solo ‘modes’, you hit the Mute or Solo button to apply it to the selected track. Some might miss the old behaviour (Ableton tell us they’re looking to address this “very soon”), but you can still mute and solo multiple tracks at once by holding either button and pressing the track select buttons. Hitting the Mix button a second time (or holding it down in Device or Clip mode) drops into the old ‘detail’ view, revealing all the mixer controls for the selected track.

The new Convert button enables instant conversion of Simpler tracks to Drum Racks, and audio tracks to sliced Simpler patches, while the Layout button switches to 64-Pad Mode, and the



The Mix view reflects Live 9.5’s Peak and RMS metering



Live 9.5’s nifty new Simpler was built with Push 2 very much in mind

Slice as nice

As of Live 9.5, both Push 1 and 2 can browse all the samples on your system and load them encased in the newly empowered Simpler (see *Live 9.5: The Creative Guide* in cm225 for details). With Push 2, the waveform of the sample in the selected Simpler (or Drum Rack cell) appears in the display, where it can be zoomed and directly manipulated via the rotary encoders.

While this is incredibly useful for visualising your start, end and loop points, it really comes into its own in Slicing mode, with which each slice of the sample is mapped to its own pad for triggering and sequencing. You can set

the slicing sensitivity on screen, see which slice of the sample is playing back at any given time, and nudge the positioning of slice markers with total accuracy. In no time at all, you’ll find yourself flying around your samples and creating playable instruments and patterns with them, without so much as a glance at your computer monitor.

If you’re confident in your finger drumming skills, there’s also a Pad Slicing option, which can be used to assign pads to slices in real time by tapping the pads as the sample plays back - it takes a bit of practise but certainly works once you get used to it.

Octave/Page cursor keys are shift pad coverage within instruments and sequences.

At a Push

For all its brilliance, Push 2 isn’t quite flawless. It still doesn’t give access to Send, Volume and Pan controls within Drum Rack Chains; you still can’t load samples directly into Audio track clip slots (though this is coming in a Live 9.5 update); the Tap Tempo button would make more sense as a pad; long folder names in the browser don’t auto-scroll, so you can only ever see the first 16 characters; and since we can now access our enormous sample libraries, the browser would benefit from some form of tagging. And perhaps most notably, it still offers nothing in the way of specific Arrangement View functionality.

Taken on its own terms, though, Push 2 is quite simply the most powerful, wildly creative Ableton Live controller on the market, and more comfortable in its own skin than its predecessor. For existing users, it’s a must-have upgrade; for newcomers and those who dig Push’s particular feature set and modus operandi but found the original’s slightly over-layered logic confusing, its operational clarity and more focused proposition will make it very hard to resist, even at its new, higher price. **cm**

Web www.ableton.com

Alternatively

Native Instruments Maschine Studio
cm198 » 10/10 » £729

Although there’s no comparing the Maschine software to Ableton Live, they’re both outstanding systems

Akai APC40 Mk II
cm210 » 7/10 » £290

Not as good as Mk I, this Live controller is still a fine option

Verdict

- For Awesome build quality
- First-class pads
- Beautiful, effective screen
- Fantastic sampling functionality
- Greatly improved workflow
- Genuinely inspiring composition tool

Against No Arrangement View editing

A massive improvement on Push 1. Push 2 is everything the original has always wanted to be, and more

10/10