Expressive E
Touché €399 MAC

This eye-catching French MIDI controller puts four directions of fully configurable and highly creative plugin wrangling right at your fingertips

> Looking like an organically sourced wah-wah pedal, Expressive E's Touché MIDI controller is designed to work with both hardware and software instruments. It controls up to eight plugin parameters at once, and outputs MIDI CCs and CV signals, through movement of a 'floating' wooden surface – called the Skin – in four directions: downwards at the top and bottom ends (or both together), and left and right in its entirety. The whole contraption is sprung, returning to the centre when released. For the body of this review, we're looking at Touché as a software controller – *Standalone mode* discusses its use with hardware synths.

The idea is to tie meaningful sets of instrument parameters to the four axes for collective one-handed control. For example, modulate a synth's filter cutoff and resonance individually or together by assigning them to the top and bottom of the Skin, and couple them with, say, modwheel and vibrato depth on left and right. Assigning plugin parameters and

The back panel houses MIDI and CV connections

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managing presets is done in the included Lié plugin. You also get 500MB of mapped presets for UVI's free UVI Workstation plugin – basses, pads, bells, keys, leads, etc – making a compelling showcase right out of the box.

Physically, Touché feels every bit as 'premium' as its price suggests it should. The casing is solid and weighty, and the Skin feels great under the fingers, with a satisfying degree of resistance in all four directions. It's USB-powered, too, so no juice is required when plugged into a computer, and a mobile phone charger will suffice for standalone operation.

The two buttons at the bottom are used to navigate internal and computer-stored presets, and the rotary encoder increases and decreases the Skin's tilt sensitivity. The lateral sensitivity is tweaked by removing the (magnetically-attached) Skin and adjusting a slider underneath. We assume there's a mechanical reason for the discrepancy between the two adjustments. Pushing the encoder like a button,

meanwhile, freezes Touché's output, holding assigned parameters at their current values until pressed again.

Reading the Lié

The Lié VST/AU plugin acts as a 'host within your host', like Native Instruments' Komplete Kontrol, connecting the hardware to the plugin loaded into it. Having scanned your plugins folder, all your VST instruments appear in the Plugin menu at the top and the preset browser on the right. Choose an instrument from the former and all of its automatable controls become available for selection in the parameter menus of the eight assignment slots. Select a parameter in a slot, click the top, bottom, left or right (or left *and* right for bipolar control) of its Skin graphic to assign that controller to it, set the Min/Max range with the sliders, and you're good to go. Alternatively, parameters can be linked to slots in the plugin interface itself, to which the Lié 'shell' adds a row of slot buttons at the top. Click a slot then a parameter to make the link, or activate the Speedmapping button to have the next eight parameters clicked auto-map to the eight slots in order.

The output of each slot and the base position of its plugin parameter are indicated in the vertical scale next to the slot by an animated meter and an orange arrow, respectively.

Clicking the square button at the bottom of a slot opens its response curve display; clicking that opens the Curve Editor on the right, for freehand drawing and detailed editing of the response map. When not occupied by the Curve Editor, the right hand panel houses the Scope – a

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Lié's Memory View shows the colours and LED numbers assigned to the onboard presets
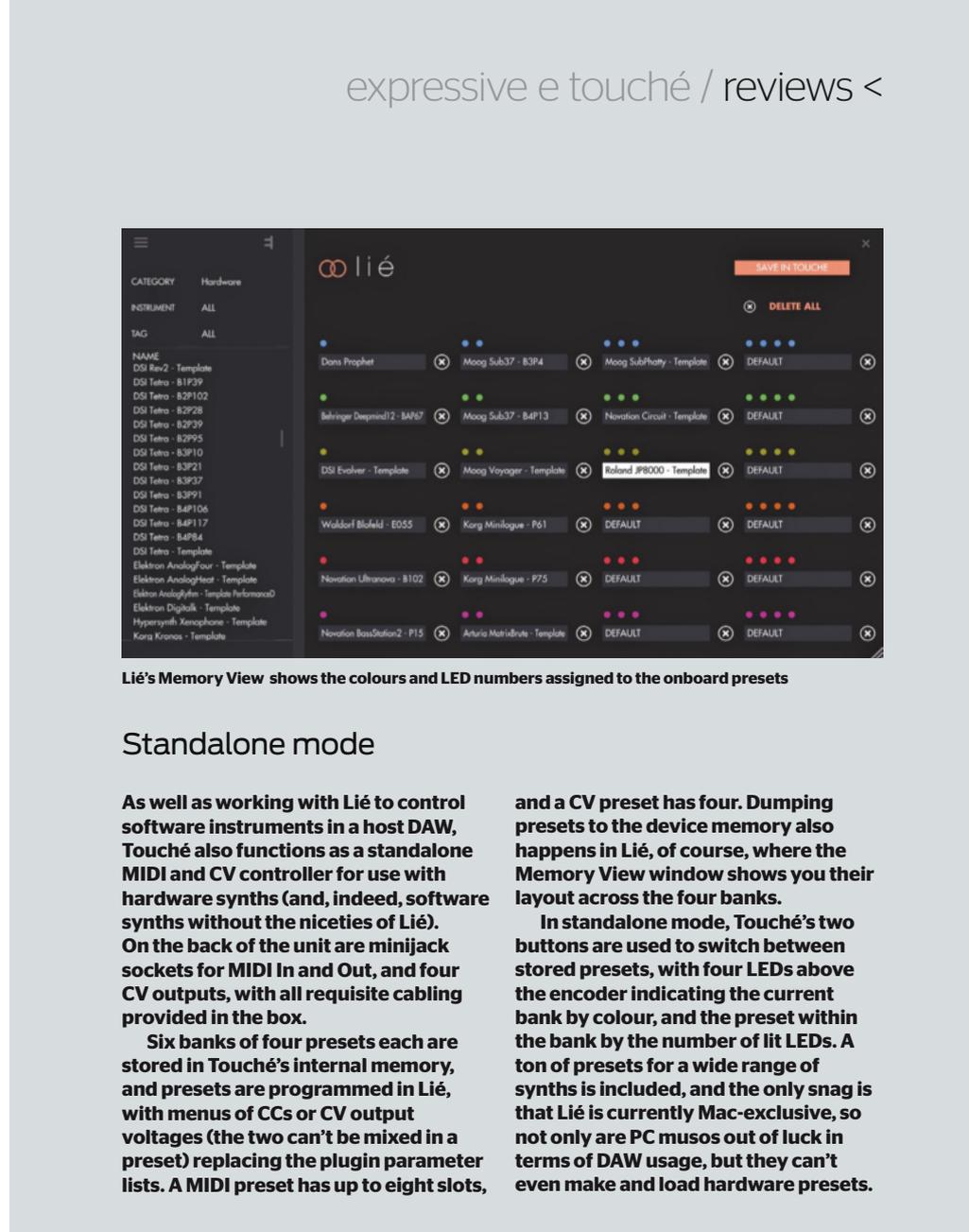
graphical representation of the Skin, giving excellent real-time feedback on the pressure applied in all four directions. The button above sets left/right movement to output pitchbend as well as their assigned parameters.

Lié's browser facilitates filtering (by instrument and tags) and loading of Lié presets. These aren't the factory/user presets of the hosted instruments, but those created within – and readable only by – Lié, comprising both the state of the plugin and the stored Touché controller map. Saving your own patches is easy, and Expressive E have already released free preset packs for Diva, ARP2600 V, Massive, Monark, Prism, Spire, Sylenth 1 and Synthmaster, amongst others, with more to come. However, while it's stable and perfectly functional, the browser needs some work. The Instrument and Tag windows are far too small, the inability to clear multiple selections with a single click is maddening, and the lack of custom tags hurts. The rest of Lié, fortunately, is a pleasure to use.

Touché total

Playing Touché is intuitive and fun. Slide your fingers along it to balance the pressure between top and bottom; push it laterally to mix in a bit of left and right; tap it for rhythmic effects – it's like a cross between a joystick, the aforementioned wah-wah pedal and a drum pad. And the sensitivity of the thing is astounding.

On the downside, the positioning of the preset buttons on the near edge of the unit means care needs to be taken to avoid accidentally hitting them with your wrist. It should also be noted that Lié only outputs the MIDI CCs it uses internally for plugin control (CC 16-19), not VST/AU automation data. Indeed, the Lié-hosted plugin is completely invisible to the host DAW's automation system.

Standalone mode

As well as working with Lié to control software instruments in a host DAW, Touché also functions as a standalone MIDI and CV controller for use with hardware synths (and, indeed, software synths without the niceties of Lié). On the back of the unit are minijack sockets for MIDI In and Out, and four CV outputs, with all requisite cabling provided in the box.

Six banks of four presets each are stored in Touché's internal memory, and presets are programmed in Lié, with menus of CCs or CV output voltages (the two can't be mixed in a preset) replacing the plugin parameter lists. A MIDI preset has up to eight slots,

and a CV preset has four. Dumping presets to the device memory also happens in Lié, of course, where the Memory View window shows you their layout across the four banks.

In standalone mode, Touché's two buttons are used to switch between stored presets, with four LEDs above the encoder indicating the current bank by colour, and the preset within the bank by the number of lit LEDs. A ton of presets for a wide range of synths is included, and the only snag is that Lié is currently Mac-exclusive, so not only are PC musos out of luck in terms of DAW usage, but they can't even make and load hardware presets.

With those caveats accepted, though, Touché is a brilliant performance MIDI controller, the unique physicality and design of which put it in a class all of its own. We're addicted! **cm**

Web www.expressivee.com

Alternatively

Roli Seaboard Rise 49
cm231 » 9/10 » £949
The 'keywaves' of this weird and wonderful controller enable all sorts of performance possibilities

Native Instruments Komplete Kontrol Mk2
**cm250 » 10/10 » £479/559**
A superb keyboard with a similar 'shell' control system for NI plugins

Verdict

For Feels fabulous under the hand
Spectacularly expressive
Lié is mostly very good
UVI Workstation is a solid inclusion

Against Browser's kinda fiddly
Lié automation records as CC data
Previous/next preset buttons are easily pressed by accident

Clever, original and amazingly expressive, Touché is a very special MIDI controller.

8/10
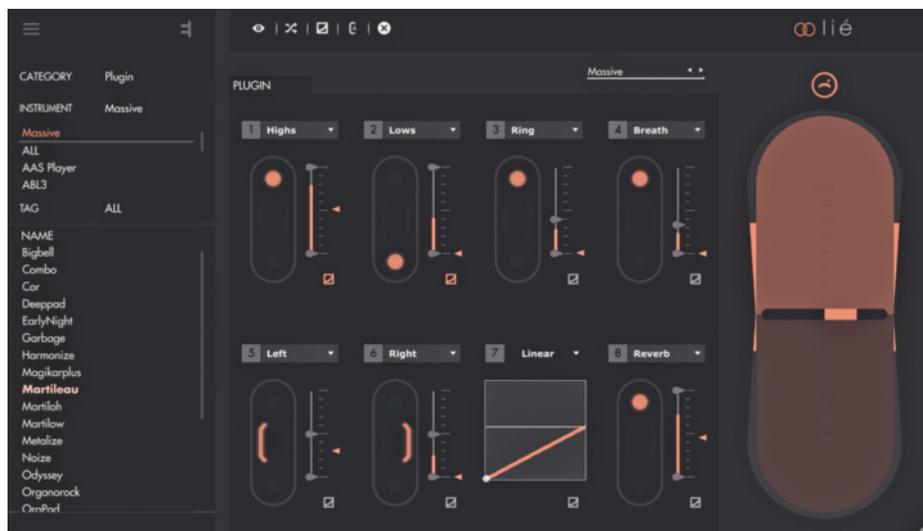
Minor browser issues aside, Lié is a commendably solid host and preset programmer/manager