



Novation Launchkey Mini Mk3

£100



Novation's Ableton-friendly entry-level controller receives a major makeover for its third generation

> Ever since the debut model burst onto the scene way back in 2009, the Novation Launchkey Mini budget MIDI controller has been a best-seller. A compact, ultra-portable, lightweight USB keyboard aimed squarely at Ableton Live users but equally at home controlling Logic, Cubase, Reason or any other HUI-compatible DAW, it seems that Novation have been listening well to customer feedback, as many of the upgrades on this new Mk3 model tick some of the boxes that were left unchecked last time around.

Pitch bend and modulation touchstrips are the most immediately obvious addition, and the rear panel has also received plenty of attention, with a USB socket for power and MIDI data transmission, a 3.5mm TRS MIDI Out socket for talking to MIDI hardware, and a sustain pedal input. There's also an arpeggiator with some unique features, a Fixed Chord mode and a

Capture MIDI button that instantly accesses said function in Live, creating a clip from the last notes you played, even if you weren't recording.

Show me the Mini

The facelifted Mk3 has a more modern look than Mk2, with a pleasingly slab-like profile. The

“Lightweight, but not overly plasticky, the Mini Mk3 passes the laptop bag test with flying RGB colours”

familiar 16 velocity-sensitive, RGB illuminated pads, arranged in two rows of eight, are more recessed than those on the Mk2, while the eight knobs above have been smoothed off in a more polished design reminiscent of Native Instruments' aesthetic. Neat, businesslike and altogether taller, thinner and easier to get hold of than the earlier model, these are pots with end stops, rather than endless rotary encoders. Incredibly lightweight, but not overly plasticky to the point where it feels cheap, the Mini Mk3 passes the laptop bag test with flying RGB colours, and comes with a chunky USB cable to connect up to the sturdy USB-B port on the back, which is a relief from the often less-than-durable micro-USB connectors found on many similarly-sized devices.

Key points

While the backlit pads and buttons have a firm,

“The control strips and sustain pedal input, in particular, transform the expressiveness of the device”

resilient quality, the 25 velocity-sensitive mini keys have a very light action and shallow travel, which, although making them extremely easy to play and great for quick runs, gives them a slightly clacky feel. There's no aftertouch, but that's not really to be expected at this price point, so we won't complain.

The pads can be configured so that they form an extra two octaves in addition to the range of the keys, playing either in a different register or, as they're set up to transmit on MIDI channel 10 by default, a totally different instrument to the keys, which transmit on MIDI channel 1. You can then select the scale that the pads trigger (natural minor being the default), with root notes at either end, which makes for an inspiring new way to play and compose lead lines and melodies, even for the more experienced musician.

The new performance controls are a huge bonus, with the pitch strip, in particular, being great for trills, as it flicks back to the central zero value instantly when you lift your finger off from either end. Conversely, the modulation strip behaves like a physical mod wheel, sticking to whatever value you set it at until you touch again at the bottom to reset it to zero. Connect a sustain pedal, meanwhile, and flowing pads and atmospheric piano parts suddenly become a breeze to program.

Looking shifty

The dedicated navigation buttons of the Mk2 have been changed to a Scene Launch button and a button that turns the lower row of pads into Stop, Solo and Mute switches. Located in the top left corner, next to the touch strips, the Shift button is the key that unlocks many of the Mini Mk3's long list of capabilities - from changing the mode of the pads to navigating within Live. You do, however, have to hold the Shift button down to access these, making it a two-handed job. We can't help thinking that some form of Shift Lock would be more convenient, so that the button latches when pressed, enabling you to select the relevant function with the same hand.

The Launchkey Mini is a versatile controller capable of playing nicely with any DAW, but its stock in trade has always been its in-depth

integration with Ableton Live, and the Mk3 builds more than capably on this foundation.

The addition of the control strips and sustain pedal input in particular transform the expressiveness of the device, turning it from merely an array of buttons and key switches into more of an actual instrument. If you already know your way around Ableton Live, it'll be intuitive enough to get the hang of quickly, and it really does demonstrably increase the speed of your workflow for a fraction of the price of, say, Ableton's own Push 2.

The Launchkey Mini Mk3 represents a huge leap forward for what was already our favourite budget controller for Live. It looks like this particular success story looks set to continue for 'mini' years to come, then. **cm**

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The Mini Mk3's onboard arpeggiator has a few surprises in store

Arping on

The Mini Mk3's arpeggiator modes can be found stencilled above the keys and control knobs, and are accessed by holding down the Arp button while tapping or adjusting the relevant control. All the usual suspects are there - up, down and up/down patterns, switchable rates, swing, gate (note length), octave range and latch functions - but this particular arp has a couple of rather clever tricks up its sleeve in the form of the Mutate and Deviate functions.

Enabled by tapping the respective key, then varying the depth of the effect with an assigned knob, these two parameters work on note pitch and rhythm respectively. With an arpeggio

running, turning up the Mutate control introduces increasingly varied note choices to the pattern, while Deviate alters the rhythm by increasingly removing note events from the sequence. Using them, it's possible to start from a simple chord and build up to something radically different with just a few tweaks. The current mode is reflected in the illumination of the pads, which can also be used to change settings once you've got the gist of where each mode is represented in the grid. Hitting Record will capture the notes output from the arpeggiator (rather than just the chord you played to generate them) onto the currently selected track.

Alternatively

Arturia MiniLab MkII
cm241 » 9/10 » £89

Arturia's mini controller boasts pitch and mod touchstrips, 16 rotary encoders and more

Akai MPK Mini Mk2
cm161 » 8/10 » £73

This one has four-way pitch/mod joystick, eight MPC pads with note repeat, and eight assignable knobs

Verdict

For Works brilliantly with Live
Responsive Pitch and Mod strips
Sustain pedal input
Innovative arpeggiator
Hardware MIDI Out

Against No mains power option
MIDI TRS-DIN adapter not included

The third version of this small wonder constitutes a major upgrade from the extremely successful Mk2 model

9/10



“Pleasingly slab-like”: The Launchkey Mini Mk3 improves on Mk2 in terms of build quality as well as functionality