

# Native Instruments Kontrol S Series | from £429

NI bring their hard/soft magic to their premium plug-in collection with a new keyboard controller range. **Daniel Griffiths** takes Kontrol...

## INCLUDES AUDIO

### WHAT IS IT?

A free software front-end for Complete, plus a unique keyboard controller to tweak it

### CONTACT

Who: Native Instruments  
Web: [www.native-instruments.com](http://www.native-instruments.com)

### HIGHLIGHTS

- 1 Simple new software
- 2 Gorgeous new hardware
- 3 Innovative new features

### PRICING

Kontrol S25  
**£429**

Kontrol S49  
**£499**

Kontrol S61  
**£599**

**W**hen NI announced Complete Kontrol, an innovative way to browse and edit the sounds

resident in their world famous plug-ins, I gave a little wince. I always quite liked NI's Kore and gave it the benefit of the doubt on the strict understanding that a) It often 'got in the way' when you wanted to do proper tweaks b) It never really made good on its promises. So it's admirable that NI have remained attached to this 'one software to rule them all' ideal because – at its 'kore' – it's a good idea. Instead of searching through each plug-in for a specific sound you can browse all your 'bass' tones at once. What does it matter if the sound comes from Absynth or Massive anyway? And if you *do* want to specify a specific synth you can. Easily. Rather than walk away from the 'koncept' NI are back with another stab. And this time they've got it right.

This time their 'super synth' is a game of three parts and each makes a lot of sense. Firstly there's Complete, NI's popular super-suite of software that in version 10 feels more unified and consistent than ever. Next is Complete

Kontrol a free bit of software for Complete 9 or 10 owners that sits in front of the individual plugs and gives a simple unified interface. And finally there's the Kontrol S keyboards, a new set of controllers specifically designed to work with Complete Kontrol and which come in 25, 49 or 61 key forms.

### Take Kontrol

Okay, so let's talk Complete Kontrol first. Complete Kontrol finds the plugs

and presets installed by Complete and allows you to browse all of its sounds, edit important elements with a strimmed down version of the full plug's interface and generally do all the stuff that matters from one simple-looking plug-in. You can search for 'pad sounds' (for example) via search criteria and pull up a list of options regardless of the plug that makes them. It's a standalone or plug-in (appearing in your NI folder in your DAW's drop-down) and

## Complete, Kontrol, Keys? What's The Konection?

It's worth clarifying the connection between Complete, Complete Kontrol and Kontrol S. Without Complete, Complete Kontrol is a CC editor for Kontrol S that gives the hardware the bare minimum of controller features. You'd be a fool to buy a Kontrol S (and use Complete Kontrol) without Complete onboard. And *all of*

Complete Kontrol's search and quick tweak systems for Complete work without the keyboard and it's free. Kontrol S adds physical controls for Complete Kontrol, some screens, lights and touchstrips. It's basically some very pretty (but expensive) icing on an already expensive (though delicious) cake. Features like the Light Guide look amazing but

I've never found it too upsetting to have to trawl up and down a keyboard to find 'where the snare drum is'. It's questionable as to how many users are going to set up their own coloured keystrips, but all of Kontakt's presets and Battery's kits, for example, come with colours attached so you don't have to tweak a thing to get a lightshow out of the box.



### Perform Controls

The Scale and Arp buttons give fast access to Complete Kontrol's excellent key-locking and chord features (so you'll never hit a duff note again) and top-spec arpeggiator.

### Touchstrips

Two touchscreen style strips allow you to set up inertia-based modulation effects and generally do things that wheels can't.

### Transport Controls

The staple of any DAW and MIDI controller. Control the essentials right here without reaching for your mouse.



it works great. It's simple, easy to understand and pretty fast, given that tapping through sounds requires your computer to load up each plug and sound to let you hear it. Locking the search to a particular plug-in speeds things up further but rather rubbishes the 'one plug searches all' concept.

All Komplete's sounds are accurately categorised and everything makes so much more sense than NI's R.I.P. Kore system. There's no spurious 'sound morphing' features, unwanted

without it and – at those prices – needs all the help it can get. We can see lots of Komplete users cheekily enjoying Komplete Kontrol with no intention of ever buying a Kontrol S and giving NI any more money. Still, it's their call.

### S for style

Attach a Kontrol S keyboard to Komplete Kontrol and things simply get a lot more tactile. The Kontrol S is styled identically to NI's Maschine Studio and the pair will immediately

be precise, light and definitely 'synthesizer' but sturdy with a smoothly weighted touch allowing fast playing and accurate dynamics. After five minutes we loved it.

Kontrol S's eight built-in screens give vital information as to what each knob is about to do before you turn it and where that parameter is set. Eight parameters for every sound automatically appear on the keyboard and page left and right buttons take the knobs deeper into more obscure

functions. The concept is similar to Novation's ground-breaking SL keyboards which used tiny screens (albeit at lesser quality) to do the same thing.

Kontrol S's Light Guide – a system of coloured LEDs above the keys that aims to show you 'what a key will do' before you hit it – is a real unique selling point. The exact use for the lights system changes depending on what you're doing but broadly speaking it shows the position of sounds across the keybed and/or notes and scales selected in the keyboard's unique chord and arpeggiator modes. And in a studio's half light it just looks cool, with the length of the keys more often than not bathed in a cool blue.

And finally there's Kontrol S's unique mod and pitch 'wheels', replaced by two touchstrips with LEDs

## It's easy to start thinking of Kontrol S as the most powerful synth you own rather than an 'empty' box

effects and mixer sections or buttons you don't understand (or use). And the software feels clean and nimble enough for you to confidently have it between you and your NI plugs without any fear that it's slowing down your computer or dumbing down your synths. It might be that you never open the full plug again and we can see a Komplete 11 (12? ...13?) where this single interface truly becomes the front-end of Komplete's gamut of power.

So it's slightly confusing as to why Komplete Kontrol is being made available for free. It would make more sense to include it only with the Kontrol S as the keyboard is next to useless

strike a chord with anyone who cares about their studio's ergonomics. Seriously, if you own one you will lust after the other. The plastic is matte and soft to the touch and the metal surfaces are brushed and (literally) cool. Knobs are identical to the smooth dials on the Maschine Studio and the whole thing is solid enough to feel premium but light enough to sling around.

Browsing sounds, setting search criteria and tweaking parameters can all be done from the keyboard's controls and it's easy to start thinking about Kontrol S as the most powerful synth you own rather than an 'empty' box. The keybed is made by Fatar so the feel

### SPECS

**System requirements**  
**PC:** Windows 7 or 8, Intel Core 2 Duo or AMD Athlon 64 X2, 4GB RAM (6GB recommended for large KONTAKT Instruments), USB 2.0 or higher  
**Mac:** OS X 10.8 or 10.9, Intel Core 2 Duo, 4GB RAM (6GB recommended for large KONTAKT Instruments), USB 2.0 or higher  
 Requires power connection (adaptor included)  
**Windows:** Standalone, VST 32 & 64-bit, AAX 32 & 64-bit  
**Mac OS X:** Standalone, VST 64-bit, AU 64-bit, AAX 64-bit

Described features require KOMplete 9 or higher. Optimised integration with KOMplete 10 and KOMplete 10 ULTIMATE. Doubles as MIDI controller with 16 key splits, Light Guide support, and advanced touchstrip functionality

**Connectivity**  
 MIDI In/Out, 1/4" TS connections for expression and sustain pedal

#### Complete Kontrol S25

**Dimensions:**  
 274 x 85 x 506mm

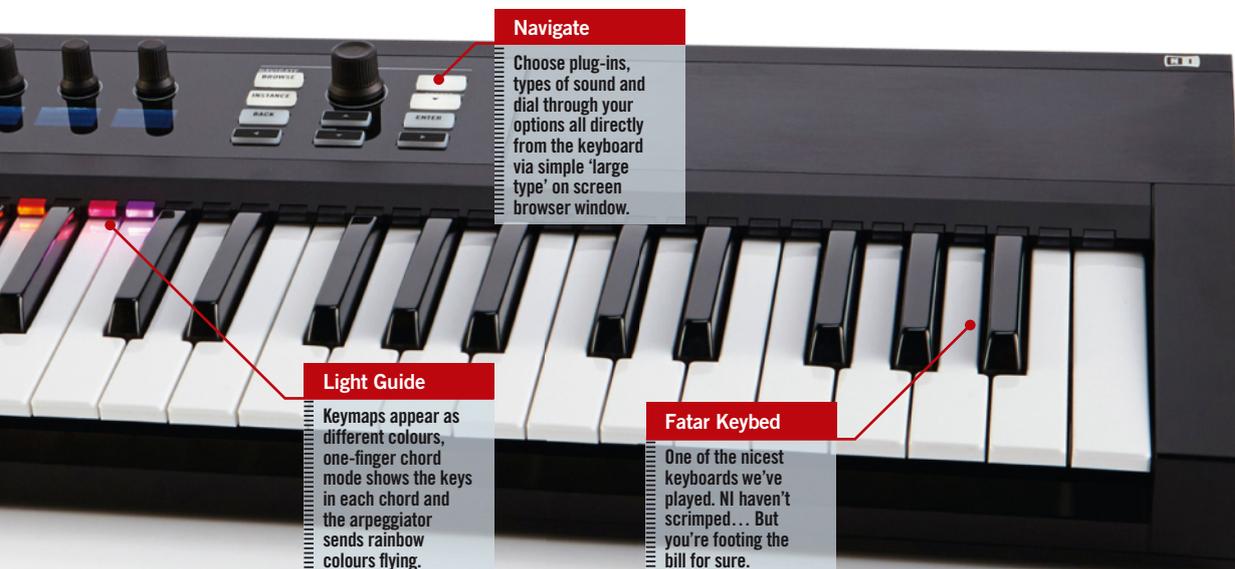
**Weight:**  
 3.25kg

**Complete Kontrol S49**  
**Dimensions:**  
 274 x 85 x 837mm

**Weight:**  
 5.55kg

**Complete Kontrol S61**  
**Dimensions:**  
 274 x 85 x 1002mm

**Weight:**  
 6.35kg



#### Navigate

Choose plug-ins, types of sound and dial through your options all directly from the keyboard via simple 'large type' on screen browser window.

#### Light Guide

Keymaps appear as different colours, one-finger chord mode shows the keys in each chord and the arpeggiator sends rainbow colours flying.

#### Fatar Keybed

One of the nicest keyboards we've played. NI haven't scrimped... But you're footing the bill for sure.

## ALTERNATIVES



**Novation  
Launchkey 49**

£149

Great build, programmable mapping, knobs, sliders and drum pads and a price less than *half* of the Kontrol S. Hmm...

[www.novationmusic.com](http://www.novationmusic.com)



**Arturia KeyLab 61**

£300

Great looking, decent build and complete with the brilliant Analog Lab software bundle. A bargain.

[www.arturia.com](http://www.arturia.com)



**Korg Triton  
Taktile 25**

£320

Covered in controls and with a full-on Triton synth built in, making it a real synth, not just a controller.

[www.korg.com/uk](http://www.korg.com/uk)

showing levels. At their simplest these are faders allowing you to drag a finger up to the desired height but their use as a touch surface allows a player to tap at different points and toggle between extreme settings instantly in a way that a wheel could never accomplish. Alternatively (via various modes in the Kontrol software) a player could set an effect modulating up and down with inertia based on how fast you pushed the strip, touchscreen style. Just the job for wobbling the LFO on your basslines or going modulation

and bend crazy while still having your hands free to play.

## The Complete package?

Caution to the wind and wallet rinsed and you've got a very new and sleek way of putting sounds in your DAW. For this review (more by circumstance than intention) I installed Complete 10, Maschine and Complete Kontrol on a new fast Mac with Logic. The result – tens of thousands of sounds I can select and manipulate in a consistent way I really like and

understand – has really made me wonder if I should even bother installing anything else.

Complete plus Complete Kontrol (for free) makes a *lot* of sense but we do wonder quite how popular Kontrol S will prove. Simply requiring Complete on board (in order to unlock nine tenths of the stuff it can do) makes it rather niche. And that price tag, hiked by its great screens and one-of-a-kind Light Guide, just makes it more niche – £429 for the 25 key version and an incredible £599 for the 61 key? Ouch...

But like all cool, expensive stuff, you can of course simply choose to live without it. A Bentley is just a car after all. But we think that once you've test driven Complete with Complete Kontrol and Kontrol S in the driving seat you might well part-ex your banger. **FM**

## Genius Solos Plus Instant Inspiration

One of our favourite features of Ableton's Push controller was the ability to select a scale (ie, tell it the key of the tune you were working on) and have it illuminate only the notes that sound 'right'. The result: instant perfect solos and inspirational jams.

The Kontrol S (via Complete Kontrol software) can pull exactly the same trick. Pick your tune's key, hit only the lit keys and it's impossible to sound crap.



Similarly the software's Chord Mode features a host of chord sets where single keys are assigned to jazzy Pop, Rock and Dance chords, meaning that random improv triggers multi-fingered genius progressions. You

just can't sound bad! And the powerful arpeggiator will fling a musical torrent at your chosen sound with the simplest of finger prods – all with a lightstorm of activity from the keyboard's built-in LEDs.

**FutureMusic VERDICT**

**BUILD** [Progress bar: 10/10]

**VALUE** [Progress bar: 8/10]

**EASE OF USE** [Progress bar: 10/10]

**VERSATILITY** [Progress bar: 9/10]

**RESULTS** [Progress bar: 10/10]

A beautiful hard and soft package that just works. Hugely expensive but once you're hooked, worth it.



### Native Map

Every sound in Complete instantly maps eight of the most important parameters to Kontrol S's eight knobs. Screens tell you what each knob does and the current settings.