



ROLI Seaboard Rise 49

£950

PC MAC

These UK manufacturers have literally been making waves in the MIDI controller world, first with the Grand, and now the more affordable Rise

> Replacing conventional piano-style keys with a continuous, rubbery playing surface of ridged 'keywaves', ROLI's Seaboard concept is designed to bring the control and expressiveness of acoustic instruments to their software counterparts. Their first and flagship venture, the Seaboard Grand, comes in 37-, 61- and 88-note sizes with built-in sound generation courtesy of the Equator synth engine, and the Rise series delivers the same expressive capabilities in more compact 25- and 49-key USB MIDI controller form, with the Equator synth supplied as a software plugin for OS X and Windows.

Rise and shine

The very first thing that strikes you about the Rise 49 is the sheer weight of the thing. At 4.2kg, it's seriously heavy - no matter how frenetic your playing style, you can be sure that the Rise isn't going to budge. Included in the box is a high-quality soft case, USB cable and no-nonsense quick-start guide. It's possible to use the Rise as a standard keyboard controller straight out of the box, but harnessing its uniquely expressive features means downloading a 2.7GB software bundle. This includes the Equator soft synth, and the ROLI Dashboard For Rise app, which lets you customise the sensitivity of the playing surface and map MIDI CC's to the onboard controls. You also get a download code for the Bitwig 8-Track DAW.

Connectivity-wise, on the left-hand edge of the device is a socket for an optional 9V power supply, a sustain pedal jack and two USB ports (type A and type B). Either of these can be used to connect to a computer or iOS device, and the B port is also used to power the unit and charge its internal battery, which gives up to eight hours of wireless operation - yes, handily, the Rise can also transmit MIDI over Bluetooth.

Ridge rider

The big question, of course, is: what's that bizarre surface actually like to play? Our immediate impression was that it felt like playing a row of cocktail sausages through a wetsuit - weirdly, addictively tactile! The lack of the usual physical boundaries between keys

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means that, at first, you find yourself having to focus your attention on accuracy in order to hit the right notes. Joyously, the top and bottom edges of the entire playing surface are huge horizontal pitch ribbons along which you can easily create swooping pitch dives and soaring rises. The playing surface itself is suitably resilient, and remarkably resistant to fingernail marks and scratches, although ours did reveal itself to be a bit of a dust magnet - ROLI recommend the regular use of baby wipes to keep it clean.

The key to the Rise's expressive control is that it interprets a total of five playing gestures (or "dimensions of touch"), transmitting a different MIDI message for each. Strike is the initial Note-On, generated as velocity when you hit a keywave. Glide represents horizontal movement and generates pitchbend messages. Slide (which the Seaboard Grand doesn't have, notably) represents vertical movement up and down each keywave, transmitting MIDI CC74 (usually Brightness). Press is the equivalent to polyphonic aftertouch on a regular keyboard, generated by applying pressure to the keywaves, while Lift transmits the speed of lift-off from a key.

Like the keywaves themselves, the Rise's onboard controls are minimal. To the left of the playing surface are three touch faders, illuminated white when the device is powered. Their function depends on which of two operating modes you're currently in - if

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you’re in Expression mode, they set the responsiveness of the glide, slide and press gestures. If you’re in MIDI mode, however, they behave like MIDI faders on a regular controller, transmitting whatever MIDI CC you choose to define in the Dashboard app. Above the faders is a switch for selecting presets in the accompanying Equator soft synth, while below is an X/Y touchpad, an octave selector and a power switch that also doubles as a mode selector when pressed briefly.

Finger flickin’ good

The architecture of the surface allows for some unique playing techniques. For example, the black note pitches are replicated in the valleys between the ‘white’ keywaves, so you can play a sharp or flat simply by moving across horizontally from a white key. This makes pitchbending supremely intuitive, as you can achieve a semitone bend just by moving your finger in the appropriate direction. Similarly, beautifully precise vibrato can be had by wiggling your hand, guitarist-style, from side to side. Once you’ve practised enough to get these techniques down, the expressive potential of the Rise is truly revelatory.

Kind of the keyboardist’s equivalent of a fretless bass, you can do things with the Rise that just aren’t possible with a regular keyboard controller, and the longer you spend with it, the more you discover what it’s capable of. It’s at the higher end of the price spectrum, but as a more affordable, soundless alternative to the Grand, and with the benefit of the additional Slide gesture, it’s a sound investment, particularly for the studio environment. We wouldn’t

necessarily suggest it as a replacement for your regular keyboard, but as an instrument in its own right, there really is nothing else quite like it. The Rise is simply brilliant. **cm**

Web www.roli.com
Info Rise 25, £600



Equator’s presets have been carefully tailored to show off the Rise’s talents to the max

On the Equator

Included as a standalone app and an AU/VST plugin, ROLI’s Equator for Rise soft synth has been designed from the ground up to take full advantage of the expressive potential offered by the Rise. It features a hybrid synthesis engine that combines three wavetable oscillators, frequency modulation, sample playback and multimode filters. Over 100 presets are supplied, each one geared up to respond to the five control gestures that the device can interpret. Ranging from growling basses to screaming leads, mesmerising evolving pads and mysterious mallets, the selection ably demonstrates the capabilities of this

unique partnership of software and hardware, with plenty of scope for editing the sounds and tweaking them to better suit your playing style if required - each of the five gestures can be set to modulate any parameter, for starters.

But the fun doesn’t end there. If you have an iOS device, you can install ROLI’s free Noise app on it, which is powered by the Equator synth engine and includes a selection of 25 of its presets. Once the Rise is paired with the device - a simple procedure involving a couple of clicks - you can use it to play Noise wirelessly via MIDI over Bluetooth. Awesome!

Alternatively

Roger Linn Linnstrument
N/A » N/A » \$1799

Similarly innovative, with three dimensions of touch rather than five

KMI QuNexus
cm197 » 8/10 » \$179

This ultra-portable controller offers expressive control via polyphonic pitchbend and aftertouch

Verdict

For Incredibly expressive, utterly unique Equator soft synth sounds fantastic
MIDI over Bluetooth has minimal latency
Incredibly tweakable MIDI capabilities
Built like a tank

Against Rather pricey

Takes time to adapt to playing style

Brilliantly innovative and responsive, the Rise could be paving the way for the future of keyboard instrument design

9/10

The Dashboard app can calibrate the sensitivity of the Rise’s keywaves, touch faders and X/Y touchpad to your liking

