



# Native Instruments Maschine Mikro Mk3

£199

PC MAC

Hot on the heels of the A-Series keyboard comes the cheapest, dinkiest hardware controller for NI's groove-focused DAW to date...

> It's been seven years since Maschine Mikro – the smallest member of NI's family of controllers for their Maschine 2 DAW – last saw an update. The intervening years have not only seen the arrival of the roomy Maschine Studio (10/10, **cm198**) but also the making of a number of major improvements to the 'core' Maschine in its Mk3 iteration, which scored 9/10 in **cm249**.

Maschine Mikro Mk3 arrives alongside the A-Series keyboard range (10/10, **cm263**), aiming to present the same affordable entry point into the world of Maschine as those cheaper alternatives to the S-Series 'boards do the Complete Kontrol platform.

So, Maschine Mikro Mk3 is a 4x4 pad controller for NI's very capable but decidedly 'different' Maschine 2 DAW (included – VST/AU/AAX/standalone). It can also be used as a general-purpose MIDI controller with any other DAW or application, but its raison d'être is to provide hands-on governance of every aspect of

Maschine 2 – browsing sounds and plugins, performance and recording, processing, arranging and mixing. The sleek, angular 320x177x45mm, 1.12kg hardware looks like it's been cut directly out of Maschine Mk3, and boasts the same sturdy build quality, bright LED-backlit buttons, supremely responsive LED-backlit pads (not as bright, alas), and

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performance-enhancing ribbon controller. Around the back are a USB 2 port, handling both power and data, and a Kensington Security Slot.

## Missing in action

What Maschine Mikro Mk3 doesn't have, obviously, are Maschine Mk3 and Studio's beautiful full-colour dual displays – genuinely enabling the software to be negotiated without looking away from the hardware – and the eight buttons and eight touch-sensitive rotary encoders that come with them. In fact, while Maschine Mikro Mk2 at least had a smaller display with just three Function buttons, Mk3 ditches all of it in favour of the same tiny OLED readout found on the A-Series keyboards, used to show text-only information – browser results, plugin parameter names and values, Group and pad names, etc. This yields a hefty drop in price of which we very much approve, but pays for it with a fairly radical change in conceptual

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direction, given that the ability to use Maschine without looking at your computer monitor most of the time – or at least a lot of the time with previous Mikros – has always been a key selling point for the system. We’ll come back to this...

## On the buttons

The layout of Mikro Mk3 has been made to match that of Maschine Mk3 as closely as possible, but there are unavoidable differences. The Auto, Lock and Note Repeat buttons form a section along with the Group button, which ‘shifts’ pads 12-16 to Group selection. While this makes for an effective stand-in for Maschine Mk3’s discrete Group A-H buttons, the same can’t be said of the browser controls. Despite the single Browser button of Maschine Mk3 being substituted for three separate ones – switching the rotary encoder between scrolling and loading Projects, Favourites and the visible browser results list – the whole setup is hobbled by a lack of lateral movement (see *Rotary Club*).

Happily, though, the intuitive button banks to the left of and above the pads have been retained. Crucially, this includes the top row of four for quick switching between Pad, Keyboard and Step sequencing modes, and entering the Scale and Chord engine.

Also included is the Smart Strip ribbon controller that we liked so much with Maschine Mk3. This handles pitch and mod wheel duties, ties into Maschine’s Perform FX modules, and lets you ‘strum’ MIDI chords.

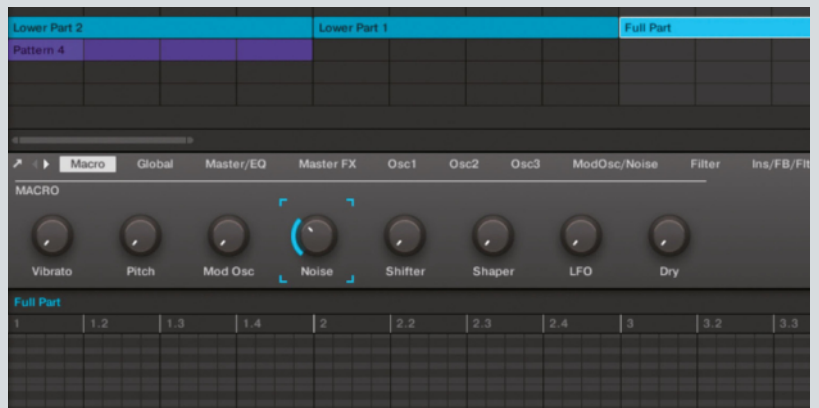
## Mikro’s scope

The famously slick Maschine workflow is all about flying around between Groups and Sounds, playing and recording MIDI and audio parts, tweaking and automating instruments and effects, and even arranging tracks, entirely from the controller without any breaks in playback. The big question, then, is: how heavily do Mikro Mk3’s cutbacks impact on that?

First of all, the removal of the screen is a workable compromise in the interest of keeping the price down. Maschine Mikro Mk2’s display



The tiny OLED readout obviously doesn’t make any sort of substitute for the dual displays of Maschine Mk3



A highlight appears around the parameter currently assigned to the rotary encoder

## Rotary club

**Maschine Mikro Mk3’s push button rotary encoder isn’t of the ‘4D’ kind found on Maschine Mk3, so there’s no up/down/left/right ‘joystick’ functionality. That’s fine – it keeps the cost down – but we’re very surprised the horizontal axis hasn’t been replicated in the left/right buttons for stepping through browser categories and mixer channels, both of which, consequently, have to be done onscreen using the mouse. Weird.**

The other buttons to the right of the encoder switch it between control of Volume, Swing, Tempo and the parameters in Maschine’s Control Area – plugins, Macros, mixer levels and pan,

etc. Select a parameter to assign it or step through adjacent parameters with the left/right buttons. The Sampling button, which puts the Maschine Mk3 into full-on sampling, audio editing and slicing mode, merely sets the encoder push button to starting and stopping recording. Ironically, its location, above the left/right navigation buttons, would be perfect for an up/down pair...

Being detented, the rotary itself is great for easily stepping through presets, etc, but although the Shift button sets it to finer resolution, we’re undecided as to whether or not we’d prefer a smooth action, as would better suit most plugin controls.

served as a slightly cumbersome halfway house between Maschine Mk3’s display and no display at all, anyway, and when that wee OLED doesn’t tell you what you need to know, having to look up at your monitor isn’t much of a speedbump.

What does make – and always has made – the Mikro experience somewhat ‘lesser’ than that offered by Maschine Mk3 and Studio, however, is the single rotary. There’s simply no getting away from the fact that eight knobs are considerably better than one when it comes to plugin and mixer control. Plus, with no soft keys, there’s far less editing of notes, samples, the arrangement, etc; and the browser and mixer navigation currently feel slightly broken – surely NI are planning to activate the left/right buttons.

Ultimately, yes, Mikro is, in many ways, a compromised Maschine, but the software, and those all-important pads and their modal controls are exactly the same as those of its big sibling, and it’s really quite remarkable how hands-on you can get with it considering how much has been taken away. For beatmakers on a budget, and existing Maschine users looking for a perfectly portable controller to take on the road, Maschine Mikro Mk3 should be seen as an empowering opportunity rather than a qualitatively ‘inferior’ option. **cm**

**Web** [www.native-instruments.com](http://www.native-instruments.com)

## Alternatively

**Maschine Mk3**  
**cm249 » 9/10 » £479**

The full-on dual-screen Maschine controller is unarguably superior, but costs more than twice as much

**Arturia SparkLE**  
**cm194 » 9/10 » £199**

Take command of the SparkLE software (or any MIDI-compatible app) with this cute controller

## Verdict

**For** Liberatingly portable and cheap  
Same pads as Maschine Mk3  
Superb build quality  
Cleverly adapted Maschine workflow

**Against** Poor browser navigation  
Pad backlights aren’t terribly bright

The most portable, affordable Maschine hardware yet wins us over with its footprint and functionality, but inevitably involves a degree of compromise

**8/10**