

Novation Dicer | £79

What's rubbery, sits on the corner of a deck and promises to change your DJing game? **Marc '01'** investigates the Dicer phenomenon

WHAT IS IT?

DJ MIDI controller primarily for SSL and other DJ software

CONTACT

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HIGHLIGHTS

- 1 Sits in the right place
- 2 Highly responsive
- 3 Intelligent lighting

Now that most manufacturers have done the generic MIDI controller to death, we're seeing the next wave of

controllers, designed for specific jobs or even specific software functions. In my humble opinion, this is definitely a good thing, as I'd rather have something doing one job well than something else doing a lot of things, but only doing them okay.

Novation's Dicer is one of the next wave, and this compact controller is targeted at DJs — specifically Serato Scratch Live users who want to get some extra hands-on performance from the Looping features.

Just like decks, Dicers come in pairs, and it can be securely mounted on the corner of a Technics 1200. On the underside is a circular mounting block (this can be detached by unscrewing it) that enables it to slot into the 45 RPM adaptor recess of the deck, so it won't wobble when prodded or knocked. Funnily enough, this is one of its major selling points — if you've ever tried to find space for a MIDI controller in a DJ booth, you know just how difficult it can be, so having a controller that sits in exactly the right place is a liberation. If you need to attach them to CDJs, or prefer to

position them on a different part of a deck, simply detach the mounting circle and use the DJ putty provided to stick them in place.

Two heads

So, we're off to a good start — but thankfully there's more. Dicer is USB-powered and uses the smaller USB Micro 1.1 standard connectors. The pair of units are identical, so either can be connected to the computer. To save using two USB ports to connect the pair, you can daisychain the units together using the provided mini jack cable. To clarify, although this is an audio lead, it's only used for MIDI.

Setup time is short and sweet. Just mount the Dicers to the decks, plug them in and you should be good to go. They are class-compliant, so there is no driver installation and, since, they

are pre-mapped to Serato's Looping and Cueing functions, it's game on as soon as you see them light up.

The layout features five big round rubber buttons and three smaller ones. The big ones are numbered like dice and are the main ones used for performance; the smaller ones are used to select the various modes. All of the buttons take advantage of intelligent backlighting and use three colours to distinguish themselves from one other.

Join the cue

The first thing to do is to select one of the modes to play with. Let's start with Hot Cue mode — this makes the unit light up red and enables you to store up to five cue points using the big buttons. To store a cue point, simply tap the button, at which point it will light up to indicate it's saved it. You can delete a cue point by holding down the little Cue Mode button and pressing the active Cue button, at which point the light should dim and it will be ready for re-arming.

The second mode is blacklit in green and controls the Loop Roll feature. This is great for adding cool fills and stutters without interrupting the flow. This time, pressing and holding any of the buttons momentarily loops the track. The five buttons correspond to different increments,





If you've ever tried to find space for a controller in a DJ booth, one that sits in the right place is liberating

starting at one beat and rolling through half, quarter, one-eighth and one-16th of a beat. Obviously, this is only going to work smoothly if the track in question has had its BPM analysed in advance. The nifty thing about Loop Roll is that the track will resume from the point it would have reached. So if you hold down Roll for two bars, when you release it the track will play from two bars after the initial button press and so will always be in sync.

The third mode is for Auto-Looping and makes the buttons light up in

amber yellow. It differs from Loop Roll in two significant ways. Firstly, the five loop lengths are longer, ranging from one beat, two beats, through to four, eight and 16 beats. Secondly, the Loop function is activated by toggling the button on or off.

Getting Dicey

After a few hours of playtime, it's easy to get addicted to using the Dicers, simply because they make it so easy to explore the different possibilities which can be performed with the buttons.

They are mega-responsive to touch, and the triggering is lightning-fast. Another nice feature is that when holding

down one Loop Roll button, you can tap another to create polyrhythms without the Dicer getting confused and glitching.

In the lead-up to its release, Novation were heavily hyping Dicer as a 'game changer'; now that it's uncovered, some may wonder what the difference is between using this and any other generic MIDI controller to operate Loop functions. In my opinion, it's the combination of ergonomics and intelligent lighting that justifies the hype. If you're sick of taping controllers to the side of your decks, only to knock them off halfway through a show, this is for you. My only reservation is that it's a bit expensive compared to other controllers; there's nothing similar right now, but that could easily change. If you've been reluctant to dive into SSL's Looping/Cueing features because they don't feel right, this may well change your mind. **FM**

Life Beyond Serato

So what happens if you're liking the Dicer, but have already invested in other DJ software? Novation say that, since it's a generic MIDI controller, it can be used with all the usual DJ software — with the caveat that you might need to set up the mappings yourself.

Another difference is that the intelligent lighting won't work automatically and might be tricky to set up in some cases.

Each unit transmits 30 unique MIDI messages — that's five per mode and another five per shift mode (when you hold the Mode button and one of the big buttons



simultaneously). The types of messages are limited to Note ON only, spread over channels 11, 12 and 13, so there's no possibility to program MIDI CC and pitch bend. The buttons themselves work as momentary touch out of the box, and there's no option to make them toggle in the hardware,

but this won't be a problem with software such as Traktor, which allows you to specify the action within the software.

Hopefully Novation will be releasing setup files for popular DJ tools in the future that take advantage of the lighting system in the same way as it does with Serato.

SPECS

Serato Compatibility: SSL 2.1 or higher

Class Compliant MIDI Controller

Up to 60 MIDI assignments per pair / 30 per unit

Ball of DJ Putty

5 large round multi-colour back-lit trigger buttons

3 small round multi-colour back-lit function buttons

3 Pre-programmed layers

2 user defined MIDI layers

Micro USB 1.1 connector

Kensington lock space

Mini-Jack connector for connecting pairs

Dimensions:

90 x 13mm

Weight:

72g

ALTERNATIVES



Denon-HC1000s

£149

More functionality, but won't fit onto the side of a turntable. Built from robust metal, this controller is designed for Itch with Loop, Roll and Cue points for both decks in one unit. Also features Track Select and Fast Search buttons and File, Browse, History and Prepare keys.

denondj.com



Traktor X1

£159

Dual-deck control for Traktor-centric DJs. Lots of knobs and intelligent lighting to keep you informed, but difficult to find room to strap onto a Technics 1200.

native-instruments.com



Akai LPD8

£49

Like the Dicer, it's small, lightweight and covered in pads to tap. The eight pads are velocity-sensitive and there are four banks, so you can program up to 32 different functions.

akaipro.com

FutureMusic VERDICT

BUILD

★★★★★

VALUE

★★★★★

EASE OF USE

★★★★★

VERSATILITY

★★★★★

RESULTS

★★★★★

A clever little solution for DJs that puts the control buttons in just the right place.