Arturia KeyStep Controller £99

Arturia's latest might look like a simple MIDI keyboard but, as **Si Truss** finds out, it has plenty of tricks up its sleeve

CONTACT **WHO:** Arturia (Source Distribution) **WEB:** www.arturia.com, www.sourcedistribution.co.uk **KEY FEATURES** **I/O:** USB. CV: Pitch Out, Gate Out, Mod Out. MIDI In/Out. Sync In/Out. Sustain Pedal In. Power In **FEATURES:** 64-step sequencer with eight-slot memory. Arpeggiator with eight patterns. Chord mode. **DIMENSIONS:** 482 x 152 x 38mm **WEIGHT:** 1.4kg

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Coming in the wake of last year's excellent, multifaceted BeatStep Pro, Arturia's latest controller – a simple-looking, 32-note mini keyboard – might look a little underwhelming at first glance. However, for a sub-£100 controller, the KeyStep packs in a surprising amount of functionality and an impressive number of well-designed features.

As with the two 'Steps' that preceded it, the KeyStep features a range of different I/O formats. There's a USB connection, for hooking the controller up to a computer, MIDI In and Out ports and CV Pitch, Gate and Mod outputs. There are also mini-jack Sync In/Out ports, which will work with pulse clock devices, such as Korg's Volca range, or can send and receive DIN Sync messages via a (separately purchased) adaptor. Arturia's MIDI Control Centre software allows for further configuration of the outputs

too, including setting the CV outputs to volts per octave or hertz per volt and adjusting sync settings. Finally, a sustain pedal input and power input round off the connections.

The hardware itself is fairly lightweight, consisting of a metal base with a plastic top and rubber controls. The keys are a 'slim' design, but are velocity and aftertouch sensitive and are fairly playable for a controller this size. The keys are joined by a pair of touchstrips that handle pitch and modulation and, while these offer nothing in the way of visual or tactile feedback, they're conveniently placed and nice to use. The KeyStep has clearly been designed with portability in mind though, and on

that front it excels. At just under 50cm long and 15cm deep it's far from cumbersome and easy enough to squeeze onto even a small desk alongside a laptop.

Sequencer and arp

To call KeyStep a keyboard controller only tells a fraction of the story though. Alongside its standard MIDI keyboard functions, the KeyStep also features a built-in polyphonic sequencer, arpeggiator and chord mode. The sequencer has an eight-pattern memory, which comes pre-loaded with patterns but can be overwritten by user input. Each pattern can have up to 64 steps, with a maximum of eight notes per step. Notes can be inputted 'offline'

THE ALTERNATIVES

Arturia BeatStep Pro
£199

If you're not too fussed by the lack of a keyboard and want a mix of melodic and percussive sequence control over multiple devices, the Pro is still the way to go.
www.arturia.com

Korg SQ-1 £89

The SQ-1's sequencing is less flexible and there's no keyboard or arp, but it offers a similar range of outputs and can run on battery power.
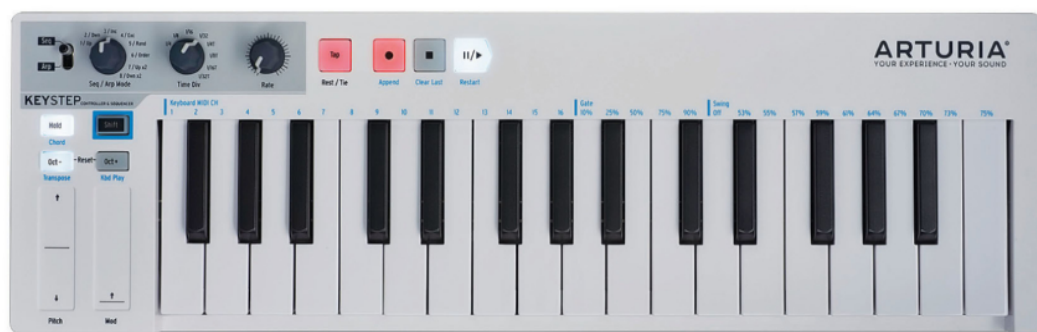www.korg.com

M-Audio Mini 32 £39

If you like the sound of a portable 32-note controller keyboard but don't need the sequencer, arp or chord mode then M-Audio's Mini range offers good value.
www.m-audio.com

SEQUENCER The KeyStep features eight sequencer slots, each of which can be up to 64 steps in length.

ARPEGGIATOR The arp has a choice of eight patterns, including randomised and user-defined modes.

KEYBED The keys are a 'slim' design, but are velocity and aftertouch sensitive, so are relatively playable.

PORTABILITY Its compact frame makes the KeyStep lightweight and easy to fit into any set-up.

step-by-step, with a button for adding rests and tie notes. Sequences can be recorded or replaced in real time too, simply by hitting play and record. There are Append and Clear Last functions too, for adding or removing steps from the end of a sequence. While the hardware itself only offers eight sequence slots, it's possible to save and load an unlimited amount via the MIDI Control Centre software, where users can also create sequences via a piano roll and upload them to the device.

The arpeggiator, meanwhile, offers eight patterns, including a Random mode and a user-defined Order mode. The tempo and timing of the sequencer and arpeggiator are controlled by Rate and Note Division rotaries along the top of the KeyStep, the latter of which offers eight rhythmic delineations. The tempo of both can be sync'd via any of the rear inputs, with the clock source selected via a pair of small, indented switches on the rear of the unit. These switches are actually one of the KeyStep's few design missteps – they're small and fiddly, and tucked away in a position that's awkward to access without picking the controller up and turning it over.

Beyond these, there are a few other features accessible via the Shift button. With Shift pressed, the keybed is used to select the MIDI output channel as well as control gate length and swing. Having gate and swing controls up front like this is actually a nice little touch, providing a quick way to add subtle rhythmic variation to sequences on the fly. Shift also gives access to a Transpose mode and Keyboard Play, which allows the keyboard to play notes via the MIDI output and output a sequence via CV simultaneously.

Aside from the fiddly clock selectors mentioned above, my only real gripe with the KeyStep is the fact it ships without a power adaptor. Obviously, this isn't uncommon these days – and the KeyStep can function via USB power – but it does mean that, straight out the box, it can't be used without a computer, which is a shame for a device that boasts of its standalone CV and MIDI credentials. It's an extra expense to take into account, rather than a deal breaker. With this much functionality packed into a portable and convenient controller keyboard, all for less than £100, the KeyStep is easy to recommend. **FM**

CHORD MODE

The KeyStep's Chord Mode feature allows users to define a chord and then trigger that shape transposed across the keyboard. This is done by hitting Shift and holding down the Hold/Chord button. Up to 16 notes can then be inputted consecutively, which will form the saved chord shape. The lowest note entered acts as the chord's root note, by which the chord is transposed across the keyboard. These chords can be sequenced, although

doing so reduces the maximum chord size from 16 notes to the sequencer's per-step capacity of eight notes. Used alongside the arp, Chord mode makes it very easy to create single-finger arpeggiations.

FM VERDICT

9.2

With lots of functionality and flexibility packed into a convenient and affordable package, the KeyStep gets a big thumbs-up.