

Ableton Push 2

| from €699

Ableton's controller gets a sleek overhaul and some new features. *Si Truss* goes Live...

WHAT IS IT?

An update to Ableton's impressive Live controller

CONTACT

Who: Ableton
Web: www.ableton.com

HIGHLIGHTS

- 1 Great looking and very useful screen
- 2 Revamped pads feel great to play
- 3 Workflow is exceptionally fluid and fun

When Ableton released the first incarnation of Push in 2013, they instantly claimed the Live controller market for themselves. Where Novation's Launchpad range and Akai's APCs had previously competed for dominance with devices that offered control over differing areas of Live's UI, Ableton's hardware debut set out to be

a 'do-it-all' controller, granting hands-on access to almost every aspect of Live. Push proved a resounding success – its interaction with Live felt tighter in some areas than others, but on the whole the result was a sleek hardware/software relationship that could only really be matched by NI's Maschine range.

Push 2 largely sticks to the same winning formula, but refines it in a few

key areas. As before, the controller is focused around a grid of 64 backlit, velocity sensitive pads that can be used for launching clips, step sequencing or playing drum racks and instruments – the latter utilising Push's useful Scales mode. The controller also comes with a healthy stock of rotaries and buttons, along with a screen and touchstrip, both of which have increased in size for version two. Significantly, while Push 1 was created in collaboration with Akai, its follow-up is solely the work of Ableton. As a result, while the layout and general principles of Push remain largely the same, much of the hardware itself has been updated – the screen has been completely revamped, the pads have been given an overhaul and the whole device is now larger, lower and features a solid aluminium top instead of a plastic coated surface.

As with the original, things are kept fairly simple in terms of connections. On the rear panel there's just a USB connection, a pair of expression pedal





inputs and a power input. Like its predecessor, Push 2 can run on USB power alone, although with the power drain from the new screen factored in things are significantly dimmer when not using the included power supply. If I was going to request anything extra, it would be nice to see a MIDI output similar to that on the Launchpad Pro added to future versions of Push, as it would be great to be able to sync an additional hardware instrument directly

from the controller. It's hardly a dealbreaker though.

Revamped and refined

The first thing you notice upon unboxing Push 2 is just how good it looks. The original was already a sleek-looking bit of kit, but with its decluttered control surface, lower profile and larger, clearer screen, Push 2 is a beautifully designed controller. That sense of quality carries through into the way Push feels too – all

Live's browser. With version 9.5 of Live, Push is now able to browse not only Live's built-in devices and presets, but also any third-party VST/AU plug-ins and any user sample libraries. The browser now filters out any irrelevant content too; so you won't see any MIDI devices listed if an audio track is currently selected, and vice versa.

It's worth noting that many of these browser refinements contained in Live 9.5 are also applicable to Push 1,

although the vastly improved screen does play a major role here too. Its increased size allows for sub-groups of devices and presets to be unfolded across up

to eight columns. In all it makes the process of selecting and adding devices much more fluid and enjoyable, allowing users to easily construct effects chains on the fly without interrupting the creative flow. There are still a few little minor bugbears though: Live's browser could do with a tagging system to help organise users' sample libraries, and it would be nice to be able to browse devices by type – eg all installed compressors together in one list, instead of treating native and third-party effects as completely separate menus.

Keep it Simpler

One of the primary focuses of both Push 2 and Live 9.5 is a tightening up of the DAW's sampling workflow via a complete overhaul to its Simpler device (see *New in Ableton Live 9.5*). While

SPECS

Pads: Soft silicone pads, carefully calibrated to respond perfectly at any velocity. RGB backlighting.

Display: The high-resolution RGB display is bright and clear at any viewing angle and under any lighting

Touchstrip: 17cm touch strip for pitch bend/scrolling. 31 LEDs for navigation.

Dimensions:

378 x 304 x 26mm

Weight:

2.7kg

With its decluttered control surface and larger, clearer screen, Push 2 is a beautifully designed controller



knobs and buttons are reassuringly sturdy, and the whole device feels very well built. It's the new pads that make the biggest impression though – they're firm yet responsive, and the RGB backlighting is clear and striking.

Layout wise, there are only a handful of changes from version one. Most notably, there are now rows of buttons above and below the screen, which are primarily used for navigating around tracks and devices. The navigational 'arrow' buttons have been moved to the top end of the unit too, along with the Add Track and Add Device buttons. The left-hand touchstrip has increased in size too, and now has added LEDs to aid with scrolling and navigation.

These changes tie into one of Push 2's best, albeit less instantly obvious, refinements: the way it interacts with

Screen Test

The enlarged and enhanced screen is one of the most instantly obvious improvements over version one, and it has significant impact on the overall workflow. Whereas Push 1 featured a dot matrix screen that provided parameter feedback in a pleasingly retro, albeit somewhat functional manner, the new display proves to be substantially

more useful and flexible. It's full colour and hi-res, making it a lot easier on the eyes, and the visual content adapts well to provide differing visual information depending on the section of Live being controlled. In Simpler's new slice mode, for example, we see the current sample's waveform complete with movable 'slice' divisions. EQ Eight,

meanwhile, gives users a visual representation of currently selected curve type, along with virtual rotaries showing cutoff and resonance.

It has a huge effect on the browser too, making locating sounds and devices a lot easier. No longer will you get lost in sub-menus when searching for that perfect sound mid-jam session.

ALTERNATIVES



Native Instruments Maschine Studio

£680

Not a Live controller, but NI's hybrid system is the only thing that can really match Live/Push for software-hardware synergy.

www.native-instruments.com



Novation Launchpad Pro

£195

It's not as deep as Push, but the Pro is a great Live controller in its own right. Plus, it's portable and can work standalone too.

<http://novationmusic.com>



Akai APC40

£250

With nine faders, a crossfader and a range of rotaries, the mkII APC40 beats Push for mixing.

www.akaipro.com

most of the improvements here are actually housed within the free update to the DAW itself, Simpler's refresh has clearly been developed with Push in mind, and it carries through to vastly improve the controller's overall workflow. With the simple turn of a rotary, users can easily switch between the device's three modes – Classic, One Shot and Slice – allowing samples to be chopped up, shaped or re-pitched across the central 64 pads. It makes sequencing and experimenting with samples much more flexible. The new Convert button helps too, allowing audio clips to be instantly sliced to Simpler instruments.

The updates refine the winning formula, and tighten the relationship between hardware and DAW

Push comes to shove

On the whole then, version two refines the whole Push experience, making the workflow smoother and offering seamless interaction with much of the DAW. There are still a few things Push doesn't do so well, however. For one thing it doesn't really engage in any meaningful way with Live's Arrangement view, and is still a controller that lends itself to a primarily Session view focused workflow. Saying that, however, it's very much to Push 2's credit that it doesn't simply feel like a clip launcher with a few extra features attached – although obviously it does this very well, the emphasis is really on playing and tweaking devices, rather than simply firing off pre-made loops.

To Upgrade Or Not To Upgrade?

Until May, Ableton are offering a trade-in scheme allowing owners of Push 1 to part exchange their existing controllers to get 30% off version two (with the added bonus that traded-in units will be donated to musical education projects). Does the offer make it worth current owners rushing out and

buying the new version? That's still up for debate. Undoubtedly, Push 2 is better in almost every way, but its new features are refinements more than revolutionary new tools. Much of the new functionality from Live 9.5 comes to the original version of Push too, and Ableton have stated their intention to continue to

support and add features for version one.

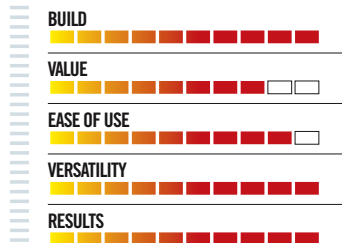
In short, Push 1 remains an excellent Live controller. If you feel like better pads and a vastly improved screen are worth 500 euros, you won't be disappointed in your purchase. Otherwise, you can stick with version one without feeling like you're missing out.

Similarly, Push's Mix mode is still its weakest area. It's perfectly functional and covers all the bases you'll need for rough mixing, but it's nowhere near as refined as some of the other functions. Push 2 really shines when it comes to creative and sound design applications, and the mix functionality feels like it's there to support that, more than to facilitate precise final mix sessions. Ableton could look at refining the mix control with future Push updates, but it's debatable how necessary that is – if anything, I'd like to see Ableton develop a fader-laden companion controller to work alongside Push, and leave Push to the creative applications it excels at.

Still, all things considered, Push 2 is the best software-specific controller

on the market. The updates for version two – most notably the screen and pads – refine the winning formula significantly, and further tighten the relationship between the hardware and the DAW. Both in terms of design and functionality, this is a truly top-end controller that justifies its price tag. **FM**

FutureMusic VERDICT



A beautifully refined update to probably the best software-specific controller on the market.



New In Ableton Live 9.5

The latest free update to Live arrived alongside Push 2, bringing a redesigned device, new filters and more. We put its notable new features to the test...



Revamped Simplifier

The headline addition to Live 9.5 is an overhaul to Live's basic sampler, Simplifier. Along with a refreshed UI, Simplifier gains two new modes – One Shot and Slice. One Shot mode, as its name suggests, will play a single sample from beginning to end, at a variety of pitches across the keyboard. Slice, meanwhile, divides up an audio file into chunks which can be triggered by playing different notes. A third mode, Classic, retains pretty much all the functionality of the original Simplifier device. The whole thing is a great addition to Live – offering new, accessible sound design tools that are a joy to tweak.



Cytomic filters

One thing I've always liked about Live is the fact that its built-in devices are quite transparent. The flipside to this, however, is that, traditionally, it's never had any particularly characterful dynamics or EQ effects. That changed with the Cytomic-developed Glue compressor in Live 9, and now they've followed it up by adding new analogue-modelled filters to Simplifier, Sampler, Operator and Auto Filter. The results are excellent; these multi-mode filters are gritty and full of character, with resonance that can be pushed into self-oscillation. The classic 'transparent' filters are still there too though!



Max synths

Alongside the new features of Live, Suite owners are treated to a handful of new Max for Live devices. There's a trio of synths to download – Bass, a single oscillator bass synth; Poly, an analogue-style subtractive polysynth; and Multi, a 'morphing' synth with a simplistic UI, designed specifically to be tweaked and played with Push. The former two are fairly straightforward, but sound great and are decent additions to Live's arsenal. Multi, meanwhile, is more interesting, putting tweakability over depth. Coupled with Push, it's a lot of fun and sounds impressive too.



Metering and UI

There have been a couple of UI tweaks added in version 9.5. Firstly, Ableton have improved the way metering works, so that both peak and RMS information is displayed, which is handy for keeping an eye on your headroom and compression settings. Waveforms are now higher quality too, allowing you to zoom in further and see sounds in more detail. There have been improvements to the way Live automatically assigns colours to clips. That might sound fairly trivial but it makes the whole Live experience feel significantly more organised.



Link

Ableton's Link technology was announced alongside Live 9.5, but it hasn't actually rolled out 'officially' yet and at the time of writing it's still available as a public beta. Link is a built-in tool that lets multiple computers running Live wirelessly sync to one another. That's not all though – Ableton have made the SDK open to iOS developers, so they can build Link into their apps. Currently, the likes of Korg Gadget, Akai iMPC Pro, triqtrac and loads more are already onboard. I've yet to have the chance to test Link with more than two devices but, given a cursory experiment, it seems like a tool with a lot of potential.