

Akai XR20 | £219

Akai move their expertise into a non-sampling, preloaded drum machine. *Dan 'JD73' Goldman* finds out what it's all about...



ON THE DVD

WHAT IS IT?

A compact and portable drum machine loaded with up to the minute Hip Hop/Urban samples, master effects and synth sounds.

CONTACT

Who: Numark Alesis Europe
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HIGHLIGHTS

- 1 Compact, lightweight and can be battery powered
- 2 Simple to setup and use
- 3 Sounds and feels great

The Akai name has been synonymous with sampling drum machines and world famous Hip Hop producers since the early '90's. The original MPC series of sampling drum machines (designed in collaboration with Roger Linn) are still regarded as some of the best ever made. The Numark group recently bought Akai Pro and many thought this might have been the nail in the coffin for Akai Pro music products.

However, the designers at Akai have been very busy ensuring the survival and evolution of the MPC line and also creating several new products including

the XR20 Beat Production Center (I'm officially naming it the BPC!)

USB free

The XR20 is an intriguing product and it's brave of Akai to release a preloaded and sampler-free drum machine without USB, in the current climate of laptop and software-driven beat production. Hopefully, Akai have done enough market research.

Make no mistake though – this is a drum machine in the traditional sense. Concept-wise, it reminds me of units such as the Alesis SR16, Cheetah MD-16 and Yamaha RY20 from back in the

day, and straight out of the box the impressions are pretty favourable.

Build-wise, the XR20 feels solid and looks good for this price point. The overall design and feel is clear and uncluttered and definitely carries forward the current Akai family look. The pads feel great and MPC-like, although sometimes you need to give them a good bash to get the maximum velocity. It's a shame that only eight levels of velocity are available via the pads and full-scale velocity is only possible over MIDI.

One thing that always annoyed me about making beats on Akai MPCs in particular was that sometimes, it was extremely difficult to remember which pad made a particular sound within a beat you'd just recorded (especially if you were trying to erase a drum hit).

With the XR20, it's easy to find the sound that's playing, especially as each pad lights up blue in exactly the position it was played within a sequence. Now if only they'd filter this feature over to the MPC range!

The display is very clear, large and



LED Screen

The XR20 comes with a good-size LED screen, removing the need for cryptic abbreviations

Jog Wheel

Use the intuitive jog wheel for browsing presets, editing and configuring a more precise tempo

Performance Pads

The 16 percussion pads only provide eight levels of velocity unless triggered via MIDI

**MIDI Control**

MIDI In, Out/Thru offers full external control for the XR20

Footswitch

Use a CV footswitch to control playback, tempo and switch between your patterns. Great for on stage or for a live feel in the studio

Multiple Outs

The XR20 offers separated outputs for sends, phones and your main mix

uses a bright blue backlight that should ensure it can be read in all light conditions. The size of the screen also means that names of sounds and beats are always displayed in full, rather than cryptically abbreviated, as on some smaller displays. It really helps make workflow quick and easy even for the drum machine novice.

It's the beat!

To the lower-right of the pads are the transport controls. The now obligatory stop play and record buttons and new Part A, B fill and Mute buttons. (See box on Beat Construction with the XR20). It's nice to see the legendary Note Repeat button included which allows you to play (for example) 16th hi-hat patterns or rolls by just holding down a pad and the note repeat button at the same time. (The value of the note

Connectivity

The XR20's rear panel has all the connectivity that you would expect, except for a USB connector.

From left-to-right there is the main volume control, a stereo aux out, left and right outputs, a

headphone out, a jack mic input (which allows you to send a mic'd signal/vocal through the unit), MIDI in, out/thru and two footswitch jacks that control start, stop, tap tempo and A, B, Fill parts.

Power is supplied by 6 AA batteries or via the supplied wall-wart. There's also a Kensington lock socket to stop musical criminals getting away with your phat beats!

have produced some great Urban libraries in the past. I'm happy to report the sounds are tough and punchy, broad in scope, high-quality and very useable (which is a good job as you are stuck with them).

From dirty 808 kicks, hats and claps to more live sounding kits and one shot effects (noises, sound effects, scratches, vocal hits and more) it's all

than with a keyboard (you can play the sounds via MIDI keyboard if you so desire) and it's easy to come out with completely different types of chords and bass lines due to the limitations of playing via the pads.

It's very inspiring to work in this slightly askewed way and many a fresh b-line/beat has been made in the short time I've had the XR20.

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Get stuck in

If you feel the preset sounds aren't quite doing it for you, then you can get stuck into the simple but useful editing tools

repeat is set by the quantise value set in 'Record Setup' mode).

Next up is the Tap Tempo button that does what it says on the tin! If you hold this button down and move the data wheel, you can set the tempo with a finer resolution. The tempo is continuously displayed in the bottom-right of the screen.

The mode buttons are the heart of the XR20 and allow direct access to the various types of sounds and patterns and the pattern play and step edit modes. There are 100 preset/user writeable patterns on board and 100 writeable songs. The onboard sounds have been made by Chronic Music who

here and with over 700 individual sounds, there is plenty to keep the programmer occupied for a long time. My only complaint sound-wise is there's a fair bit of background hiss appearing at the outputs.

There is also a synth section containing 63 instrument and synth samples which can be played polyphonically via the pads. The general character here is grimey and noisy, almost sounding like they've been sampled at 8- or 12-bit resolution!

They work well in this Urban context and allow full song backings to be built exclusively in the XR20. It's fun playing the synth sounds via the pads, rather

by stepping through the Edit pages using the Page buttons.

You can edit pad volume, pad velocity, select the main or aux output, panning, tuning, envelopes and filter. These all work well and though the low-pass filter is very basic in operation and has no resonance control, it's pretty useful nonetheless.

Effects-wise, there are 23 reverb presets ranging from springs, to gates, to rooms and more and these are again very well chosen yet a little grungy sounding – in a good way! It's nice that each pad/sound can have its own send amount, so you could have your hats dry and snare with reverb within a kit.

SPECS

Outputs: 1 x TRS jack aux, 2 x TS jack main, 1 x TRS jack headphone out

Inputs: 1x TS jack microphone input

Display: LED/blue backlit/variable brightness

Pads: 12 velocity-sensitive with blue LED's

Sample/DAC resolution: 16/24bit

Sounds onboard: 700/32MB sounds by Chronic Music

Sound resolution: 16bit 44.1khz uncompressed PCM

Polyphony: 32 voice

Velocity response: 8 loudness levels via pads, full velocity range via MIDI

Timing resolution: 96ppq

Tempo range: 30-300bpm

Sequencer/memory capacity: 150,000 notes, 200 patterns (100 user/100 preset), 100 songs, 100 user and 100 preset kits

Sync: MIDI click with song position pointer

Dimensions: 250mm x 195mm x 50mm

Weight 0.94kg

ALTERNATIVES



Alesis SR18

£190

Uses the same display and similar feature set to the XR20 but with fewer pads, less polyphony and geared towards realistic/acoustic drum sounds/percussion.

alesis.com



Boss Dr-670

£220

Features fewer sounds, but also features pattern triggering via pads, a comprehensive display, and footswitch control.

bossus.com



Cheetah MD16

£100 upwards

British-made drum machine. 8 outputs, 8 voice polyphony and gritty as you like! Bag one if you find it.

ebay.co.uk

There is also a great master EQ/compressor with 14 presets that sound fantastic and helps to add that final polish to your beats.

So what's the verdict? Generally, this is a great little drum machine but there are some major limitations with the

sound ROM chip etc) so the XR20 is slightly stunted at the moment, but who knows what Akai have up their sleeves in this regard.

Surely though, it wouldn't have cost too much to include a USB socket or card reader at this price point and it

your recording. This can be frustrating when you want to edit it after.

Machine drum

Finally, I would have liked to see an effects bypass button, a return to main window button (it's sometimes a few too

many button presses back to the main screen) and the headphone socket mounted on the front. All in all though, this is a great and inspiring

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XR20, though bearing in mind its reasonable price, it's hard to criticise.

The major downside is that there is no way to change the sample set, add user samples or update the operating system (unless there are future plans to allow this to happen over MIDI/changing

would have changed it's appeal dramatically. Also, there is no onboard sampling, though this would confuse it with the MPC range.

Another annoying downside is that quantise can't be set after your beat has been recorded – it has to be set before

box and through its simplicity (and limitations), I've found myself making very different beats compared to what I'd make with my DAW.

The XR20 is easy to use, sounds great and would be equally at home on stage or in the studio. If you're on the lookout for a drum machine you'd be crazy not to check it out. **FM**

Beat Construction on the XR20

Making beats on the XR20 is very simple, intuitive and MPC-like in feel. You pick your sounds, which can be a preset or user kit.

Next up, select an empty pattern which can be 1 to 32 beats long, set the quantise and swing value in record setup mode and press record and the beat loops round. You can also use offset to

shift beats earlier or later. Then hit the pads you want and hey presto, you have a beat!

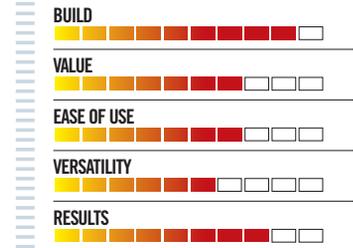
The beat can then be looped on its own, or chained with other beats into a song structure. Each pattern has an A and B part and each one also has its own fill.

For editing in greater detail, there is a familiar

Step Edit mode, where each hit can be tweaked at note level to perfection, (or destruction!) as you might require.

Finally, patterns can be assigned to pads in pattern play mode and triggered in any sequence you like on the fly. Beats and synth parts can also be muted on the fly via the mute button.

FutureMusic VERDICT



A great sounding drum machine that's inspiring but knows its place behind Akai's MPC range.

