

Native Instruments Maschine Studio | €999

The biggest Maschine yet rules the roost over a new 2.0 version of the software. So have NI finally nailed their MPC beater? **Oliver Smith** tries it out

WHAT IS IT?

Flagship sampler, synth and sequencing software with comprehensive hardware controller and sound library

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HIGHLIGHTS

- 1 Hardware that looks and feels great
- 2 A brilliant workflow for sample-based music production
- 3 Well implemented Native Instruments Complete integration

The Maschine range will be no stranger to regular *FM* readers. It is the combination of a dedicated hardware

controller with a software package that includes sampling, synthesis, sequencing and mixing tools. The

original version of Maschine was released in 2009, and NI have been refining and improving the concept ever since. We've had the introduction of the smaller Mikro version, a MkII hardware upgrade that added multi-coloured pads, and multiple

tweaks to the software adding vintage sampler emulation, VST/AU plug-in hosting, and time-stretching features.

However, while the likes of Akai were clearly enamoured enough to use the hard-plus-soft formula for restarting their classic MPC line in the form of their Renaissance, many producers still feel that there was just too much missing for Maschine to take the step from beat machine to true DAW replacement. Well, with new, cleaner and more powerful 2.0 software and the biggest, most control laden surface yet, let's see just how serious the top-flight Maschine unit is.

Installing, please wait...

When you open the box the first thing you will want to do is to plug in the hardware and make a track. Unfortunately, despite Studio's size



Dedicated Control Buttons
A set of buttons for navigating the main sections of Maschine. Allows for quick access to the Arrangement, Mixer, Browser and Sampling features.

Drum Pads
Multi-colour illuminated pads with velocity and aftertouch. Very sensitive and perfect to use for finger-drumming. They can also be used chromatically for playing melodic samples.

Jog Wheel
A large illuminated multi-function jog wheel with built-in push button. When used in conjunction with the surrounding edit buttons it allows for quick sample browsing, level changes, tuning, and more.

and price tag, Maschine's brain is still the software and there's a load of convoluted downloading of the software from online, installing the 'Komplete Selection' of included plug-ins (see later), installing the new library from disc (including the original V1 library) and then authorising the lot. It's your typical NI install all told, but we can't help thinking that a single install (be it download or disc) in a single process would be far preferable. For all its size and girth, installing (the now finely tuned) Komplete 9 is easier than this.

Thankfully, setting up the hardware is rather simpler: power, USB, done. And what a treat the new hardware is. It's about a third bigger than the regular Maschine – this is for the 'Studio' rather than the gig bag – which not only means more controls but better spacing. The dual screens are now full colour TFT units and the metal and shiny plastic give it a pro-feeling, highly glossy look.

Special mention to the flip out feet which finally put Maschine at an angle so you can actually use it while seated.

and Paste, Undo, and Quantize now have their own dedicated controls and that really makes a difference. Likewise the colour screens are much nicer to stare at and the resolution finally allows you to do accurate sample work without using your computer's screen.

The new, large illuminated jog wheel is great for selecting parameters accurately and dialling through sounds, and the level control section allows you to easily adjust audio levels, which are displayed by the accompanying meters. They're a nice addition but it's quite

cosmetic rather than actually essential. Still, for this price we want as many flashing lights as possible please!

The two large colour displays are

the stars of the show. They are sharp and easy to read, providing much more space for information than previous incarnations. However, at times it feels like the software does not yet take full advantage of this new real-estate with many menus feeling empty and looking for something useful to display.

Under the skin

The new version 2.0 software has been re-written from scratch, but the overall layout remains familiar. Graphics have been redesigned to look much more modern, with a cleaner, more streamlined style. The application now supports multi-core processing (about time) which means you can use a lot more plug-ins without running out of power.

SPECS

2 large high-resolution colour displays, 16 touch-sensitive multi-colour illuminated pads, 8 display knobs, LED level meters, Large jog wheel with LED ring, Built-in stand, 13GB free disk space required for complete installation, High-speed internet connection recommended for downloads, WAV, AIFF, REX and AKAI MPC file import

Included Software: Maschine 2.0 (standalone and VST/AU/AAAX plug-ins), Komplete Selection (full versions of Massive, Solid Bus Compressor, Scarbee Mark I and Reaktor Prism), 8GB sound library

Connections: Foot switch input x 2, MIDI In x 1, MIDI Out x 3, Kensington lock port, USB 2.0 and 3.0 supported (type B port).

Dimensions:

432 x 350 x 58.5mm

Weight:

3.2 kg

The resolution finally allows you to do accurate sample work without using your computer's screen



Level Meters

Audio meters showing the level of the current input or output. The buttons can also be used to select an input for sampling.

And also to the trio of MIDI out ports which mean that Maschine is crying out to be the hub of your hardware.

Audio not included

It's worth noting that despite the price and size there's no audio interface (ins or outs) which sets it apart from the MPC Renaissance. NI argue that you've already got a perfectly good audio interface but, to not include one when the competition does, feels like a cheeky saving and a surprise on a unit this big and expensive. It's worth remembering that for all its new girth and presence the Studio hardware is still just a (gorgeous looking) controller.

That said there are 19 more buttons than the MkII, meaning regularly used features such as Copy

Drum Synth

Maschine 2.0 includes a set of five all-new drum synthesizers. The Kick plug-in has eight sound engines that range from deep 808 sub-bass thuds to acoustic kicks. The Snare plug-in includes nine different sound engines producing everything from electronic zaps to realistic snares. High-hat, Tom and Percussion plug-ins complete the range.

The drum synths have an attractive interface and the control ranges are well chosen so that it is easy to



dial in a useful sound. Many of the presets recall classic drum machines, but the plug-ins can also go beyond this, offering

creative new options. One of the great features is the ability to make perfectly tuned drum sounds that sit well in a mix.

Those upgrading from version 1.x will be interested to know that their old installation will be left untouched, and that legacy projects can be imported. And if you're perfectly happy with your existing hardware (original, MkII or Mikro) you can upgrade to the 2.0 software for just 99 euros. We think that's a no-brainer.

Our favourite part of 2.0 is the updated browser, which makes the old system feel like squinting through a letterbox. There's a clearer way to filter

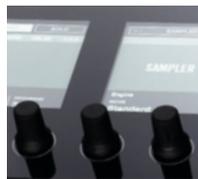
files in the library and Native Instruments Complete 9 plug-ins are also fully tagged and well integrated into the system and the two work well together. The process of managing the user library still feels a little clunky – why can't we just click an 'Add' on any slice on any screen and have it instantly included alongside the supplied sounds? But everything you need is at least possible, if rather convoluted, and currently files must be added to the library before they can be

browsed from the hardware at all. It's also a shame that MP3 support is not included (for either import or export).

As with traditional samplers, Maschine is capable of recording and editing audio files. These functions work in largely the same way as in previous versions, but the software layout has been improved. Sample slicing is again well implemented, and we've taken to using Maschine as our sample slicer of choice. Loading up a track and isolating the choice snippets within to build your own kits has never been easier or more fun. One gripe: time-stretching is still only available as an offline editing option which feels a little dated in 2013. NI already have the technology to do live time-stretching and pitch-shifting in Kontakt so why not add it here? On a similar note, it is also frustrating that there is no way to preview audio loops in time with your track from the browser, as in software such as Ableton Live. Still some room for improvement here.

The Good And Great

What we liked and what we loved about the Maschine Studio...



> Two large screens allow you to clearly see what you are editing in detail. Perfect for slicing and dicing samples, as well as allowing you to do much more without opening a laptop or looking at a computer screen.



> The Jog Wheel is ideal for stepping through parameters and samples with great speed and accuracy. It allows for quick access to many settings such as pan, volume, song position and swing.



> A new mixer view makes Maschine a much more complete production tool, enabling you to edit multiple tracks at once and to get a proper overview of current mix levels. Finally it looks and feels like a real DAW.

Studio session

The basic process of making a track with Maschine Studio is quite straightforward. First you choose a sample or synth preset from the browser and load it into a pad. You can then edit the sound using the rotary encoders. Once you have something you are happy with, patterns can be entered into the step sequencer or recorded live. Finally, your patterns are then chained together to make a full arrangement. The new arrangement view on the hardware makes this part a little easier than before, but there are still some limitations that might disappoint those who are used to the flexibility of a regular DAW. For all its new power this is still a pattern and 'beat' focused way of making music.

Something that was sorely missing from previous versions was a proper



MIDI Interface

One MIDI input and three individually addressable MIDI outputs for a total of 48 MIDI channels. Perfect for connecting a controller keyboard and some vintage synths.

Foot Switch Inputs

Hook up a pair of foot switches for hands-free control. Foot Switch 1 starts and stops playback, while Foot Switch 2 controls recording. Momentary or latching switches can be used.

ALTERNATIVES



Akai MPC Renaissance
£699

Akai's Renaissance aims to bring the drum sampler concept up to date. Early software bugs put some off, but this unit has a lot to offer. The built-in audio interface is a bonus.

www.akaipro.com



Ableton Push
£429

With their Push controller, Ableton have transformed their highly regarded DAW into a beat sequencer and live performance tool that challenges Maschine. The 64 pad grid is particularly powerful for melodic use. You need the full version of Live for the best experience.

www.ableton.com



Beat Kangz Beat Thang
£549

Designed as a beat machine from the ground up, the Beat Thang can run without a computer and has a built-in battery for truly portable production. Some features don't live up to their full potential, however.

www.bketechnology.com

mixer view. NI have done a great job here, with a clean and well laid-out solution. Multiple channels can be adjusted at the same time and side-chaining has also been added, essential for the pumping volume

There is no way to see things like compressor gain-reduction meters, or synthesizer envelope shapes on the hardware. Perhaps in an update?

The plug-in version of Maschine is easy to integrate into your DAW, with

the sound library and plug-ins means it is useful for a wide variety of music genres, and the new drum synths serve to reinforce this fact. In fact it's perfect for all kinds of House and the release-ready nature of the sounds

makes tune creation in this genre a joy.

The price does seem rather high and – given that the Studio's extra controls are luxury perks rather than

The cutting-edge, great-sounding library is reason enough to get Maschine as part of your set-up

effect found in many modern styles. The mixer also has special graphical views for NI plug-ins which allow you to adjust a set of regularly used parameters without opening the full plug-in window. Similar graphical plug-in views are shown on the hardware but it is disappointing to find that they are purely decorative and do not respond to parameter changes.

multiple outputs and more flexible MIDI mapping than before. There are now separate buttons on the software for exporting MIDI or audio sequences via drag-and-drop.

The best yet?

While it's being pushed at Hip-Hop producers, the Studio is by no means limited to certain styles. The range of

essentials – we predict that the bulk of purchases will remain with Mikros or MkIIs. You certainly won't be able to hear the difference if you spring for the Studio and, we believe, make a tune with any less hassle.

So can you finally make a Maschine track without looking at the screen? Nearly, but when the full-size software looks so great why limit yourself? **FM**

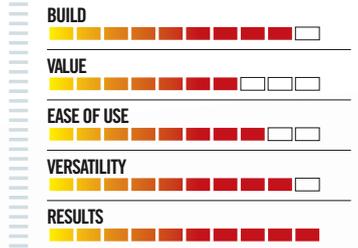
Sound Library

An extensive collection of plug-ins, presets and sounds are included. There are 8GB of samples in total which cover genres such as Hip-Hop, Dubstep, Trap, and Techno. The bulk of the sounds come from the old 1.8 library along with at least 2GB of new

sounds. There is a selection of high-quality multi-sampled instruments, loops, one-shots and drum kits and all sound superb. This cutting-edge, great-sounding library is reason enough to get Maschine in your set-up even if you don't intend

to sequence with it. There's even 23 effects/mixing plug-ins, along with the 'new with 2.0' Scarbee Mark I Electric Piano, Reaktor Prism, and Massive synthesizers. Plus their Solid Bus Compressor, which does a great job on drum busses and master channels.

FutureMusic VERDICT



A great package for creative beat-making with excellent hardware control.



Dual Screens

Large, high-resolution colour screens. In many sections of the software the left one is used for an overview while the right one shows a close-up view.

Context Sensitive Encoders

The eight encoders change the parameters currently displayed onscreen. Smooth turning with comfortable rubber knobs for fine control.