Novation PC MAC
Launchpad Pro £229

It's easy to add bells and whistles, but how do you improve a device that was celebrated for its simplicity without muddying the waters?

> The original Launchpad controller for Ableton Live (10/10, cm145) appeared shortly after Akai's APC40, eschewing knobs and faders for a more rugged, pads-only approach. It proved a popular concept, spawning a Mini version and a brighter RGB-equipped revision. The all-new Launchpad Pro, however, takes things up a considerable notch.

The most significant development with the Launchpad Pro is that it's a standalone device. While the Launchpad is a USB MIDI controller that needs a computer connection to do anything, the Pro can be DC- or USB-powered, operating without any attached software and featuring five-pin DIN MIDI I/O for connection to electronic hardware instruments. Previous versions were capable of controlling software other than Live, of course, but this takes things to a whole new level.

Like the Launchpad and Launchpad Mini, the primary target for the Launchpad Pro, with its updated 8x8 matrix of RGB-backlit pads and 32 RGB backlit buttons, is Ableton Live 9, for which it's configured by default, facilitating clip launching (with matching pad colours), sequencing, clip and device editing, and mixing. The last of these has been advanced beyond the Launchpad and Mini, with the ability to tap a pad on a volume fader strip, say, and have the fader glide smoothly up or down to it, with the strength of the pad hit controlling the speed of the transition. Also, you no longer need to switch to a separate mixer mode to access mix controls – simply hold down the Mix function button, make a change and release the button to revert to performance mode.

Surrounding the 64 pads are 32 buttons, 24 of which are labelled to correspond with a range of Live functions, including Session/Arrange mode, Record Arm, Undo, Clip Stop, Track Select, Quantise, Click on/off, and toggling access to mixer and device functions (with parameter values set using the pads). Like Push and the APC series, the eight buttons down the right-hand side default to Scene-triggering duties. Also like Push, the Launchpad Pro 'knows' whether you have a regular instrument or a Drum Rack device highlighted and switches the pad mode accordingly, with optional Scale locking in the otherwise-chromatic Instrument mode. And those velocity- and aftertouch-sensitive pads feel great, incidentally – even better than those of previous versions. In fact, the whole unit is clearly built to last.

There are many other nifty features and touches, too, such as the easy-to-use setup page (for adjusting things like brightness, MIDI channel assignments and aftertouch controls), and a User setup mode for freely MIDI mapping almost all buttons. Nonetheless, a couple of obvious Push features notable by their absence are Note Repeat and step sequencing.

The Launchpad Pro improves on a successful formula without sacrificing the spirit of the original. It also opens the Launchpad up to users of other DAWs, who can now program the device for their own platform (or at least use other people's programs), and standalone hardware. Live users – still the main target market, we assume – will no doubt remain split into the existing APC/Push and Launchpad camps, but the Launchpad Pro considerably narrows the feature gap between them at a very competitive price. cm

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Open-ended

Inspired by the way previous Launchpad versions have been reprogrammed by the thriving hacker community, Novation have taken the bold and hugely commendable step of actively encouraging people to reprogram it, and they have made the unit's firmware open-source.

The potential is staggering, but obvious uses include making it work as a standalone MIDI sequencer, allowing single buttons to trigger chords (an as-yet-unreleased in-house hack along these lines has buttons further from the centre of the grid playing ever more complex chords), random sequence generators, arpeggiators and more.

It all suggests a very exciting future for the platform, and though it may take time for some of the speculated standalone hacks to enter circulation, enter they surely will. In essence, Novation have built a controller that can only continue to improve the longer you own it.

Alternatively

Ableton Push
cm191 » 10/10 » €578
Ableton's own controller is exceptional, but it's only for Live

Livid Base II
cm221 » 9/10 » $349
User-customisable controller, with dedicated editing software, and user templates for many DAWs

Verdict

For	Great build quality
	Open-source firmware
	Versatile
	RGB LEDs
	Standalone MIDI

Against	No Note Repeat
	No step sequencing

With its programmable firmware and standalone operation, the Launchpad Pro is serious competition for Push, and caters to other DAW and hardware users, too

9/10