



# Novation SL MkIII £540/£630

With a built-in eight-track sequencer and enough connectivity to drive your entire studio, this kaleidoscopic controller keyboard raises the bar

> It's been almost a decade since the release of Novation's acclaimed SL MkII controller (9/10, **cm140**), featuring the company's proprietary Automap system. This made 'wrapped' copies of all your plugin instruments and effects, the parameters of which were automatically mapped to the knobs and sliders on the SL MkII's surface. It worked well enough on its own terms, but was hardly the most immediate approach to plugin control; and things have moved on since then, with Native Instruments' NKS protocol in particular proving that there are better ways to achieve largely the same result.

With the arrival of the SL MkIII (available in 49- and 61-key versions), Novation have at last stepped away from Automap in favour of alternative (if not always truly comparable) protocols, and added a whole host of further bells and whistles to their flagship controller keyboard that qualify it to take on a far more central role in any electronic music studio, be it

hardware-based, software-based or a hybrid of the two.

## Making a Mk

Right out of the box, the SL MkIII makes a grand first impression: weighty, solid-feeling (despite being all-plastic) and clearly built to Novation's usual high construction standards. Connection to Mac or PC is over USB, and it requires external

power via the included adapter. Also around the back are the usual MIDI In/Out/Thru 5-PIN DIN sockets (Thru can alternatively serve as a second Out), Expression, Sustain and Footswitch inputs, plus two sets of 3.5mm CV/Gate/Mod output jacks and a Clock Out for connection to a Eurorack rig or any other so-equipped analogue gear. In conjunction with the SL MkIII's sequencer and eight discrete Parts (see *Seeing Patterns*), all this connectivity enables independent playing and sequencing of any combination of MIDI, CV and DAW/computer-hosted instruments – a feat that no other controller we're aware of can pull off.

The synth-action keys are semi-weighted and feel great, while the mod and pitch wheels move smoothly and exhibit no lateral travel. Drawing comparison with NI's Komplete Kontrol 'boards, every key is topped with an RGB LED that's used to provide orientation for custom scales, as well as visual feedback on keyboard zoning, and notes output by the sequencer and arpeggiator.

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In the top half, things get decidedly colourful, with an RGB LED-festooned plethora of knobs, sliders, buttons and screens that looks more like the cockpit of an aeroplane than a MIDI controller. Specifically, there are eight rotary encoders and associated buttons, five LED screens, eight sliders, 16 backlit velocity-sensitive pads with polyphonic aftertouch, 16 ‘soft buttons’, and a transport section for operating the sequencer or a connected DAW.

The SL MkIII comes preloaded with mapping templates for a wide range of hardware devices – Octatrack, Peak, Sub 37, Nord Lead 2, Prophet 6, etc – selected and loaded from the front panel. These are managed and added to using the free and fairly intuitive Components software editor/librarian, so making and storing your own (up to 64 on the unit) is certainly no great chore.

## Opening DAWs

While templates are used for hardware and standalone software control, getting the SL MkIII talking to your (supported) DAW is even more straightforward. Press the InControl button and the encoders, sliders, pads, soft buttons and transport section all hook in bidirectionally to Live, Logic, Cubase, Pro Tools, Studio One Reaper or Reason, facilitating a degree of hands-on control that varies from one to another.

Thanks to Novation’s experience with the Launch range of controllers, Live is the best supported of the lot, with the rotaries and LED screens enabling visually guided control of devices and plugins, the pads launching Session View clips and triggering Drum Racks, the sliders and soft buttons operating the mixer, and so on. Despite the simplistic representation of parameters in the screens, it’s not a million miles away from the control aspect of Ableton’s own Push. Reason compatibility covers particular instrument and effect parameters but not the



Design your own custom templates with Novation’s free Components editor/librarian for Mac and PC



The eight-track/Part sequencer is unarguably one of the highlights of the SL MkIII

## Seeing Patterns

One of the things that sets the SL MkIII apart from the competition is its onboard eight-track/Part sequencer. Polyphonic sequences (Patterns) of up to 16 steps in length are programmed step by step or recorded live, looper style, with the pads used to select, clear and visually represent steps, and notes input via the keys. The output and MIDI channel of each Part is easily adjusted, so you could have one Part triggering, say, a hardware drum machine, another playing a Eurorack setup via CV/Gate, and the other six routed to separate plugin instruments in your DAW. A Part can comprise up to eight chainable Patterns, the keyboard can be zoned to

play/sequence multiple Parts at a time, and Patterns are fully editable from the unit. As well as note data, automation of pretty much all of the SL’s controls – wheels, rotaries, sliders, etc – is recordable, too. There’s also an arpeggiator (active for only one part at a time, alas), the rhythm of which is programmed on the pads.

The SL MkIII’s sequencer is surprisingly powerful and fast to work with. Our only significant issue with it is that notes adhere rigidly to the grid at all times, quantised on the way in and un-nudgeable afterwards, which rather limits its expressiveness in terms of ‘human’ timing.

main mixer; and although Logic doesn’t allow access to full plugin interfaces, it does assign the rotaries to that DAW’s Smart Control macros. Cubase, Pro Tools, Studio One and Reaper, however, use the HUI protocol, and only grant access to the transport and mixer.

## The magic number

Playing to such a diverse array of functionality, the SL MkIII could easily have ended up being an unfocused jack-of-all-trades, but Novation have unequivocally hit the mark, building a ridiculously versatile controller keyboard that shrewdly taps into the current electronic music zeitgeist. Not only is it a good DAW controller (a great one, indeed, if said DAW happens to be Live), but it brings together – and goes to town with – everything in your studio that accepts MIDI or CV. And rather than being the impractical novelty feature we half-expected before we actually fired it up, the Circuit-style sequencer provides a refreshingly tactile and self-contained alternative to your regular onscreen equivalent – it’s so much fun.

Incredibly well designed, hugely empowering – both creatively and functionally – and Swiss army knife-like in its versatility, the SL MkIII sets a new standard for controller keyboards. **cm**

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## Alternatively

**Native Instruments  
Komplete Kontrol Mk2**  
**cm250 » 10/10 » £479/£559**  
NI’s alternative only offers control over NKS-compatible plugins

**Nektar Panorama P4**  
**cm182 » 9/10 » £440**  
Control a range of popular DAWs with this flexible keyboard and plugin/mixer control surface

## Verdict

**For** High quality keys and pads  
Brilliant onboard sequencer  
Play and control eight things at once  
Tight DAW integration  
CV/Gate/Mod/Clock outputs

**Against** InControl varies by DAW  
No off-grid nudge in sequencer

A supremely flexible central hub for all your hardware and software, the SL MkIII is a massive step up from its predecessor

**10/10**