Platinum Award

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Akai MPC One & MPC Live II £639/£1040

The reinvigorated MPC range gains two new hardware devices and a software update. **Si Truss** dives back in…

CONTACT **WHO:** Akai Professional **WEB:** akaipro.com **KEY FEATURES** **MPC Live II – I/O:** 6x jack out, phones out, 2x jack in, phono out, 2x MIDI out, 2x MIDI in, 4x stereo CV out, 2x USB A, 1x USB-B, ethernet Link, SD card **MPC One – I/O:** 2x jack out, phones out, 2x jack in, 1x MIDI out, 1x MIDI in, 4x stereo CV out, 1x USB-A, 1x USB-B, ethernet Link, SD card

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The most comprehensive laptop-free music makers on the market right now

CV outputs on both are a great addition

The Live II's built-in speaker sounds surprisingly meaty

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Software workflow is still a touch on the convoluted side

occasions about my skepticism of the need for companies to keep adding speakers to their synths and grooveboxes – they rarely sound decent, offering no substitute for headphones or proper monitoring and – in the case of Volcas, POs, etc, – have more capacity to annoy those around you than aid your music making. I'm forced to admit though, it's a nice addition here.

Crucially, the Live II's speaker actually sounds good, offering decent volume, a surprisingly good stereo image and – crucially – a fair amount of low-end presence. I still wouldn't rely on it for mixing or in-depth sound design, but for setting up kits and bashing out patterns it works nicely. It fits well with the rechargeable battery too, making it easy to up sticks and work on an idea away from the studio.

There are other, less obvious tweaks to the Live hardware too. Most notable of these is the addition of four stereo mini jacks on the rear for outputting CV signals. CV was already included on the larger MPC X, but given the proliferation of accessible analogue gear and Eurorack systems, it makes a sensible addition here too. CV sequencing slots nicely into the existing MPC workflow, and the ability to trigger and sample analogue hardware adds to the appeal of using the MPC Live as the hub of a live setup.

There have been a few tweaks to the control layout too, the most significant being that the master volume has moved from being a small dial on the rear panel to a chunky front panel knob. This is a smart choice, rectifying one of the more annoying elements of the original's design.

Are you the One?

The MPC One is the smallest and lightest of the range, at just over 2kg. Conversely, despite being the most readily-transportable, there's no battery here, meaning it needs a power supply at all times. This is a shame, perhaps, but the inclusion of a rechargeable battery would have driven up both the price and weight, negating the device's USP.

Despite the smaller size, Akai have done an excellent job of arranging the One's layout so as to include as much control as possible. The same high-quality 7-inch

Back in 2017, Akai made something of a U-turn with their iconic MPC range. Following several laptop-reliant iterations – MIDI controllers designed for bespoke software, effectively equivalents to NI Maschine – the company released a pair of MPCs that once again took things out-of-the-box with built-in CPUs that allowed them to operate as completely standalone, DAW-rivalling production tools.

The behemoth-like MPC X was the flagship, but the MPC Live was the standout. Equipped with a rechargeable battery for completely wireless operation, the Live really nailed the balance between self-sufficiency and versatility – stripped back enough to allow users to free themselves from the shackles of their studio computer while powerful enough not to leave them hankering after their DAW.

While several software updates have brought new features into the mix, 2020 is the first time in a few years we've seen any new hardware in the MPC range. Announced within six months of one another, the second generation MPC Live and MPC One both sit at the smaller and more portable end of the range. So what sets these two apart?

Back to Live

The most obvious update for the MPC Live II comes in the form of a chunky black built-in speaker sat across the full width of the hardware's bottom edge. I've waxed lyrical within these pages on multiple

touchscreen is included, along with the four Q-Link rotaries and main browser knob. The clicky plastic buttons don't feel as nice as their rubber counterparts on the Live II but, oddly enough, the One actually has more front panel controls, with dedicated buttons for functions such as Program Edit and Q-Link edit that aren't there on its counterpart.

The pads themselves have been downsized a little, making them closer in size to those found on Novation's Launchpad Pro, but they still feel excellent to play and are up there with the most responsive you'll find on any MIDI controller.

The multicore CPU and RAM under-the-hood is identical to that of the MPC Live, so there's no difference when it comes to the software experience itself. The two areas where notable concessions have been made are the onboard storage and hardware I/O. On the former front, the One trims the 16GB drive found in the MPC Live down to just 2GB, with a significant reduction in pre-loaded sounds as a result (although the 2GB sound library hardly feels stingy). Fortunately, there's still USB and SD card slots included, making it easy to expand the storage options.

Elsewhere, the ins and outs have been trimmed down to the bare minimum needed to leave the MPC One as a fully functioning workstation. The additional output from the Live have been removed, leaving just a stereo pair master output and headphone port. The inputs too, are trimmed back to just one stereo pair, losing the Live's phono input. This makes it slightly more complicated to sample directly from a vinyl turntable, but it's not massively problematic – if you've got a deck for sampling, odds are you already have a mixer or amp to hand that can act as a go-between.

Alongside these, there's one MIDI input and one output, and one each of USB-A, USB-B and ethernet network connection. Of these, it's the Live's multiple USB-A ports I'd miss most, as I like being able to use them to load samples and run an external MIDI device simultaneously. On the whole though, nothing's missing that would be a dealbreaker for most users. The full crop of CV minijacks remain – a nice touch.

Soft launch
On the digital side, these MPCs – and the previous gen Live and X –

There's no rival for realising the dream of wireless, go-anywhere music production

BUTTONS The clicky plastic buttons aren't as nice feeling as the Live's rubber versions, but there are more of them

PADS The pads here are slightly smaller than those on the Live or X, but still feel great and are highly responsive

I/O The One strips the connectivity back to, in most cases, one each of all major ports
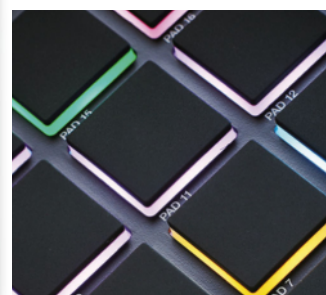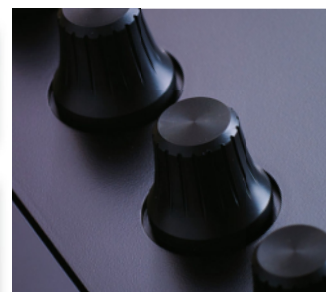
are identical, running the same MPC 2 software, which has just been updated to version 2.8. To recap, the software is available to use in two ways – standalone on the machine itself, or as a desktop application using the MPC as a controller. In capabilities terms, the MPC app is a DAW-level sampling, recording and arrangement environment stocked with a comprehensive range of tools. When I reviewed the previous MPC Live, I said the software – in standalone mode, at least – felt occasionally convoluted and disjointed, and I stand by that criticism now; there are a lot of different views and menus to navigate, and while much of the workflow is intuitive, some features end up buried amongst sub-menus.

That said though, you can't knock the capabilities here. There are some restrictions when using the software in standalone mode, compared with the desktop version, primarily a limit of eight audio tracks and no access to third party plugins. The latter of these isn't too big a hindrance as Akai's own suite of effects and synths is comprehensive and covers most bases to a pretty high standard. In all it doesn't feel like too much of a compromise in exchange for truly self-contained, portable music making.

Since we last reviewed the MPC line, Ableton Live compatibility has been added, not only allowing MPC creations to be exported as Live projects, but also providing mapping to use the hardware as a wireless Live controller. The latest software update, version 2.8, adds a vastly expanded set of MIDI capabilities. This allows the MPC hardware to connect to multiple devices simultaneously, using an external USB hub or MIDI interface – a handy feature, particularly for working around the One's reduced number of ports. It's also now possible to route MIDI internally to sequence multiple elements from a single track. A retrospective record tool has been added too, effectively the same as Ableton's Capture, allowing users to recall recently played MIDI parts.

All in all, the MPC range is at the most appealing right now that it's been in the 21st century. In terms of its balance of capabilities and convenience, there isn't anything on the market to rival the MPC Live when it comes to realising the dream

of wireless, go-anywhere music production. The hardware updates for v2 are subtle, but both speaker and CV ports add genuine usability.

For my money, the Live remains the pinnacle of the range, although there's a whole lot to like about the MPC One – primarily its price. While the reduced size isn't drastic enough to prove gamechanging, if value is your primary factor, it offers the most affordable route into the MPC ecosystem while keeping the hardware compromises at an acceptable level.

For those who can afford it though, the Live's increased connectivity and onboard battery mean it's still the one to go for. **FM**

VOLUME Master volume control has moved from the rear of the unit to a chunky top-panel rotary. A smart, more convenient choice

SPEAKER The Live's new speaker can run at a decent volume level, with a good amount of bass and a surprisingly decent stereo image

I/O The Live's I/O is largely unchanged from version 1, but the inclusion of four stereo CV outputs is a nice addition to the mix

Q-LINK Recent software updates now mean that the Q-Link macro controls can be used with Ableton Live and external hardware

FM VERDICT

MPC ONE

9.0

The One trims the full MPC experience down to sit at a more affordable price point, making only a few, largely acceptable, compromises along the way

FM VERDICT

MPC LIVE II

9.5

A truly go-anywhere music production experience – and now better equipped than ever. The Live II remains the high point of the current MPC range