

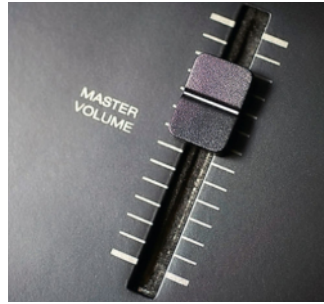
M-Audio Hammer 88 £399

Stuart Bruce chips away at this full-size weighted keyboard with an excellent selection of virtual instruments

CONTACT WHO: M-Audio WEB: www.m-audio.com

KEY FEATURES A deceptively simple 88-note master keyboard with excellent MIDI control plus four excellent virtual instruments including – two grand pianos, a Hammond organ and some great-sounding electric pianos





THE PROS & CONS



A very playable weighted keyboard, although it's at the lighter end of what some serious players would consider 'piano-like'

Excellent bundled software which gives you a mini production package



A limited amount of front-panel control. Some programmable knobs would have been welcome

Using multiple edited patches for live work could prove tricky, given that there's no onboard memory – swapping a controller patch means sending it from a computer

At first glance, the Hammer 88 is a very simple and rather elegant-looking master keyboard which feels solid and satisfyingly heavy, while still being a simple one-person lift. The keyboard itself is weighted but is certainly at the lighter end of the scale – it'll suit anyone used to a piano, and synth users won't take long to adjust either.

Additional control on the front panel is minimal: a volume slider, some up/down buttons and pitch and mod wheels. To the rear are connections for sustain, soft and expression pedals, plus a USB connector and a standard MIDI out port. There's also a connector for an external power supply, so you can either bus power it if connected via USB but also use it as a MIDI master without a computer attached.

Once connected to a computer, the full possibilities become clear, thanks to the Hammer 88's very useful control software and some excellent virtual instruments. Using the Preset Editor, it's possible to set up to four zones, each with its own channel and transpose settings. Further to this you can map the controls – the fader and expression pedal, the footswitches, the buttons and the wheels – to other functions, and save patches, building up a library of settings which are then simply transmitted to the Hammer 88 via USB – great for performances and writing setups alike.

It's comfortable to play and feels very positive under the fingers

The included software takes in plenty of piano and keyboard sounds. To start with, there are three instruments from Air. Velvet is a very comprehensive set of electric pianos based on Fender Rhodes suitcase, MK1 and MK2 models, a Wulitzer 200A and Hohner Pianet-T. These are highly playable and sound great. Next up is the Mini Grand, a very simple grand piano plugin with plenty of tonal variation, and an instrument I often choose over far more complex multisampled piano instruments. Next up, Air's DB-33 is one of the best Hammond emulations out there, and one you'll have heard on many tracks (like the Mini-Grand, DB-33 has come bundled with Pro Tools for many years.) Also included is the Eighty Eight Ensemble from SONiVOX. This is a beautifully sampled nine-foot Steinway Grand, with combination patches of layered strings, synths and choirs, resulting in some excellent textures all-round.

On top of all this, you also get Ableton Live Lite and a three-month subscription to Skoove, a very good Virtual Piano Teaching course.

All in all, this is an excellent

package. I really like the keyboard – it's comfortable to play and feels very positive under the fingers. It's a shame that it doesn't have any onboard memory to store multiple patches, especially as it's so easy to edit them with the supplied software. I suspect that for some players this would be a deal breaker.

As a Studio Master Keyboard, the Hammer 88 is great, and the bundled software puts a whole range of high-quality traditional sounds under your fingertips. A really solid product at a very attractive price. **FM**

FM VERDICT

7.8

An solid, well-constructed master keyboard with solid bundled software. If you need something simple that plays really well, check it out