Native Instruments
Maschine+ £1,099

After years of speculation, NI launch their first standalone
instrument. **Si Truss** asks if it lives up to the hype...

CONTACT **WHO:** Native Instruments **WEB:** native-instruments.com **KEY FEATURES** Standalone music production tool for sequencing, sampling, audio recording and composing with onboard synths. **I/O:** 2x TRS line outputs, 2x TRS line inputs, 1x dynamic mic input, stereo headphone output, 1 x MIDI In, 1 x MIDI out; 1 x footswitch in, 2 x USB ports for MIDI controllers/external HDDs

THE PROS & CONS

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A fully-fledged Maschine experience fully out-of-the-box

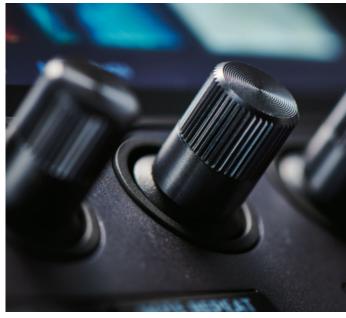**Included instruments and sounds cover a broad range of bases**

Workflow is generally slick and isn't hindered by the lack of a laptop screen

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Included synths are classics, but undeniably long-in-the-tooth

It could use some more creative effects

I/O is lacking compared to its closest rivals

Few major brands have remained as committed to the software realm as NI. In that context, Maschine+ is a big move for the brand, their first product that isn't designed primarily to work in conjunction with a PC, Mac or iPad.

Technical details aside, this isn't some radical new product stream; Maschine+ offers nearly the exact same hardware/software workflow as 2017's Maschine Mk3, albeit on an internal OS, not an external computer.

That's not to dismiss it – the Maschine range has become a slick, comprehensive sampling and sequencing system, and the Mk3 is undoubtedly the pinnacle. It's testament to the tight hardware-software synergy of that controller design that you can effectively remove the computer from the equation without hampering it.

As a concept, Maschine+ works. While there are some big limitations compared to the desktop version – which we'll come to shortly – on the whole, this is the bonafide Maschine

experience in standalone format. You can sample, sequence, compose with softsynths, perform and even work with external hardware and, crucially, I never felt hindered by the lack of a mouse, keyboard or full laptop screen using it.

Like its closest rivals, Akai's standalone MPCs One and Live, Maschine+ isn't solely a standalone instrument. Like them, this latest Maschine comes equipped with a controller mode, whereby it can act as an audio interface and MIDI controller for the desktop version of the Maschine 2 software. As such, Maschine+ isn't so much an alternative to the standard Maschine setup as an expansion; keeping the full features of the existing studio workflow but letting users unplug from the computer too.

As both the controller layout and software architecture are near identical to that of the Mk3, I'll just

highlight what's different here. If you're not familiar with Maschine, we reviewed Mk3 back in FM343 and on video at bit.ly/mk3review, the bulk of which is still relevant for Maschine+.

Unsurprisingly there are some technical differences from the Mk3 to the hardware itself. Maschine+, in its anodized aluminium case, feels considerably more robust than its plastic counterpart. I/O along the rear is broadly the same as that found on the Mk3. There are additions though, with an added pair of USB inputs on the rear and an SD card slot along the side – which comes equipped with a high-speed 64GB card. The built-in audio interface, meanwhile, operates at 44.1 kHz/24-bit in standalone but can go up to 96 kHz/24-bit when connected to a computer.

Maschine+ packs an Intel Atom quad-core processor and 4GB of RAM, which is used to run a custom Linux OS. Built-in storage is 32GB,

Akai MPC Live II £1,035

Boasts a rechargeable battery, onboard speaker and better I/O than Maschine+, but NI's synths and software have more pedigree.

akaipro.com

Native Instruments Maschine Mk3 £499

Essentially offers the same workflow as the standard Maschine Mk3. Given that the latter is less than half the price, consider if you need standalone capabilities.

native-instruments.com

Pioneer DJ Toraiz SP-16 £850

Pioneer's standalone sampler fits neatly into a modern DJ setup, making it a good choice for electronic live performers.

pioneerdj.com

used to install the OS and factory sounds, meaning the SD card slot handles all user storage. Maschine+ is also equipped with Wi-Fi. Bluetooth is also teased via a small logo on the box, but plays no role as yet.

As with Akai's standalone MPCs, there are limitations to what Maschine+ can run via its onboard OS compared to the desktop version. The Maschine 2 software itself ports over in full, including its Bass Synth, six Drum Synth modules and line-up of effect processors, but currently only a handful of NI plugins and no third-party tools can be used away from a computer. The NI instruments currently compatible with standalone mode are Massive, Monark, FM8, Prism, Retro Machines and 'Factory Selection' versions of Kontakt and Reaktor, all supplied with the hardware. On the effect front Maschine+ brings the Phasis phaser module and Raum 'creative reverb'. There's no getting around the fact this is a fairly dated selection of instruments. Of the synths, the Minimoog-inspired Monark is the

most recent release, despite being nearly eight years old, and there's no sign of recent offerings like Massive X or Form. On the flipside, these instruments – Massive and FM8, in particular – are stone cold classics. Producers in any electronic genre could happily churn out plenty of music before running out of inspiration. And that's before even touching on the bundled expansions [see below] or the ability to import, record or sample audio.

Implementation of these synths and effects works as it does when using the Mk3 controller hardware, whereby the eight parameter knobs below the screens can be used to tweak a varying assortment of macros and core parameters. For the most part you don't quite get full access to the sound engine, but there's enough depth to tweak and tailor sounds to suit your needs.

These controls are better implemented for some devices than others. Given the open-ended and shapeshifting nature of Reaktor, it can be a little confusing working out

precisely what you're editing at times, meaning editing sounds often descends into blind twiddling.

Users can import synth and effect presets from the desktop plugin counterparts though, meaning there's a nice workflow in designing complex custom patches using a computer then sending them over to Maschine+ to jam out patterns in standalone mode. It's possible to import your own Kontakt patches too, which adds considerably to the flexibility.

Since we reviewed the Maschine Mk 3, there have been a few developments to the overall capabilities, all of which benefit Maschine+. Recent years have seen NI finally incorporate audio into the Maschine workflow, and as well as simple sampling and looping, it's now possible to record full takes of stereo audio that can then be edited using the fairly comprehensive set of tools in the sample editing window.

The Maschine software's arrangement tools have evolved somewhat too, now encompassing a system that uses individual Ideas and

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LIBRARY AND EXPANSIONS

Maschine+ comes pre-installed with an 8GB factory sound library, as well as offering access to five pre-selected Maschine expansion packs, along with a voucher to pick up two more of your choice. You'll need to hook the unit up to a Wi-Fi connection to initially register it, but when you do all of these sounds can be downloaded using a slick on-device library. The selected expansions cover a decent range, touching on hip-hop, R&B, melodic club sounds and moody techno. On the whole, the quality of NI's expansion packs is high and, while they're a little pricey, they're well curated and tend to include plenty of usable and inspiring sounds. Once purchased, these are available to download through NI's Native Access application, and can be used with or without Maschine, so you can load them into the DAW or sampler of your choice too. In all it's a solid crop of sounds to get you going, and new users are unlikely to feel short on material to be played around with.

Song windows and a system of Clips. These allow users to initially play with loops and scenes before laying them out in a more traditional timeline manner. It can feel convoluted, but there's certainly considerably more flexibility now. For example, Clips offer users an easy way to do things such as overdub brief audio recordings into the middle of an arrangement or create transitions between loops, which could be tough in previous iterations.

The arrangement and 'track finishing' tools are still Maschine's weakest elements, but that doesn't necessarily hinder Maschine+ – particularly in standalone mode, there's a solid case to be made for this being used as an ideas and sample sketchpad, before switching to a more traditional DAW for final arrangement and mixing. And it would be a great live performance tool to slice up and jam with pre-existing tracks, loops and patterns.

Maschine+ is impressive as is, but there are things I'd like to see expanded. I really like how you can download Expansions via Wi-Fi, but I'd like to see NI make more of these capabilities in order to send projects, presets and recordings back and forth between Maschine+ and a desktop system without plugging in via USB.

The addition of more instruments and effects would vastly add to the appeal too. NI have implied this is on the roadmap, and if so I hope they prioritise adding a few effects. While the existing setup is hardly wanting for processors, I miss deeper creative tools like Replika XT and NI's modelled EQs and compressors.

Compared to Akai's MPCs, there are pros and cons for each range. Price-wise, Maschine+ is roughly in line with Akai's recently updated MPC Live II, which outguns it on several key hardware fronts. The MPC Live features a rechargeable battery and built-in speaker: nice but dispensable. What I do miss, comparing the two, is the Live's considerably more expansive I/O, boasting triple the amount of line inputs, double the MIDI I/O and several CV outputs. The Maschine+ workflow actually works really nicely in conjunction with hardware synths and drum machines, so it's a shame not to have a few extra inputs. You can, however, expand the I/O by connecting one of NI's Komplete interfaces to the rear USB ports.

LAYOUT: Slight changes to button labels aside, the top panel controls are identical to the Maschine Mk3's

USB INPUTS: The additional slots can be used for storage, MIDI, or hooking up with other USB MIDI gear

SCREENS: Unlike Akai's MPCs, these aren't touchscreens, but they're bright and clear with lots of visualisation

HARDWARE: Despite similar looks to Mk3, Maschine+'s chassis comes in a more robust aluminium case

Conversely, Maschine+ has twice the RAM of the MPC Live and – as much as Akai's stock synths are decent – it can't compete with the pedigree of Massive, FM8, Kontakt and the wealth of third-party presets available for each of these. The Maschine software workflow is generally a little tighter and slicker than that of the MPCs too.

On that front, whereas the MPCs impose hard track count limits in standalone mode, Maschine+ is more open-ended, instead including a CPU meter so users can monitor project load. I created a project using five instances of FM8, three of Massive, two of Monark, one each of Reaktor and Kontakt, eight instances of Raum and four of Phasis; it was only when I

tried to add Prism as a Group processor that Maschine+ finally seized up.

In all then, Maschine+ lives up to the promise of bringing at least the core Maschine experience out of the box. At twice the price of a Mk3, do we all really need a standalone Maschine? That will come down to the individual user. I've enjoyed my time with Maschine+, and using it purely as a hardware instrument has proved inspiring. That said, as Maschine+ so closely follows the workflow of the existing Mk3, it's unlikely to tempt over users who've not been convinced by Maschine in the past. Maschine+ seems a smart move for NI. If the Berlin brand continue to develop the OS and add

more tools – and maybe even coax over some third-party NKS offerings? – then this has scope to get better and better. **FM**

FM VERDICT

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There are some limitations, but Maschine+ delivers the core Maschine workflow in standalone form: inspiring and fun in the process