



> reviews / controller keyboards roundup

# Best MIDI keyboards

Owning a great MIDI controller keyboard will take your music production to another level. There are many different priced and sized models out there, but don't worry, we have the ultimate guide on the subject, right here...

MIDI controller keyboards not only allow you to play and record tunes into your computer, they also let you control software – and in some cases, other studio hardware – so have become one of the most essential items for the modern music producer. They can be plugged directly into your computer or laptop via USB – or, in some cases, operate wirelessly over Bluetooth or connect to iOS devices to control apps. They are mostly used to let you play and record with your DAW's software instruments and any VST synth plugins you might have installed.

There are plenty of models to choose from. You can opt for a compact, portable MIDI keyboard that fits comfortably in a laptop bag, or you can go all in with a full-size, 88-note model with weighted hammer-action keys. Most

options we recommend over the following pages also come with additional features such as knobs, pads, buttons and faders to boost creativity and give you even more control over your software.

You can get a perfectly decent cheap MIDI keyboard for way less than £100 if you shop around, but up your spend even slightly and you'll get your hands on a higher quality model with more features and higher specs. It might well be a little more rugged, too; something to consider if you want to take it on the road. And if you are a trained keyboard player, you might want to consider an 88-note model with weighted keys for the ultimate playing experience – we have also included some of these in our guide.

Most keyboards come with attractive bundles of software – synths, effects, sometimes even complete DAWs – and we've highlighted the best of these bundles in our reviews roundup.

Many MIDI keyboards also come with mapping templates for the most popular DAWs – Ableton Live, Logic Pro, FL Studio, etc – making it easy to get up and running directly with these DAWs, and start producing music right out of the box.

Over the next few pages we have reviews of 19 of the best MIDI keyboards available. To help you find the right one, we've selected our favourites in the Top Picks box. We've also included buying advice and more, so read on to find out which is the best MIDI controller keyboard for you!





## Buyer's advice

### What key size do I need?

For simple inputting of drum beats, bass and melody lines and basic chords, smaller MIDI controllers with mini keys should do the job just fine. These have the advantage of being cheaper and more portable than their larger brethren and take up

a smaller footprint on your work surface. These days, some people find that mini keys can be just as responsive and easy to play as full-size versions. If, however, you're coming from a piano or keyboard background, you will probably require the more traditional playing experience provided by

full-sized, weighted keys. Thankfully, there are options out there for everyone.

### How many keys do I need?

The best MIDI keyboards featured here come with octave shift buttons, meaning that the full range of note pitches is accessible even from a 25-key device, just by pressing a couple of buttons. That said, if you're a more advanced player, or want to learn how to play two-handed, it's better to go for a four-octave (49-note) or five-octave (61-note) keyboard. If space isn't an issue, you can even opt for an 88-key, piano-sized controller if desired. For basic melodies and chords, a smaller keyboard will work just fine though.

### Connectivity: what you need to know

With a lot of producers now working in-the-box on a single computer or laptop, you don't necessarily need a MIDI output unless you have hardware MIDI synths to connect it to, but some controllers do come with traditional 5-pin MIDI out ports. Smaller, mini jack TRS MIDI outputs are also becoming more popular and offer the same functionality. Most controllers in this guide can be powered via the USB port, and if you want to play proper piano parts, a sustain pedal input is a must.

### Understanding DAW Integration

Being able to control the transport of your DAW and adjust the parameters of your software instruments from your keyboard rather than your computer is always handy. Once you've added remote transport - ie via a physical keyboard or controller - you'll struggle to go back to your mouse for actions like playing, pausing and record arming. If you stick to one DAW and find a controller which boasts deep integration - and many do nowadays - then you're in for a treat.

## Best MIDI keyboards: our top picks

MIDI controller keyboards tend to fall into size categories: either compact, portable devices with 25 keys or larger, desk-based options with 49 or more keys and then 88-note keyboards aimed at 'proper' players.

In the compact corner, because of the sheer number of features crammed into such a light, small footprint, our first recommendation is the Novation LaunchKey Mini Mk3. It has instant support for Ableton Live, and handy creative tools like an arpeggiator and chord memory function. Next up, we also recommend the Akai MPK Mini Mk3. Put simply, it has everything you'll need, from decent quality keys, endless rotary knobs, and eight sought-after MPC-style pads for creating beats. The Arturia KeyStep Pro is also an excellent compact controller which can connect simultaneously to DAWs, hardware synths and even modular gear. Finally the Nektar SE25 has an almost crazy number of features given its size and price.

If you're looking for a larger controller, we heartily recommend Native Instruments' Komplete Kontrol S-Series boards, and in particular the Native Instruments Kontrol S61 Mk 2. They feature excellent keybeds, fantastic styling, wonderful twin colour screens and impressive functionality. Both the M-Audio Oxygen 49 MKV and Novation 49 SL MkIII also offer an excellent range of features for the money in the mid-sized area of the keyboard market.

At the top end in terms of keyboard size and playing experience, you really should check out the Nektar Impact LX88+ which offers an awful lot of playing and features for the money. Finally the Roland A-88MKII might be one of the most expensive keyboards but does offer the best 'proper' playing experience and with MIDI 2.0 installed, is future proof to boot.





# Nektar SE25 £40

**COMPATIBILITY:** Mac, PC | **NO OF KEYS:** 25 | **KEY SIZE:** Mini | **KEY TYPE:** Velocity-sensitive | **CONTROLS:** 6 function keys; assignable PB1 & PB2 buttons for pitch bend, transpose, volume, pan & track; assignable 'Part Two' button for octave, MIDI channel, transpose, layer & latch; S button for sustain & modulation | **CONNECTIVITY:** Micro USB port, sustain pedal | **INPUT POWER:** USB | **SOFTWARE:** Bitwig 8-Track | **DIMENSIONS (MM):** 335 x 100 x 21 | **WEIGHT:** 0.4Kg

If you're always making music on the move, a pint-sized MIDI controller keyboard that'll fit in a laptop bag is an essential item. Nektar's SE25 shows that features and playability needn't be sacrificed for size and portability.

Only outpriced in the budget controller stakes by the ever-so-slightly

cheaper Akai LPK25 (which doesn't provide any form of DAW integration), Nektar's new pocket powerhouse represents incredible value for money.

We found the SE25 to be thoroughly impressive during our testing process, and while it's a simple, compact product, it does exactly what you need

a small MIDI keyboard to do - no more, no less.

Where else can you get Nektar DAW integration for Bitwig, Cubase, Garageband, Logic, Nuendo, Digital Performer, Mixcraft, Reason, Reaper, Sonar and Studio One for a measly £40?

**www.nektartech.com**



## Verdict

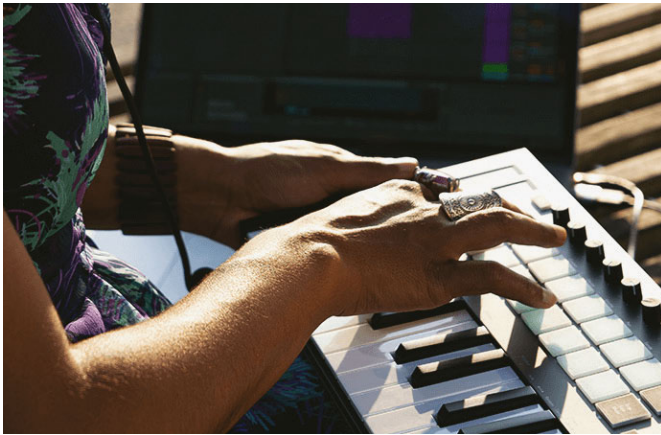
**For** Incredible value  
Nektar DAW integration  
Fits in a laptop bag

**Against** It's very simple

Professional, practical and portable playability for a paltry price. The Nektar SE25 is pretty good then!

9/10





## Novation Launchkey Mini Mk3 £69

**COMPATIBILITY:** Mac, PC, iOS | **NO OF KEYS:** 25 | **KEY SIZE:** Mini | **KEY TYPE:** Velocity-sensitive | **CONTROLS:** Octave shift, Transpose, Pitch and Modulation strips, 16 velocity-sensitive backlit RGB launch pads, 8 rotary encoders, 10 function buttons | **CONNECTIVITY:** USB B port, 3.5mm TRS Type A MIDI out, Sustain Pedal input | **INPUT POWER:** USB | **SOFTWARE:** Ableton Live Lite, two months of Splice Sounds, AAS Session Bundle, Softube Time & Tone, Spitfire Audio LABS Expressive Strings, Klevgrand DAW Cassette and ROverb, XLN Audio Addictive Keys, membership of Novation Sound Collective | **DIMENSIONS (mm):** 330 x 172 x 40 | **WEIGHT:** 0.69Kg

Developed primarily for Ableton users and recently updated, this pocket powerhouse is just brimming with features, many of which were missing from the previous version, including – finally – pitch bend and modulation touchstrips, a hardware MIDI out on a TRS jack, an incredibly flexible and versatile arpeggiator, a chord memory feature, and a great, deal-sweetening software bundle to go with it.

Of course, the Launchkey Mini Mk3 isn't exclusive to Ableton, as it plays perfectly nicely with other DAWs too, but if you're a Live user, it undoubtedly represents the best solution you'll get at this price point.

As a general use MIDI keyboard, we found the Launchkey Mini MK3 to be more than adequate for our dual-octave, travel-friendly

needs. If you want a small, velocity-sensitive MIDI keyboard with impressive connectivity, we don't think you can go far wrong with the Launchkey Mini Mk3.

<https://novationmusic.com>



### Verdict

**For** Fantastic arpeggiator  
Brilliant integration with Live  
Sustain pedal input

**Against** No MIDI adapter included

This Ableton Live-friendly supermini controller gets a sizeable update with the latest Mk3 version and packs a lot of punch for the cash

9/10



## Novation FLkey 37 and FLkey Mini £99/£199

**COMPATIBILITY:** Mac/PC | **NO OF KEYS:** 37 (25 for mini) | **KEY SIZE:** Full (mini) | **KEY TYPE:** velocity | **CONTROLS:** Pitch and mod wheels, 16 RGB backlit pads, 8 knobs, an LCD display, and 24 buttons (Mini has just 10 controls, no display) | **CONNECTIVITY:** USB, MIDI out (1/8" for Mini), 1/4" sustain input | **POWER:** USB | **SOFTWARE:** Six-month trial of FL Studio Producer Edition, XLN Audio Addictive Keys, Klevgrand Reverb and DAW Cassette, AAS Session Bundle, Spitfire Expressive Strings | **DIMENSIONS (cm):** 127 x 25.8 x 8.7 | **WEIGHT:** 8.3kg

Novation's FLkey 37 and Mini keyboard controllers are both dedicated controllers for the popular DAW, FLStudio. They're directly comparable to Novation's Launchkeys, which cater mostly for Ableton Live users.

The FLkey 37's keys are of the full-size synth-type variety, and they're part of what makes this such an enjoyable controller, contributing to the out-of-the-computer vibe. The pads are velocity sensitive, and change colour depending on the job at hand for added visual feedback. The knobs are large enough to get a decent hold on, and all of the buttons are backlit so they're identifiable in darker rooms.

The Mini comes with its share of compromises, but the functionality's still there; still good for instruments, finger drumming (and velocity sensitive), as well as button functions.

These are very nice keyboard controllers and a no-brainer choice for FL Studio. As with the best controllers, it feels like the software has broken out into the hardware world. If we were going to choose one model, it'd be the FLkey 37 – that display and the extra buttons, and the expanded playing functions, make it worth the extra money and space, recommended for any FL Studio user seeking keyboard integration and hardware control.

<https://novationmusic.com>

### Verdict

**For** Access to the most important FL Studio functions.  
Clear control layout  
Pads great to use

**Against** FL Studio focussed

Superb controllers for FL Studio and essential for live and studio use alike

9/10





## IK Multimedia iRig Keys 2 Mini £99

**COMPATIBILITY:** Mac/PC | **NO OF KEYS:** 25 | **KEY SIZE:** Mini | **KEY TYPE:** Velocity-sensitive | **CONTROLS:** Volume, Octave up/down buttons, Program up/down buttons, Setup button, assignable data push encoder, 4+4 assignable knobs, Modulation | **CONNECTIVITY:** MIDI in/out, micro-USB, 1/8" headphones output | **POWER:** USB | **SOFTWARE:** iOS SampleTank, Syntronik Pro-V Cubasis LE. Mac/PC: SampleTank 4 SE plus one of your choice from seven titles | **DIMENSIONS (cm):** 32 x 14 x 5 | **WEIGHT:** 0.58kg

Keys 2 Mini 25 is the smallest and cheapest model in the iRig Keys range, with 25 mini keys. The range also has 37 mini key and Pro (37 full-sized key) options. Mini 25 is small enough to place on any desktop, sturdy enough to stay in place there, and features direct connectivity to iOS devices.

As well as the controls that we've listed above, you can delve deeper with an Edit Mode to assign MIDI options and more, using the keys to select parameters. Program buttons, assignable rotaries, a Set button and useful assignable push-button data knob make it a complete set of controls for a keyboard model of this size.

The keyboard is not exactly what you'd call a player's dream but it's solid and well sprung. There are no dedicated pitch-bend and modulation dials, but if this is important, there are workarounds when you dig deeper, again with Edit Mode.

We criticised the bigger iRig Keys 2 for being a tad expensive, but this offers much of the functionality of that over a smaller footprint, and represents a well-spec'd keyboard controller for less cash, and there's a decent software bundle too.

[www.ikmultimedia.com](http://www.ikmultimedia.com)



### Verdict

**For** Lots of features for the cash  
Decent build quality and playability  
Good software bundle

**Against** No pitch and mod wheels

iRig Keys 2 Mini is a small-form, very well-priced keyboard with plenty of features and controls

8/10



## Arturia Keystep 37 £89

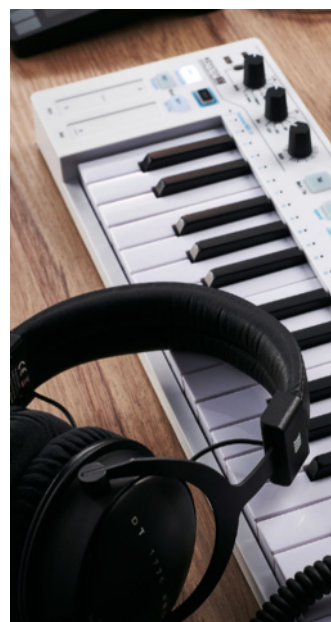
**COMPATIBILITY:** Mac/PC | **NO OF KEYS:** 37 | **KEY SIZE:** Mini | **KEY TYPE:** Velocity-sensitive | **CONTROLS:** Four assignable encoders, transport controls, touch strips for pitch and modulation | **CONNECTIVITY:** USB, clock sync, CV gate/pitch/modulation | **POWER:** 12v DC or bus | **SOFTWARE:** Ableton Live Lite | **DIMENSIONS (cm):** 55 x 35 x 15 | **WEIGHT:** 1.6kg

Sitting nicely between the Keystep and Keystep Pro, the Arturia Keystep 37 has enough features of its own to be classed as an upgrade over the original – and much-loved – model.

The expanded 37-key section allows more complex patterns and melodies to be played, while adding four assignable encoder knobs – with visual feedback – offers real-time feedback on your DAW parameters.

The sequencer is a joy to use, with the ability to program up to 64 steps directly onto the keyboard itself. This, along with the arpeggiator, can be used within your DAW or to control external hardware or modular synths making it a versatile studio workhorse which is suitable for several different workflows.

[www.arturia.com](http://www.arturia.com)



### Verdict

**For** Sequencer and arpeggiator offer a lot of creative potential  
Strum functionality is very fun!

**Against** DAW mapping can be temperamental at times

Arturia Keystep 37 is a creative and versatile MIDI keyboard with neat tricks of its own

9/10



## Native Instruments Complete Kontrol M32 £88

**COMPATIBILITY:** Mac/PC | **NO OF KEYS:** 32 | **KEY SIZE:** Mini | **KEY TYPE:** Velocity-sensitive | **CONTROLS:** Eight touch-sensitive control knobs, two touch strips, four-directional push encoder | **CONNECTIVITY:** USB | **INPUT POWER:** USB | **SOFTWARE:** Ableton Live Lite, Monarch, 6100 sounds and 10GB of content | **DIMENSIONS (cm):** 47.5 x 16.7 x 0.5 | **WEIGHT:** 1.45kg

Delivering almost the exact same functionality as the Complete Kontrol A-Series (see opposite), this eminently mobile USB 2.0 bus-powered keyboard manages to squeeze 32 mini keys and the full complement of Complete Kontrol controls into its compact frame.

The pitch and mod wheels have been replaced with a pair of short touchstrips, but the eight capacitive knobs, 4D encoder and numerous buttons are uncompromised in size and feel, giving the full experience for browsing and manipulating plugins, operating Maschine, and getting hands-on with DAW transport and mixers.

The surprisingly informative OLED display from the A-Series is also in place, as is the Smart Play feature, enabling scale snapping, chord triggering and arpeggiation. And, of course, it also works as a



regular configurable MIDI controller keyboard with any other software.

For us, the mini keys were the only real downside. They're tolerable after some getting used to them, so if you can live with them too, this is the one of the best portable and affordable MIDI keyboard you can buy. [www.native-instruments.com](http://www.native-instruments.com)

### Verdict

**For** Very portable  
More keys than you get on your average mini MIDI keyboard  
Tight software/hardware integration

**Against** Mini keys

Complete Kontrol M32 is one of the best value MIDI keyboards you can buy for compact music creation

9/10



## Native Instruments Complete Kontrol A25 £129

**COMPATIBILITY:** Mac/PC | **NO OF KEYS:** 25 | **KEY SIZE:** Full-size | **KEY TYPE:** semi-weighted | **CONTROLS:** Pitch and Modulation wheels, transport buttons, 4-directional push encoder, eight touch-sensitive knobs | **CONNECTIVITY:** USB | **POWER:** USB | **SOFTWARE:** Ableton Live Lite, Complete Start, 6,700 sounds and 13GB of content | **DIMENSIONS (cm):** 48.8 x 25.7 x 8.9 | **WEIGHT:** 2.4kg

Available in 25-, 49- and 61-key versions (we have the A25 for review), the A-Series borrows many of the S-Series' best features (see later), including the 4D Encoder (a joystick/rotary control/button combo) for software navigation; eight touch-sensitive knobs for plugin parameter control; beefy pitch and mod wheels; and most of the same backlit buttons, albeit laid out in a slightly different way.

There are, however, two major cuts: the dual colour LED screens (or alphanumeric LEDs on the S25, which still languishes at Mk1), and the unique per-key Light Guide LEDs. Even with those things taken away, though, and the reduced level of Maschine integration, we're still very much blown away by the value proposition presented by the A25 and the A-Series keyboards in general. We felt that the Complete



Kontrol A25 was potentially needlessly larger than other 25-key units – albeit incredibly well-built and wonderfully playable. Native Instruments deliver up the Complete Kontrol experience at a truly irresistible price.

[www.native-instruments.com](http://www.native-instruments.com)

### Verdict

**For** Top-notch build quality and keyed  
Works great with Complete Kontrol  
Decent software bundle

**Against** Comparatively bulky

The A25 delivers the great Complete Kontrol experience at a fantastic price – highly recommended

10/10





## Akai MPK Mini Mk3 £79

**COMPATIBILITY:** Mac/PC/iOS | **NO OF KEYS:** 25 | **KEY SIZE:** Mini | **KEY TYPE:** Velocity-sensitive | **CONTROLS:** Eight assignable encoders, eight MPC pads, full transport controls, 4-way joystick | **CONNECTIVITY:** USB | **POWER:** Bus-powered | **SOFTWARE:** MPC Beats, Bassline, Tubesynth, Electric, Hybrid 3, Mini Grand, Velvet | **DIMENSIONS (cm):** 32 x 18 x 4 | **WEIGHT:** 750g

The Akai MPK Mini Mk3 is, in many ways, the best MIDI keyboard for most people, particularly those who are looking for a quick and easy way to add melodies, basslines and simple chords to their projects.

For us, what elevates the MPK Mini Mk3 from a simple keyboard, is the addition of eight encoder knobs which can be easily mapped to practically any parameter of your DAW, and eight full-sized MPC style drum pads. What you get, therefore, is a full-service production powerhouse which excels in many different playing and performing situations. It's small enough to be thrown in a backpack, yet contains enough useful features and functions to make it a highly useful addition to any studio. [www.akaipro.com](http://www.akaipro.com)



### Verdict

**For** Loads of control  
Great bundled software

**Against** Mini keys are certainly mini

One of the best value MIDI keyboards, the Akai MPK Mini Mk3 is certainly packed with more features than its size indicates. A great buy

10/10



## Korg microKEY2 Air-25 £89

**COMPATIBILITY:** Mac/PC/iOS | **NO OF KEYS:** 25 | **KEY SIZE:** Mini | **KEY TYPE:** Velocity-sensitive | **CONTROLS:** Joystick, Arpeggiator button, Sustain/TAP button, Octave Shift buttons | **CONNECTIVITY:** USB, Bluetooth | **POWER:** USB or batteries | **SOFTWARE:** Special editions of Gadget and Module plus the Korg Collection M1 | **DIMENSIONS (cm):** 39.5 x 13.1 x 0.52 | **WEIGHT:** 0.67kg

The microKey 2 Air range includes 25-, 37-, 49- and 61-note models, all of which have the advantage of working wirelessly over Bluetooth. If you want to use this feature you'll have to install a couple of AA batteries, but these last for a good length of time and good old USB bus-powering is also an option.

The microKey 2 Air 25 isn't the most controller-packed keyboard, but it gives you the basics and plays far better than many of its rivals. In testing, we also found that it's easy to set up and operate, so if you want to free yourself from the tyranny of cables, you've found the MIDI controller keyboard you need. Being so compact and wireless, it's probably the most flexible keyboard for taking out and about too. [www.korg.com](http://www.korg.com)



### Verdict

**For** Works wirelessly  
Decent natural touch keyboard  
Very compact

**Against** Mini keys aren't for everyone

This one of the most flexible and portable controller keyboards around - and one that works wirelessly too

8/10



# M-Audio Oxygen 49 MKV £129

**COMPATIBILITY:** Mac/PC | **NO OF KEYS:** 49 | **KEY SIZE:** Full-size | **KEY TYPE:** Velocity-sensitive | **CONTROLS:** 8 velocity-sensitive trigger pads, 8 assignable knobs, 9 assignable faders, transport buttons | **CONNECTIVITY:** USB, sustain pedal | **POWER:** USB | **SOFTWARE:** Ableton Live Lite, MPC Beats, Skoove and Melodics instrument learning, Air Hybrid 3 and Mini Grand instruments | **DIMENSIONS (cm):** 81 x 24 x 9 | **WEIGHT:** 2.9kg

Oxygen 49 is the cheaper version of M-Audio's Pro 49, and while it lacks some of that keyboard's features, it's still a worthy MIDI keyboard controller. The OLED display of the Pro is replaced by a 3-segment LED display, while the 16 multi-coloured pads are stripped back to eight backlit red ones, but are split into two banks of eight, so you still have access to 16 sound sources from the front panel when programming, just not simultaneously.

Also absent is the dedicated MIDI out port, but perhaps the biggest difference is that the Oxygen 49's

functions are mostly triggered via soft keys and via 'secondary modes' from the keybed itself.

That all said, much of the tech introduced with the Pro is here, so you get Smart Chord and Smart Scale modes which aid songwriting and composition, an excellent arpeggiator, plus Beat Repeat so that stutters and repeats can be triggered from the pads. The Oxygen Pro 49 breathed new life into the Oxygen range and this sibling is also feature-packed and creative, with many of the features for less cash.

[www.m-audio.com](http://www.m-audio.com)



## Verdict

**For** Chord and Scale modes great for composition and production  
Fully-featured arp  
Deep DAW integration

**Against** Less ergonomic and half the pads of the Pro

The Oxygen 49 MKV is a feature-packed and creative keyboard, with many of the features of its more expensive Pro sibling

9/10







# Roland A-88MKII

## £899

**COMPATIBILITY:** Mac/PC | **NO OF KEYS:** 88 | **KEY SIZE:** Full-sized | **KEY TYPE:** Velocity sensitive with Escapement and Ivory Feel | **CONTROLS:** 8 pads, 8 knobs, Pitch Bend/Modulation lever, 2 assignable buttons, 3 pedals | **CONNECTIVITY:** 3 x TRS pedal jacks, MIDI in/out, USB Type-C, DC input | **POWER:** USB or external PSU (not supplied) | **SOFTWARE:** Control software and Standard MIDI File player | **DIMENSIONS (cm):** 143 x 27 x 12 | **WEIGHT:** 16.3kg

The A-88MKII is a long-awaited update to Roland's much loved A-88 full-size piano action MIDI keyboard. The footprint is compact – good news if you're using it in the studio, and at 16kg it's not too heavy for live use.

The control section has been overhauled with new backlit pads and knobs. Further features include two assignable Control Change buttons, Transpose and Octave selectors, as well as Velocity Curve options and an onboard arpeggiator. Pitch-bend and modulation are handled by a combo lever, and the keyboard can operate in up to three layers or three split zones. A-88MKII is also MIDI 2.0-ready so handy for the extras that this advanced communication protocol brings.

A-88MKII has a great design, with Ivory Feel keys, 3-sensor key detection and key-specific progressive hammer action, which all deliver the feel of a real piano.



Overall it's very capable and a competitively priced update, but its winning feature is that the piano action is class-leading at this price. Given that this isn't the sort of unit one changes that regularly, it's also great to see that it's future-proofed with MIDI 2.0 support.

[www.roland.com](http://www.roland.com)

### Verdict

**For** Excellently playable keyboard  
Compact footprint and not too heavy  
MIDI 2.0 support

**Against** Controller section layout

The Roland A-88MKII is a great controller keyboard that is feature-packed and potentially future proof

9/10





# Novation Launchkey 88MK3 £399

**COMPATIBILITY:** Mac/PC | **NO OF KEYS:** 88 | **KEY SIZE:** Full-sized | **KEY TYPE:** semi-weighted | **CONTROLS:** 16 velocity sensitive pads, 9 faders, 8 pots, 9 fader buttons, transport controls | **CONNECTIVITY:** 3-USB port, MIDI Out, sustain pedal input | **POWER:** USB or PSU (n/s) | **SOFTWARE:** Ableton Live Lite, XLN Audio Addictive and offerings from AAS, Spitfire and Klevgrand | **DIMENSIONS (cm):** 127.0 x 25.8 x 8.7 | **WEIGHT:** 8.3kg

Novation pitches Launchkey as a DAW-ready device that provides keyboard, keypad and DAW control. It comes with a pretty decent set of onboard standalone features and, in addition to a USB port for connection and power, there's a regular MIDI out and sustain pedal input.

You can use it in conjunction with most DAWs but its custom scripting means that it integrates best with Ableton Live. It also gets extended support in Cubase 12 via a pre-installed script, and there are user-installable scripts for Logic Pro and Reason.

You get a great selection of velocity-sensitive pads, eight pots, nine sliders with accompanying buttons, a small LCD display and transport controls. The keyboard action is fast and positive.



There are plenty of onboard features – the most powerful being its arpeggiator and scaling options – making it an ideal standalone controller.

Overall, Launchkey 88 Mk3 is a solid keyboard. It offers an excellent set of features for the price and is particularly attractive for those using the script-supported DAWs.

<https://novationmusic.com>



## Verdict

**For** Semi-weighted keybed with good action

Velocity sensitive backlit pads with aftertouch

Extensive features like arpeggiator and selectable scale

**Against** Works best with supported DAWs

Novation Launchkey 88MK3 is a solid performer and great standalone controller but best used with the compatible DAWs

9/10







# Nektar Impact LX88+ £249

**COMPATIBILITY:** Mac/PC/iOS | **NO OF KEYS:** 88 | **KEY SIZE:** Full-size | **KEY TYPE:** Velocity-sensitive, semi-weighted | **CONTROLS:** 8 potentiometers, 9 faders, 9 assignable buttons, 6 transport buttons, 8 velocity-sensitive pads | **CONNECTIVITY:** USB, MIDI Out port, 1/4-inch TS jack footswitch input | **POWER:** USB or mains | **SOFTWARE:** Bitwig Essentials Package and Bitwig 8-Track | **DIMENSIONS (cm):** 127.6 x 27.9 x 8.9 | **WEIGHT:** 8.2kg

Today's buyers of keyboard controllers are spoilt for choice, but if you're looking for a full piano-size 88-note MIDI controller, said choices are more limited. One great option is Nektar's Impact LX88+, which combines an 88-key semi-weighted USB-powered keyboard with extensive DAW control via nine sliders, nine buttons, eight knobs, eight pads and transport controls.

Despite the number of features, the LX88+ is reasonably compact and light enough to be portable. What's more, the keys feel good and the mechanical noise is quite low. The LX88+ won't suit everyone, and some 88-key users will be

after a full weighted hammer-action, but at this price it's a bargain and well worth a try.

[www.nektartech.com](http://www.nektartech.com)



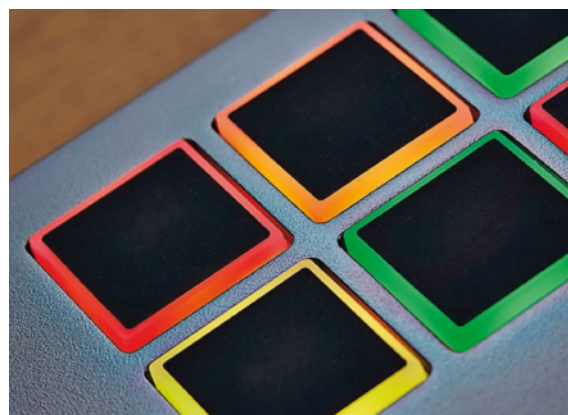
## Verdict

**For** A full-size keyboard  
Solid but portable  
Great value

**Against** Keys aren't hammer-action

The Nektar Impact LX88+ is a great keyboard considering what you get: a piano-sized controller at a great price

9/10





# Arturia

## KeyLab 49 MkII £449

**COMPATIBILITY:** Mac/PC/iOS | **NO OF KEYS:** 49 | **KEY SIZE:** Full-size | **KEY TYPE:** Velocity-sensitive with aftertouch | **CONTROLS:** J16 RGB-backlit performance pads, control bank with 9 faders and 9 rotary knobs | **CONNECTIVITY:** Expression, sustain, CV/Gate, MIDI, USB and 3 assignable auxiliary pedal inputs | **POWER:** USB mains with optional adapter | **SOFTWARE:** Analog Lab V software with 2000 synth sounds, Ableton Live Lite, Piano V | **SIZE (cm):** 79.3 x 29.7 x 5.3 | **WEIGHT:** 6.3kg

KeyLab is Arturia's flagship controller keyboard, and the MkII comes in 49- and 61-key versions in black and white. The MkII's keyboard and pads are bolstered by DAW controls and deep integration with Arturia's bundled Analog Lab 3 software. Although similar in layout to the KeyLab Essential, the MkII is a very different unit, with a higher pricetag and more upmarket feel.

We found the aluminium case to feel reassuringly robust, and the Pro-Feel keybed felt fantastic, delivering excellent sensitivity across the full range of velocities. The metal pitch and mod wheels are light and responsive. KeyLab MkII is operationally intuitive, with three distinct modes: DAW, Analog Lab and User (there are ten user configurable presets) – selected via dedicated mode buttons in the centre.

The KeyLab MkII not only delivers fine playability, but also tackles DAW control and synth editing with aplomb. Throw in CV connection capabilities and standalone operation and the price seems justified.

[www.arturia.com](http://www.arturia.com)

### Verdict

**For** Three well-executed modes  
Tight integration with Analog Lab

**Against** Fairly pricey

Great playability, flexible DAW control and synth plus CV connection capabilities all make this a fine keyboard

9/10







# IK Multimedia iRig Keys I/O 49 £249

**COMPATIBILITY:** Mac/PC/iOS | **NO OF KEYS:** 49 | **KEY SIZE:** Full-size | **KEY TYPE:** Velocity-sensitive, synth-action | **CONTROLS:** 2 slider strips for pitch and modulation, octave, program change and transport controls, 5 programmable touch-sensitive knobs, 8 velocity-sensitive pads | **CONNECTIVITY:** USB, Neutrik combo line/instrument/mic input jack with 48V phantom power, balanced stereo and headphone outputs | **POWER:** USB or batteries | **SOFTWARE:** Several iOS apps plus SampleTank 4 SE and three software titles of your choice | **SIZE (cm):** 69.3 x 20.8 x 6.5 | **WEIGHT:** 2.18Kg

The iRig Keys I/O combines a MIDI controller keyboard and audio interface into a single unit, and is designed to be as compact as possible without compromising on playability. It also comes with a seriously impressive line-up of bundled software.

The unweighted keys are light and responsive, with satisfying travel and minimal lateral movement. The onboard audio interface operates at up to

24-bit/96kHz, and sounds very good doing it.

The iRig Keys I/O 49 is small enough to find a space on even the most hectic of studio desks, equipped to handle basic recording duties and general purpose MIDI control on stage and in the studio, and pretty good value. What's more, it comes with a knockout software bundle.

[www.ikmultimedia.com](http://www.ikmultimedia.com)

## Verdict

**For** MIDI control and audio I/O in one  
Impressive bundled software

**Against** Only one mono input  
Entry-level keyboard

IK's iRig Keys I/O 49 is great MIDI keyboard controller and audio interfaces in one and comes with some great software

8/10





# M-Audio

## Keystation 61 MK3 £129

**COMPATIBILITY:** Mac/PC | **NO OF KEYS:** 61 | **KEY SIZE:** Full-size | **KEY TYPE:** velocity sensitive | **CONTROLS:** Octave Shift, Pitch bend/modulation wheels, Transport button for DAW control, 1 Fader | **CONNECTIVITY:** DC Power, USB port, MIDI Out, sustain pedal input | **POWER:** USB or DC | **SOFTWARE:** Pro Tools First M-Audio Edition, Ableton Live Lite, AIR Mini Grand, AIR Velvet, AIR Xpand!2 | **DIMENSIONS (cm):** 99.5 x 18.9 x 6.8 | **WEIGHT:** 4.1kg

If you need five octaves and can squeeze an extra few notes out of your budget, M-Audio's venerable Keystation range of MIDI controllers offers this 61-key beauty for a very reasonable price indeed.

The Mark 3 version here offers a full-size, semi-weighted five-octave board of the kind of quality you'd expect from M-Audio, plus the option to control your DAW's transport via dedicated buttons.

There's the usual trade-off between the number of keys versus the breadth of features available, but if you're looking for sheer playability without all of the bells and whistles you get on other models, this is one of the best cheap MIDI keyboards out there... especially when you consider that there's also an 88-key version available for a measly £199.

[www.m-audio.com](http://www.m-audio.com)

### Verdict

**For** Lots of keys in a slim profile  
Excellent pedigree  
DAW transport/navigation buttons

**Against** Few assignable controls

This is one of the finest cheap MIDI keyboards. Maximum keys, minimum money from M-Audio

9/10







# Native Instruments Komplete Kontrol S61 MkII £699

**COMPATIBILITY:** Mac/PC | **NO OF KEYS:** 61 | **KEY SIZE:** Full-size | **KEY TYPE:** Velocity-sensitive with aftertouch | **CONTROLS:** Pitch and Modulation wheels, touch strip, two high-res colour screens, Light Guide, 4-directional push encoder | **CONNECTIVITY:** MIDI I/O, 1/4" TRS connections for expression and sustain pedals | **POWER:** USB | **SOFTWARE:** Complete 14 Select with 11,000 sounds and over 50 GB of instruments and effects | **SIZE (cm):** 100 x 29.7 x 8.4 | **WEIGHT:** 6.55Kg

The Komplete Kontrol S61 MkII is a smart MIDI keyboard controller that offers pre-mapped control of NI's Komplete instruments and any third-party plugins that support the NKS standard. In comparison to its predecessor, the Komplete Kontrol MkII also adds two high-resolution colour screens, along with 17 additional function buttons. There's tighter DAW and Maschine integration, too, making it

possible to mix, navigate and edit projects from the hardware.

As before, there's a Fatar keybed and Light Guide, and we welcome the arrival of proper pitch and mod wheels rather than touchstrips. That being said, a single horizontal touchstrip is supplied and can be used for additional expression. If you liked the idea of Komplete Kontrol the first time around, the good news is that there's even more to like about it now.

You can do so much more from the device itself, with better visual feedback and much deeper levels of integration front and centre of its workflow. If you're already wedded to the Komplete software package, nothing will help you work with it as musically as Komplete Kontrol MkII.

[www.native-instruments.com](http://www.native-instruments.com)



## Verdict

**For** Tight Komplete and DAW integration

Provides playing assistance

Spend less time with your mouse

**Against** No sliders

A smart MIDI controller for your plugins and DAW with great integration for any NI and NKS products

9/10





# Novation 49 SL MkIII £549

**COMPATIBILITY:** Mac/PC | **NO OF KEYS:** 49 | **KEY SIZE:** Full-size | **KEY TYPE:** semi-weighted, synth-style, velocity-sensitive | **CONTROLS:** Pitch and Modulation wheels, 16-full colour RGB backlit velocity-sensitive drum pads, page and scene launch buttons, 8 continuous rotary knobs, 8 sliders, 6 transport controls, octave/transpose buttons, track buttons, 5 RGB TFT screens | **CONNECTIVITY:** USB, MIDI Out/Out2/Thru, Sustain and Expression pedal, Footswitch pedal, CV/Gate/Modulation 1 and 2, Clock out | **POWER:** Mains power | **SOFTWARE:** Ableton Live Lite, 4GB of sounds | **DIMENSIONS (cm):** 81.7 x 30 x 10 | **WEIGHT:** 6.8Kg

Sure, you can plug the SL MkIII into a computer and use it to control your DAW, but with an eight-channel onboard sequencer and multiple forms of digital and analogue output, this latest SL really can do much more besides. Novation has done an excellent job in making setup as hassle free as possible, but given how adaptable the SL MkIII is, you'll still need to spend some time configuring it to best adapt it to your own setup.

It doesn't quite match the plug-and-play immediacy of NI's Komplete Kontrol system, but offers much more flexibility for interfacing hardware and software. The ability to sequence and control analogue hardware, MIDI-



equipped instruments, plugins and your DAW all from one interface and clock source is excellent, and if you dig into the SL MkIII's versatile workflow, and you'll find that there's a deep well of creative possibilities that are just waiting to be explored.

<https://novationmusic.com>



## Verdict

**For** Excellent, easy-to-use sequencer  
Flexible range of digital and analogue control  
Components system makes it easy to manage and edit template

**Against** No per-channel swing

Novation's 49 SL MkIII is one of the best MIDI keyboards for combined software/hardware control. A great buy.

9/10







# Arturia Keystep Pro £399

**COMPATIBILITY:** Mac/PC/iOS | **NO OF KEYS:** 37 | **KEY SIZE:** Slim | **KEY TYPE:** Velocity and aftertouch sensitive | **CONTROLS:** Four-track controller/sequencer, with arp and drum sequencing modes. 1, 4x CV voices w/ pitch, gate and mod/velocity outs, clock in/out/reset | **CONNECTIVITY:** USB, sustain in, speaker and line output | **POWER:** USB or mains | **SOFTWARE:** Analog Lab Intro, Ableton Live Lite | **DIMENSIONS (cm):** 58.9 x 20.8 x 38.0 | **WEIGHT:** 2.7kg

Between their 'Step' and 'Lab' devices, Arturia have a pretty broad range of controllers, ranging from the simple, budget-friendly MicroLab MIDI keyboard to the multi-format sequencing tools of the BeatStep Pro. Now the KeyStep Pro arrives to fill one of the few remaining gaps in that line-up; combining the cross-format analogue and digital sequencing of the BeatStep with a 37-note keyboard making it better suited to melodic work.

The KeyStep Pro features four sequencing channels, each of which can record a sequence of up to 64 steps. Each of these is polyphonic, up to 16 notes per step. Tracks 2, 3 and 4 are each equipped with an arpeggiator,



while track 1 doubles up as a 24-part drum sequencer.

For melodic sequencing duties and flexible hardware control, this is easily one of the best do-it-all controllers out there right now. Its compact size may deter serious 'players' - Novation's SL Mk3 remains the best CV-equipped device on that front - but modular and hardware-loving musicians will likely lap this one up. **cm**

[www.arturia.com](http://www.arturia.com)

## Verdict

**For** Handy mix of analogue and digital I/O

Lots of creative sequencing tools  
Arp and drum modes are lots of fun

**Against** Mini keys unlikely to appeal to serious players

Mod and pitch touch strips are a little small

Keystep Pro is a great all-rounder controller keyboard that fulfils your sequencing and I/O needs

9/10

