



# Native Instruments Kontrol S-Series Mk3

£649 to £1,129

PC

MAC

Native Instruments have updated their Kontrol-S Series to v3, but is it really still the best way for **Andy Jones** to Kontrol his virtual studio?

> Native Instruments' Kontrol keyboards were incredibly ground-breaking when they were released nine years ago. The idea has been to get control of your software 'off-computer' - to be able to select plugins and tweak parameters using keyboards rather than your mouse and cursor. It makes the experience more seamless, less computer-based and feel more like you're using a keyboard stuffed with software. That software does need to be NKS-compatible, though, so that the keyboard maps to it and makes the control experience more 'hardware-

like', but the list of NKS partners now includes many of the biggest names in software.

## Three refined and defined

Installation of S-Series Mk3 is in three steps: register the keyboard, download a Hardware Connection Service app to link the plugins to the keyboard, and download the S-Series Mk3 firmware update. It's lengthy, but will result in your hardware and software talking and, luckily, NI email the instructions at the start of the process.

We have the S61 Mk3 (£749) on test, with the S49 costing £649 and £1,129 for the top-end S88. With just three updates to the S-Series range being released in nine years, you expect Native Instruments to put a serious amount into each update, and Mk3 has much to like. But the biggest addition is a not-so-visible onboard computer that promises better integration with both NI and third party plugins, with more actual processing. How much is up and running at present is a little vague, though, so we're keeping this review in the here and now.

## There is little that feels better in music production

The keyboard feels sturdy with a newly designed one-piece body, but maybe has a lighter feel. Everything else feels pro, especially the aluminium dials, and new mod and pitch wheels with handy LEDs plus assignable touch strip above them. Buttons still only reveal their identity when available, which looks cool, but can be frustrating when searching for functions.

The most obvious update is the single larger screen that replaces the two on the Mk2, which makes sense for a keyboard system trying to cut down screen usage. This hi-res screen feels massive on first powering up (which in itself feels amazing, as such a large keyboard is powered by USB). It's bright, clear and easily visible from a distance. It has allowed the feel of the KK environment to be updated for a crisper and undoubtedly 'bigger' experience.

The overall Komplete Kontrol philosophy thankfully remains similar to the approach going right back to Mk1, in that you load in an instrument, and use the eight rotaries beneath the screen to immediately control its most important parameters which have been premapped for you. You can also access more parameters by holding the Shift>Left/Right arrows which moves through instrument sections and effects, opening up every parameter to control and/or automate.

Kontakt is used to load in your available libraries, and Komplete Kontrol adds any synths and other instrument plugins. We found that using either was seamless after updating plugins [see boxout]. If you were to load in an FM8, for example, you will then instantly have access to parameters and can layer effects on top of any instrument loaded, which is an excellent feature.

### Komplete solution?

We still stand by our view of the Kontrol S-Series experience as one of the best hardware/software solutions, with overall navigation now better than ever. There are added Play Assist



Using the S-Series Mk3 with NI plugins is a fantastic experience but you might have some rerouting to do with your third party plugins, and Silicon users will need to update everything

### S-Series with a DAW and third-party plugins

**You might think S-Series is all about controlling VSTs, but DAW control is also possible, and works with Live, Logic, Bitwig, DP, Studio One and FLS (Cubase and PT are imminent). We had it set up and working with Logic, with an S-Series template added to the Control Surface options; all you have to do is check that S-Series is showing as your input source. We were up and running in no time. We did have a few issues with third party plugins including Korg and Arturia, but these**

**were mostly resolved by updating the plugins via the respective installers. Do expect some of this in your setup process, and possible rerouting of plugins within either Komplete Kontrol or Kontakt to get them working seamlessly. And one other tip is to make sure you rescan your plugins in either host after updating - something we realised after a frustrating hour or two. There's a lot going on here between S-series and software, so the setup was bound to require effort.**

and colour customisation features, while the S61 keyboard is bolstered further by polyphonic aftertouch. Mk3 is pricey and not essential to Mk2 owners, but when you get your software feeling like it is sitting in your keyboard under your 'kontrolling' fingers, there is little that feels better in music production. **cm**

**Web** native-instruments.com



Nice LEDs on the redesigned pitch and mod wheel, while the touch strip has been relocated above them

### Alternatively

#### Akai VIP

#### Evarious

Runs with many MPK and APC keyboards for a similar seamless hardware and software experience

#### Novation SL MkIII

#### £560-£650

49 and 61-key controllers which are some of the most flexible out there

### Verdict

#### For Lovely new screen

Great keyboard and parameter control via encoders and switches

Play Assist features are useful

Polyphonic aftertouch is a boon

#### Against Lengthy setup process for some systems

NI's latest S-Series shows how seamless a hardware/software partnership can be, but is pricey and not an essential Mk2 update

**8/10**