



KMI QuNexus £149 PC MAC

This ultra-portable micro-keyboard might look like a toy with little regard for playability, but appearances can be deceptive

> Keith McMillen Instruments are an American company rapidly gaining a reputation for innovation in the field of hardware MIDI controllers. Their latest gadget is an innovative micro-keyboard that manages to pack in a surprising amount of compelling features.

At just 12.8" long, only 3.3" deep, less than 1/2" thick and weighing a mere 345g, the QuNexus is small, light and rugged enough to be stuffed confidently into a laptop bag. It boasts the slab-like profile of a bar of expensive chocolate, which somehow lends it an upmarket appeal, with a matt-finish, grippy surface that makes it a pleasure to hold and use. KMI's marketing material makes much of the unit's robustness, and although our tests stopped short of running it over with a car (as in KMI's own OTT stress test: bit.ly/QNstress), we did subject it to some prolonged and vigorous drum programming and prog-rock soloing, from which, thankfully, it emerged unscathed.

It's those "Smart Sensor" keys that really draw attention, though: 25 velocity-, tilt- and pressure-sensitive keypads with a satisfying, rubbery feel. They illuminate when touched, with white keys lighting up in white and black keys lighting up in blue. The front panel also houses a tiny (and, actually, not particularly usable) pitchbend pad, two octave shift buttons

and five multifunction buttons, used mainly for preset selection (see *Preset and correct*).

Hidden depths

For such a slim unit, the QuNexus is remarkably deep, particularly with regard to connectivity, the headline being its ability to act as a hub for connecting CV/Gate-equipped hardware and external MIDI modules. QuNexus also supports OSC. The left-hand edge hosts the micro-USB socket that connects to your computer, and alongside this are two minijack sockets for CV output. On the right-hand edge sits a second micro-USB socket for connecting to KMI's £42 hardware MIDI Expander unit, which in turn lets you hook up any 5-pin MIDI-equipped device.

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Next to this is another minijack socket that doubles as both expression pedal and CV input port. For an extra £22, you can also order a CV cable kit (if you don't already own your own CV cables, that is) with which to set the unit up for converting MIDI data to CV (control voltage) and vice versa, enabling old (or new!) CV-equipped hardware synths to be used with your modern DAW. That, in a unit of this price, is impressive, and if you like the idea of running analogue gear alongside your DAW, it's a real selling point.

From a performance point of view, while the lack of any rotary encoders or sliders is a definite drawback, the QuNexus does have a compensatory ace up its sleeve in the ability to tilt your finger backwards and forwards to produce pitchbend or modulation on individual keys, as well as using downward pressure to induce the same, with both actions separately assigned (see box opposite for more info). As deeply intriguing as this is, though, we came away feeling that getting the best out of it would require a fair bit of practise. It's all too easy to simply end up playing out of tune by hitting keys off centre, but with time spent properly configuring the pressure and tilt sensitivity to your playing style – and honing your technique – we can appreciate that this undoubtedly expressive system could work really well.



Chord red handed

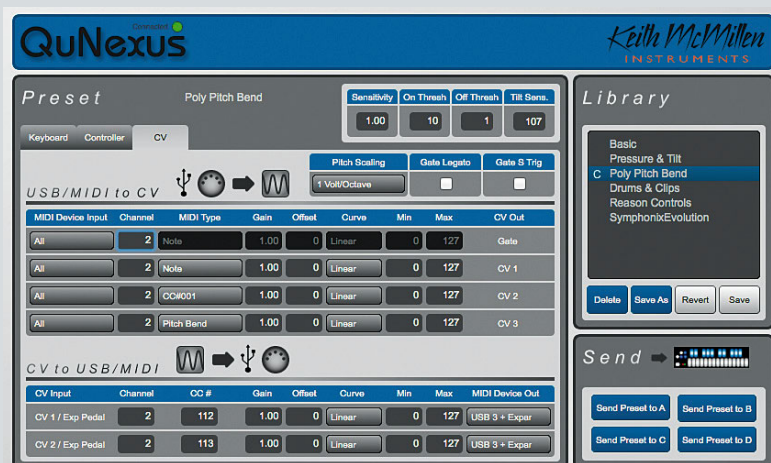
In terms of its basic 'keyboardness', the obvious assumption with a unit as small as this is that it's not going to be particularly playable. However, the QuNexus plays nothing short of brilliantly. The 30x13mm keys are extremely responsive, and the only real issue you have to contend with is that they're arranged in two distinct rows: black keys above, white keys below. This means that if you're used to incorporating the upper area of the white notes in your playing style, some slight fingering adjustments might be required. For example, when playing the first inversion of a C minor triad with your thumb on E^b, second finger on G and fifth finger on C on a normal keyboard, you'd naturally position your hand towards the top of the keys. With the QuNexus, though, you have to tuck your second finger back below your hand in order to play the G note with your fingernail. Not a serious problem, certainly, but one requiring enough of an adjustment to slow you down a little.

'Nexus heaven

For us, the QuNexus's real strength lies in the convenience of having an extremely portable device with you at all times that lets you input musical parts in a familiar fashion with minimum setup, whether you're in the studio, on the tube or in your local cafe. You can just chuck it in a laptop or iPad bag and forget it's there. And on top of its obvious melodic functionality, it's also absolutely brilliant for programming drums, being essentially a set

of pads. Throw in the tweakability offered by the editing software and its party-piece as a CV-to-MIDI converter, and the old adage about great things coming in small packages has rarely rung so true. **cm**

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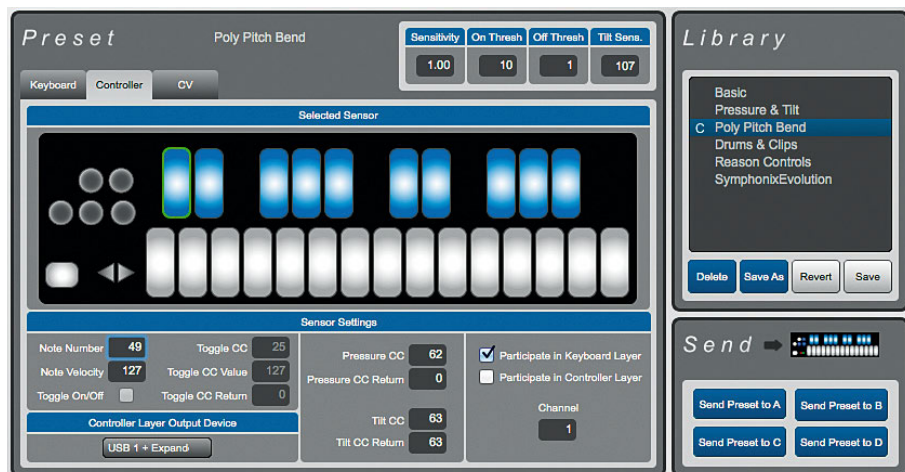
The CV layer lets you set up how the QuNexus works as a MIDI-to-CV or CV-to-MIDI converter

Preset and correct

Four recallable preset slots are accessed via the round buttons to the left of the main keys. These affect the overall behaviour of the keys and their MIDI messages, and their settings can be adjusted, saved and transmitted using the QuNexus Editor app.

The software is divided into three layers: Keyboard, Controller and CV. In the Keyboard layer, you can alter the way the keys transmit pitchbend, polyphonic aftertouch, channel pressure and four user-definable Continuous Controllers. The Controller layer enables you to further adjust the settings for individual keys, and the CV layer is used to configure settings for use with CV-equipped devices.

By default, Preset A (Basic) works as a standard MIDI keyboard, with most of the more exciting features turned off. Preset B (Press and Tilt) maps key tilt to pitchbend and pressure sensitivity to modulation (CC1). Preset C (Poly Pitch Bend) uses the QuNexus' Channel Rotation feature to transmit successive simultaneous notes on separate MIDI channels, with each key sending its own pitchbend, channel pressure or aftertouch messages. It's like having up to ten independent pitchbend wheels, similar to how a MIDI guitar controller sends pitchbend per string. Finally, Preset D (Drums & Clips) maps to the GM drum kit standard on MIDI channel 10 and can launch clips in Ableton Live.



Controller settings for individual keys can be tweaked in QuNexus Editor's Controller Layer

Alternatively

Korg NanoKey2
cm166 » 7/10 » £48

Korg's micro-controller is cheaper but nowhere near as versatile

Akai LPK25
N/A » N/A » £45

Piano-style keys and an arpeggiator, but no pressure-sensitivity

Verdict

For Incredibly portable and robust
Illuminated, pressure-sensitive keys
Polyphonic pitchbend and aftertouch
Deeply configurable via software editor
CV/Gate-to-MIDI conversion built in!

Against No knobs or sliders
Key configuration can be impractical

A personable little controller with a unique feature set that would make it a useful addition to any laptop bag

8/10