



Native Instruments PC MAC Komplete Kontrol S Series £429/499/599

The German music technology powerhouse reckon they've come up with a Komplete solution for your software instrument control needs

> Given the success of their various Traktor controllers and the Maschine family, it was only a matter of time until Native Instruments got around to developing a keyboard. The Komplete Kontrol S Series comes in 25-, 49- and 61-key versions – our review model is the S49, but apart from the number of keys, all three are identical. Crucially, like their aforementioned DJing and groove production counterparts, they're built to work with NI's own software – specifically, the instruments in the Komplete 9 and 10 suites (and you do have to have Komplete installed; individual plugins won't be 'seen' by the Komplete Kontrol software).

The build quality is up to NI's usual high standard, with the same classy, hard-edged styling as its stablemates. The rear panel houses a power adaptor input (bus power isn't an option), USB port, expression and sustain pedal inputs, and MIDI I/O (one of each, although the keyboard has to be connected to a computer via USB to work). By current standards in MIDI keyboard design, the controller array is positively modest, comprising just transport and Navigate sections, eight touch-sensitive rotary encoders with individual 'Clear View' OLED displays (bright, retro-cool and legible from any angle) and three Perform buttons (Shift, Arp and Scale). The synth-style keyboard itself is made by Fatar and feels great. Each

keybed is lit up by an RGB LED at the back end of the key – the vaunted Light Guide system – and standing in for mod and pitchbend wheels are two touchstrips with adjacent LED indicators, all of which we'll come back to shortly.

S express

The S Series keyboards require the Komplete Kontrol application (included with Komplete 10 and a free download for 9 users) to work as anything more than generic MIDI keyboard controllers. This runs as a plugin or standalone, serving as a bridge between Komplete and the S Series, and presenting all of Komplete's thousands of presets in a single searchable library, filtered by product and hierarchical instrument type/style-based tags.

As well as the browser, Komplete Kontrol includes software controls for the Scale and Arp functions (see below), and the GUI of the loaded

instrument, with choices of detail: the full interface, or the reduced Additional and Default views introduced with Maschine 2. Although the influence of NI's overambitious, ill-fated mid-noughties hardware controller/software hybrid, Kore, is apparent, that was as much a sound design system as a patch manager, while Komplete Kontrol is really just a librarian and basic MIDI input processor, but that's a good thing – Kore was ultimately a failure, remember.

Komplete Kontrol is fully usable on its own with the mouse and QWERTY keyboard, but a press of the S Series' Browse button pops open an overlaid second browser window, navigated using the push-knob and Navigate buttons. With a preset chosen and its parent instrument loaded, the keyboard springs into life, its parameters automatically mapping to the eight rotary encoders, with left and right Page buttons stepping through as many pages as required to cover the full set, and names and values appearing in the displays. It's the same sort of system that users of Mackie Control, Ableton Push, Nektar Panorama, Arturia KeyLab, Novation Automap, etc, have been enjoying for years, and every bit as empowering here.

Seeing the light

Our favourite S Series feature, though, is Light Guide, the coloured keybed LEDs. These tie the

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"The S Series is a truly brilliant controller keyboard for Komplete"

keys themselves into Kontakt, Battery and Reaktor, mirroring the colours of their keymaps and making the negotiation of keyswitches, drum mappings, mode switches and other colour-coded mappings an absolute pleasure. The only Reaktor Instruments that support Light Guide currently are the new Rounds and Polyplex, but we can only imagine what clever things might be on the way in future releases. (The encoder displays can also be fully accessed by Reaktor developers, incidentally).

The S Series also boasts Scale and Arpeggiator modes, both fully editable from the hardware and software. Scale mode lets you choose a root key, scale type and optional one-finger chord shapes, and either snaps keys outside the scale to their adjacent notes - with Light Guide illuminating the in-scale ones - or maps the notes of the selected scale to contiguous white notes. The Arpeggiator is similarly flexible, with Swing and Gate controls, a collection of preset rhythms, and velocity scaling. Again, Light Guide plays its part, showing which notes are in your arpeggio.

Finally, the pitch and mod strips are fantastic - arguably better than wheels, in fact. As well as being impressively responsive and easy on the fingers, they also have the advantage of programmability, currently only represented by the surprisingly productive Ball mode, which lets you 'throw' and bounce the mod strip.

Away from home

Without Komplete Kontrol, the S Series runs in MIDI Mode - ie, as generic MIDI keyboards without Native Map, Light Guide, Scale mode, etc. Moving from Komplete instruments to third-party ones and back in your DAW switches between the two modes automatically, retaining



Here's NI's new Rounds instrument in Komplete Kontrol, showing its scaled-down Default view

The score on the DAWs

How easy it is to switch between multiple instances of the Komplete Kontrol plugin in a project depends on which DAW you're using. If it's Live, Logic or Cubase/Nuendo, you're laughing, as not only do they support track selection with the Navigate buttons, but selecting a track automatically assigns your S Series keyboard to control its Komplete Kontrol-hosted instrument, and even arms that track so it's ready for input and recording.

Getting this functionality working in Logic and Cubase involves simply setting the keyboard up as a Mackie Control Universal-compatible device; Ableton Live requires manually

installing a MIDI Remote Script and VST/AU Instrument Racks that have to be used as containers for the Komplete Kontrol plugin - it's far less fiddly than it sounds, though.

With other hosts, a press of the Instance button invokes an overlay listing all running instances of the Komplete Kontrol plugin - choose the one you want to focus on using the Navigate buttons and you're away.

Since the S Series is compatible with the popular Mackie Control Universal protocol, you get full transport control in most DAWs via the dedicated Transport section, although track navigation is only implemented in Live, Cubase and Logic.

basic MIDI input into your non-Komplete instruments without any faffing about.

Native Instruments' free Controller Editor can make MIDI mode assignment maps, too, but it's safe to say that if you don't own Komplete 9 or 10 (or intend to), you shouldn't even consider the S Series - there are plenty of cheaper, better-equipped general purpose MIDI controllers.

While we certainly don't see ownership of Komplete being essentially a system requirement as a negative, there are a few issues worth mentioning. DAW control is limited to just the transport, with no faders, pan pots, mute/solo buttons, etc; eight encoders doesn't quite feel like enough; and the Komplete Kontrol software, while perfectly good at what it does, is clearly a very nascent platform - we look forward to instrument stacking, key splits and all the other stuff that could be in the works. And, obviously, we'd love a big Maschine Studio-style display mirroring the Komplete Kontrol browser.

As it stands now, though, with the beautifully executed Light Guide turning out to be its crowning innovation, the S Series is a truly brilliant controller keyboard for Komplete that elevates NI's equally brilliant software suite to new heights in terms of usability, productivity and fun factor. **cm**

Web www.native-instruments.com

Alternatively

Novation Impulse series
cm179 » 8/10 » £150-250

An excellent series of keyboards, featuring the Automap 4 plugin wrapper system

Arturia KeyLab series
N/A » N/A » £179-339

Built to control Arturia's preset-strong Analog Factory synth library

Verdict

For Light Guide is genius
Integrates perfectly with Komplete 9/10
Scale and Arp modes are very useful
Native Map 'just works'
Premium build quality

Against We'd love more knobs and faders to extend functionality
Komplete Kontrol still in its infancy

A superb keyboard that beats all others when used with Komplete 9 or 10, thanks to tight controller mapping and the Light Guide

9/10