



Akai Professional MPC Touch

£499



The original studio-in-a-box returns to reassert its dominance - and this time it's gone all touchy-feely

> When Akai and Roger Linn unleashed the MPC60 on an unsuspecting world in 1988, they essentially invented the concept of the 'groovebox' - a convenient, all-in-one unit capable of creating full tracks - thus changing the direction of electronic music history. The following decades brought numerous iterations and revisions of the MPC, eventually arriving at the MPC Renaissance, which subscribed to the software-driven, computer-connected paradigm spearheaded by Native Instruments' Maschine, whereby the hardware simply operates a software application on the host Mac or PC, rather than standing alone. The MPC Touch expands on this with the addition of touchscreen technology.

Black beauty

Installing the MPC software and content involves seven downloads (17GB in total), six separate install steps, a trip to your OS preferences and numerous restarts. It's convoluted, takes hours and needs addressing.

While you're waiting, though, you can admire the hardware, which looks great, feels solid and sports 16 supremely responsive RGB

backlit pads. The rubber function buttons (handling transport control, Note Repeat, Erase, etc), on the other hand, are a bit of a step back from the more satisfying clicky plastic buttons of previous MPCs.

The back panel sports the physical USB input, MIDI I/O, stereo audio I/O (quarter-inch jacks), minijack headphone output and power supply input. The MPC Touch can be partially powered by USB (the buttons work but not the touchscreen), and the built-in audio interface is certainly up to scratch (1.5ms latency at 64 samples). Some will miss the mic and phono

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inputs of the MPC Renaissance, though.

The four touch-sensitive Q-Link dials control up to 16 Q-Link parameters (four groups of four), defaulting to appropriate functionality for the current mode (Zoom in Edit mode, for example), but assignable to everything from external MIDI CCs to plugin parameters. Below them, the Data Wheel (the only component that feels a little flimsy) is employed for adjusting parameters and navigating the browser.

Nurse, the screen

Though clearly not as high-quality as, say, an iPad display, the clarity and resolution of the 7” touchscreen are fine. It's hard to see in sunlight, however. When initially connected, it serves as a 1280x800 desktop extension in Windows and OS X; firing up the MPC Software then launches the dedicated Touchscreen User Interface.

The TUI is, essentially, a customised interface for the MPC Software running on the host computer, so changes to one are reflected in the other. The only exceptions are the TUI-only XYFX and Step Sequencer (more on these shortly).

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From its Menu page, the TUI offers access to various Mode windows: Main, Sample Edit, Browser, Grid, Sampler, Pad and Channel Mixers, Q-Link Edit (currently displaying “PAGE COMING SOON”) and more, most of which will be familiar to existing MPC users. Parameters are adjusted by dragging on the touchscreen, tapping to select and using the Data Wheel, or double-tapping to open up a larger display for that parameter with calculator-style number input buttons. While the screen is perfectly responsive to touch in terms of operation, it can be a little sluggish to update visually. That’s not something that affects workflow at all, though.

Two of the best things about TUI are its fast, intuitive sample editing in Sample Edit Mode, and sequence editing in Grid Mode, including pinch-zooming, drawing slice points and setting start/end points in the former, and entering, deletion and quantising of note events in the latter. The screen is too small for really fine edits by touch alone, but the Data Wheel and nudge buttons are on hand for high-precision work.

The TUI-only Step Sequencer works with samples and virtual instruments - tap to enter steps, and set velocity, accent, etc, using virtual faders - and features the brilliant Invert State function, which turns Off steps to On steps and vice versa at the current grid resolution (ideal for instant 4/4 kicks, 16th-note hi-hats, etc).

The XYFX screen is another notable feature, enabling manipulation of the new XYFX processor’s 17 built-in effects (Beat Repeat, filtering, modulation and more) via a Kaoss Pad-style X/Y controller, with movements recorded as automation.

A soft Touch

It’s not all tactile fun and games though. We’re disappointed (but not surprised) that there’s no access to third-party plugin GUIs via the touchscreen, and browsing for new samples outside the current project is even more



Touchscreen editing makes the MPC Touch the most welcoming Music Production Center ever



MPC Software is looking a bit tired, but that doesn’t hold back its lightning-fast workflow

Software stopgap

MPC Software (AU/VST/Standalone) is based on the tried and tested MPC workflow, and there’s still no quicker, more intuitive way to capture a loop, detect its tempo, slice it to pads and play/edit it to create a new track. Virtual instruments are just as easy to sequence, and effects (built-in and VST/AU) can be added to tracks and pads. MPC Software can also be used to control external MIDI hardware.

As of version 1.9, the prized Vintage Mode (emulating the sound of the classic MPC60, MPC3000 and E-MU SP-1200) is now available to everyone (not just Renaissance users), and can be used as a selective insert on individual pads and channels, as well

as the master output. Also new is the long-awaited addition of drag-and-drop into the software for audio and MIDI clips.

Nonetheless, all eyes are on the upcoming 2.0 update, anticipated for late 2016. This will bring audio tracks, real-time timestretching and pitch processing (both are currently offline and destructive) and a new GUI. It’s perfectly possible to sequence complete songs with the MPC, but most users currently perform additional sequencing and mixing in a DAW - v2 has the potential to change that.

But sadly, there’s no mention of an overhauled browser, which is one of MPC Software’s few weak spots.

cumbersome using the hardware than the notoriously unwieldy software browser.

So the TUI doesn’t replace computer interaction completely, but rather aids with recording, sample editing and slicing, sequencing, and basically getting ideas down, before you turn to the MPC Software interface for mixing, editing plugins, complex parameter assignments and adjustment of settings. For us, the sweet spot is using a combination of the touchscreen and the Data Wheel.

The MPC Touch is going to prove hugely attractive to MPC newbies, with the TUI making the MPC concept easier and quicker than ever to learn. The content, meanwhile, although a pain to install, constitutes a huge resource of useable sounds, suitable for many genres.

But what about existing MPC users? While the touchscreen is a very cool addition, we’re not sure how much quicker it really makes the programming process. And thanks to the relatively small screen and paucity of Q-Link dials, this certainly isn’t an ideal stage instrument.

Ultimately, though, the MPC Touch is a success - albeit one with a few minor issues - and we love it. **cm**

Web www.akaipro.com

Alternatively

NI Maschine Studio
cm198 » 10/10 » £729

While Maschine is a more advanced system, albeit sans touchscreen, many prefer the MPC workflow

Ableton Push 2
cm226 » 10/10 » £499

This powerful controller for Ableton Live can work as quickly and efficiently as MPC Touch

Verdict

For The most accessible MPC yet
Sturdy hardware
Great step sequencer
Effective touchscreen implementation
XYFX is a nice performance tool

Against Visual lag on touchscreen
Software is showing its age

The most accessible MPC yet is also one of the best, although we’re very much looking forward to v2.0 of the MPC Software

9/10