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Native Instruments
Maschine Mk3 £479

NI revamp their core Maschine controller. **Si Truss** investigates how much substance lies beneath the aesthetic overhaul

CONTACT **WHO:** Native Instruments **WEB:** www.native-instruments.com **KEY FEATURES** **I/O:** 2x line in, 2x line out, mic in, headphone out, MIDI in, MIDI out, expression pedal in, (optional) power in, USB 2.0 **DIMENSIONS:** 320 x 301 x 41 mm **WEIGHT:** 2.2kg **INCLUDED SOFTWARE:** Maschine software, Maschine Factory Library, Komplete 11 Select

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Controller layout has been shuffled and rearranged making it more logical and easier to use

Built-in interface is a sensible addition

Enlarged screens and improved pads look and feel great

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Line and headphone outputs can't be used simultaneously

NI could do more to reward users upgrading from Mk2

Mic input would have been better placed on the front of the hardware

B ack in 2009, when it first appeared, NI's beat-making platform Maschine represented the tightest controller-software relationship on the market. At the application end, the software offered a pretty much self-contained platform for sampling and sequencing, while the associated hardware was designed to offer tailor-made control over every element of the platform.

Over the years that have followed, NI have expanded the Maschine ecosystem considerably, adding multiple variations on the hardware and significantly expanding the capabilities of the software. While there's no doubt that this has made Maschine as a whole far more powerful, it's also loosened that hardware-software relationship considerably. With the variety of functions available across different controllers, along with an expanded remit now encompassing arrangement, external sequencing,

creative effects and much more, there's no longer one single Maschine controller that can claim to offer truly comprehensive access to every aspect of the software.

Although the Mk3 version of NI's core Maschine controller does tout several eye-catching additions to the hardware – which I'll come to shortly – the main theme of this update seems to be a reunification of that hardware-software relationship. While this hardware overhaul isn't accompanied by a significant update at the software end, thanks to some

subtle adjustments to the controller layout and capabilities, the overall workflow ends up feeling significantly streamlined and more flexible.

Mk2 users will immediately pick up on a number of ways in which the hardware layout feels more sensibly aligned with the latest incarnation of the software. Possibly most notable of these is a new row of buttons sitting directly above the pad grid, which are used to flip between Pad, Keyboard, Chord and Step modes. While this might be a minor adjustment, it has a noticeable

impact on the workflow; on the previous version these functions were scattered around the interface, with some hidden behind shift presses, whereas the new layout places every method of using the pads in one easily accessible, logical place.

The same goes for the rejigged page/browsing buttons to the top left of the interface. Here, along with browser access, we now get buttons for jumping to the mixer and arrangement windows, along with buttons simplifying navigation between each sound's plugin and channel pages. It makes navigating around the Maschine software's (by now fairly complex) architecture considerably more intuitive.

Mk3 is about more than minor adjustments though. Along with a layout reshuffle and sleek, industrial new look, the hardware has had several significant new features, as well as gaining a built-in audio interface [see *Onboard I/O*].

The most instantly noticeable of these additions are the revamped screens, which are now considerably larger, higher definition and full colour. These are very similar to those already found on Maschine Studio, and function in much the same way, making the process of browsing, editing sounds and sequencing far more visually engaging. As was the case with Studio, this additional visual feedback does a lot to draw attention away from the computer screen.

Also brought across from Studio are the eight touch-sensitive rotaries that sit beneath the screens. Among the applications of these, most interesting is the ability to assign Macros by simply hitting the assignment button and then touching the appropriate rotary. This makes the previously somewhat convoluted process of setting up Macros considerably simpler.

Along with these eight smaller rotaries, the hardware's main browsing rotary has been upgraded

into what NI call a 'four-directional push encoder'. This essentially acts as a one-stop shop for menu scrolling, browsing and selection.

Another change likely to catch the eye of seasoned users is the overhaul to the central pads themselves. The 16 pads are now larger with improved sensitivity, particularly towards their outer edges. Despite the beefed-up size, the pad grid maintains the same centre-to-centre positioning as the previous version, meaning that seasoned finger-drummers can still rely on their muscle memory. I'm more of a sequencer person than a pad drummer personally, and probably lack the beat-bashing dexterity to give these new pads a definitive test, but they feel certainly feel nicer to play and are noticeably more responsive to velocity changes.

The other major front panel addition is the new touchstrip, which sits just above the transport controls. This is essentially a single, horizontal

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ONBOARD I/O

Possibly the most significant change for the Mk3 is the addition of a built-in 96kHz/24-bit audio interface. This adds a pair of line outs, pair of line ins, a mic input and headphone output onto the rear panel, alongside the previously existing MIDI in and out ports, and an expression pedal input. The interface is a sensible addition. Seeing as Maschine has always been touted as a self-contained platform for sampling and sequencing, it felt a touch odd to need an extra periphery to get the most out of it.

One thing worth noting is that the mic and line ins can't both be used simultaneously – plugging into the mic input overrides the line-in. Because of this it would have been

more convenient to have the mic input along the front edge of the hardware, since it's not possible to leave something in it constantly plugged in. Similarly, you'll find you can't output the same thing from the line outs and headphones simultaneously (although the phones can be set up as a cue output). This is a bit of a pain if you want to switch quickly between monitors and phones when A/Bing sounds, for instance.

version of the touchstrips found on Maschine Jam, and brings some of that controller's best functionality across to the Mk3. This includes control over Maschine's Performance FX and the ability to 'strum' notes across a scale, multiple drum sounds or slices of a sample.

One area where it does feel like NI have missed a trick by not implementing touchstrip control is the note repeat. As before, repeats are triggered by holding down the note repeat button, with buttons above the screen controlling the beat divisions of the repeats. Given that the touchstrip is placed so close under the note repeat button, it would be great to be able to use it to control repeat timings, for a more convenient way to sculpt drum fills.

On the subject of fills, another Jam-era function added to the Mk3's interface is access to Maschine's variation engine, which can be used to humanise and randomise patterns. The final Maschine Jam feature brought across is the ability to create and morph between parameter lock states. This is a great tool for automating live performances or A/Bing mix states; it's just a slight shame you can't currently record parameter morphs into arrangements as MIDI automation.

What's impressive about the Maschine Mk3 is that it manages to add functionality to the controller while simultaneously feeling like it's been simplified. Thanks to the smart reshuffling of the interface, some clever use of the new screens and improved rotaries, and general ergonomic improvements, the Mk3 ends up being less cluttered while also putting more functionality at your fingertips.

It's impressive too that, despite the added interface and enlarged screens, Mk3 maintains the rough size and weight of its predecessor, and even still runs on USB buss power. The controller does now come with an optional power adaptor, and you'll need to use this to get full brightness out of the screens and pads, but the drop when running solely via USB is fairly negligible.

In all, this is the slickest, most user-friendly incarnation of Maschine we've seen so far. For new users it represents excellent value too; despite the added interface and screens, the Mk3 comes in at the same price as its predecessor. Add

in the inclusion of the – now exceptionally powerful – software, plus Komplete Select, which includes Massive, Monark and a healthy selection of quality sounds and effects, and the package seems very reasonable.

As an upgrade it's less of a no-brainer; NI have never been great at rewarding existing hardware owners, so there's little to sweeten the deal if you're coming from Mk2 or Studio and already own the full suite of software. A few free expansion packs or some bonus

Komplete content would certainly be welcome. Don't get me wrong, the Mk3 is a significant improvement in terms of workflow and overall experience but, if you can survive without the sleeker workflow and interface, it doesn't revolutionise what the platform is capable of.

Upgrade considerations aside, the overall Mk3 experience is probably NI's finest product to date and arguably the pinnacle of controller-centred music making right now. Sleek, fun and inspiring – what more could you ask for? **FM**

TOUCHSTRIP The Maschine Jam-style strip can control performance FX and 'strum' through sounds.

PAD GRID The 16 pads are now larger and more sensitive, but maintain the centre-to-centre position of the Mk2.

SCREENS As with Maschine Studio, the larger colour screens make browsing and editing more engaging.

LAYOUT A subtle reorganisation of the control layout really speeds up the Maschine workflow.

FM VERDICT

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A few minor bugbears aside, this is probably the finest hybrid hardware/software music-making platform on the market right now.