

Test: Launchkey Mini MK4

Programmable arpeggiator, scale function and chord memory for controlling sound generators via USB or the MIDI output, plus a very deep integration into common DAWs including a step sequencer - despite its compact dimensions, Launchkey Mini MK4 has surprisingly much to offer. **by Jan Wilking**

Features

- USB-C mini-keyboard
- 25 or 37 keys
- 16 drum pads
- OLED display
- 8 endless rotary encoders
- Strips for pitch and modulation
- Arpeggiator
- Chord memory
- Input for sustain pedal
- MIDI output:
3.5 mm mini jack

Facts

Manufacturer: Novation
Web: novationmusic.com
Distribution: ADAM Audio
Price: 125 Euro (Mini 25);
159 Euro (Mini 37)

- ▲ Independent arpeggiator
- ▲ Flexible chord function
- ▲ Selectable keys
- ▲ Multi-colored pads
- ▲ DAW integration
- ▲ Step sequencer
- ▲ OLED display
- ▲ Parameter display
- ▲ MIDI output
- ▼ Encoders could be grippier

Features: ■■■■■■
Workmanship: ■■■■■■
Price/Perf: ■■■■■■
Total: ■■■■■■

Alternatives

NI Complete Kontrol M32
99 Euro
native-instruments.com

Arturia MiniLab 3
94 Euro
arturia.com

Akai MPK Mini MK3
110 Euro
akai-pro.de



The fourth generation of Launchkey comes in five variants. The cheaper models offer 25 or 37 keys with synth-action, optionally with normal-sized or mini keys. The larger Launchkeys with 49 or 61 large semi-weighted keys also have 9 faders with associated buttons.

Launchkey Mini 25 is slightly larger than its predecessor, but appears more modern in design. The keyboard is also more comfortable and quieter to play. New features include encoders instead of simple rotary knobs and the OLED display. The multi-colored pads are firmer and trigger cleanly and reliably. With the Polyphonic Aftertouch, each pad responds individually to different pressure levels.

The encoders also implement every movement correctly, but they are not touch-sensitive. They are pleasantly stiff, but could have been more grippy for our taste. In the studio, this is not a big problem, but with sweaty fingers during a performance, you might slip.

The connection to the computer or the power supply in standalone operation is done using a USB-C jack, the MIDI output is available as a mini jack. With the Components software, which runs directly in your browser, you can assign any MIDI CC

or note commands to all controllers, buttons and pads, and control external sound generators or plug-ins.

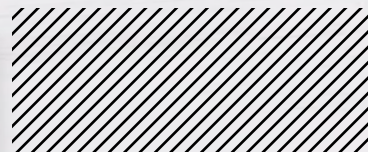
Flexible arpeggiator & chord memory

Launchkey offers plenty of playing aids. A Scale function with numerous keys ensures that only suitable notes are played. Complementing the Key, Launchkey also offers various Chord Sets that allow you to play different chords over the pads. You can even save your own chords for each pad or play a fixed chord using the keyboard.

The arpeggiator also offers significantly more than just simple up-down splitting of chords, as is typical for Novation. Various Playback Directions, Dividers, Swing, and Note Length are controlled using the encoders. Mutate mixes the notes into new motifs, while Deviate changes the rhythm. And the pads can even serve as an 8-step light sequencer for direct access. With this, you can mute individual steps, as well as program slides, accents, and ratchets (fast repetitions) in real-time, a great feature for live jamming!

DAW integration including sequencer

The DAW integration is also more in-depth than with many other small controller keyboards. With the controls, you can manage Volume, Sends, and Transport, as well as Zoom and Playhead Position.



Users of clip-based DAWs like Ableton Live or Bitwig can benefit even more. The pads not only allow you to play drum kits, but also to trigger and record clips and start scenes, with the pads adopting the track or clip colors. The names of the tracks and the instruments and devices loaded on them are displayed. The 8 encoders allow macro parameter control, displaying the name and current value of the parameter in the display. That's already very luxurious!

It gets even better; a Step Sequencer is also built-in: it is particularly exciting for programming drums. With the keyboard, you select the sound (Kick, Snare, etc.) and then use the 16 pads to set the steps at which the sound should be triggered. For sequences longer than 16 steps, you can switch the pads. Holding a pad with a step allows you, depending on the DAW, for example, to set Step Length, Velocity, Ratchets, and Probability using the controls. The sequence is created directly in the clip and does not need to be recorded later.

Verdict

Launchkey Mini MK4 offers some unique features compared to other compact USB keyboards. A programmable Arpeggiator, Chord and Scale functions, as well as the MIDI output, allow jamming with hardware sound generators independently of the computer. In the studio, Launchkey Mini scores with in-depth DAW integration that currently no other mini keyboard offers in this form. ■■

