M-Audio CTRL49

£329

M-Audio's latest keyboard controller incorporates virtual instrument and plug-in editing. **Jon Musgrave** takes control

CONTACT **WHO:** M-Audio UK **TEL:** +44 (0) 1252 896040 **WEB:** www.m-audio.com **KEY FEATURES** 49 velocity and pressure sensitive keys, pitchbend, modulation. 9 faders, 11 backlit switches. 8 assignable encoders. 8 velocity and pressure sensitive backlit pads. Full colour LCD screen. VIP VST instrument host. 1 USB, MIDI In, MIDI out, 1/4" sustain input, 1/4" expression input

THE PROS & CONS

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Excellent build quality and stylish design with plenty of customisable backlit buttons

VIP hosting instrument allows control of up to eight VST instruments and accompanying plug-in effects

Well equipped for both direct MIDI hardware control and USB computer software control

Good bundled software package including both instruments and effects

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It's quite large and heavy

If you've got lots of plug-ins VIP takes a good while to scan them and create maps

VIP not only hosts VST instruments but also the VST effects you apply

The new CTRL49 from M-Audio pushes the keyboard controller further by adding virtual instrument control to the mix. So, what you effectively have is part MIDI keyboard and controller, part DAW controller and part virtual instrument controller.

It comprises a 49-key semi-weighted synth action keyboard with pitchbend and modulation, coupled with a top panel featuring four main sections. On the left are nine faders and 11 coloured backlit fader buttons that use Mackie Control/HUI protocol for DAW control. On the right are eight rotary encoders, eight backlit switches and eight pressure and velocity sensitive backlit pads (with four pad banks), and these controls can transmit either regular MIDI CC data or be used for bespoke instrument editing. On the left you have dedicated transport controls, pad bank selectors, performance selectors including arp and pad roll, and various global options. Finally, in the middle is a colour display with rotary and cursor selectors, and various mode buttons. On the connectivity front there's USB, MIDI In/Out, sustain and expression pedal jacks, making CTRL49 well-equipped for both computer-based and hardware-based MIDI control.

To achieve instrument editing CTRL49 uses a bespoke hosting VSTi called VIP (VST, AU, AAX and standalone). This hosts up to eight VST instruments in its own multi-part mixer framework with four effects inserts and four auxiliary send/returns per part. So, it not only hosts VST instruments but also the VST effects you apply to them. The software dovetails with CTRL49's screen, rotary encoders, buttons and pads and, with global mapping presets for all the major DAWs, getting up and running is simple. To map individual instruments and effects VIP includes its own VST plug-in manager, and this does a full scan when you first load VIP. Once complete you get access to all your instruments and effects from inside VIP, including editing of controller assignments and direct editing of your plug-ins using their interfaces.

Over on the CTRL49 when you select Control mode you'll find your instrument parameters auto-mapped across four banks of eight rotary controllers and buttons. Via the CTRL49 display you can also edit the assignments as well as page through and select plug-in and instrument presets. It all works really well, and if you want to come out of VIP Control mode and use CTRL49 as a regular MIDI controller, you simply select MIDI mode.

So, what else is there to like? There are plenty of options for customising the colours and behaviours of the controls, and there's a decent additional software package included too. Any gripes? The keyboard is fairly deep front to back and quite heavy, and the black keys feel 'pingy'. But overall CTRL49 is a major triumph. **FM**

FM VERDICT

9.0

Loads of functionality, solid construction and attractive visuals, and it delivers on its promise to integrate with your soft synths and DAW.