



Novation Launchpad X

£150

The distinctive Live clip-launcher returns with a Mk3 update. Si Truss straps in for lift-off...

CONTACT WHO: Novation **WEB:** novationmusic.com **KEY FEATURES** MIDI controller designed for use with Ableton Live **CONTROL:** 64 velocity and pressure sensitive pads. Two banks of eight navigation/parameter pads **IO:** USB C (for power and MIDI)



THE PROS & CONS



Velocity makes this launchpad far more playable

New custom modes are great

Hardware itself feels better than ever



A MIDI output on the hardware would have been nice



Ten years on from the release of the first generation Launchpad, Novation's Live-focused pad controller returns for a Mk3 update, now with an 'X' appended to its name. That letter, we assume, relates to the controller line's decade anniversary, as it certainly doesn't indicate increased size – in fact, this latest Launchpad is considerably thinner, more lightweight and all-round sleeker

than the controllers that preceded it. In terms of its general form factor though, this version essentially adheres to the same design layout as the original, comprising an 8x8 grid of pads flanked by two rows of parameter/navigation buttons.

When the original Launchpad arrived, its most obvious use was as a launcher device for Live's clip view. Although it wasn't the first MIDI device designed to make use of Live's workflow – Akai's APC range already had that covered – it was the first controller to feel fully dedicated to

the DAW's clip-focused Session mode. The Launchpad effectively inspired a whole new genre of live electronic performance, giving DJs a user-friendly way to trigger their own music 'live', and giving birth to countless YouTube videos from users making use of its capabilities as a combined loop triggering and light show tool. It's a format that's been built upon by numerous later devices, including Novation's own Launchpad Pro, Ableton's official Push controllers and Akai's recent standalone Force.

In-innovation

Naturally though, things have moved on significantly over the past ten years, and the slightly simplistic nature of those original Launchpads now looks rather dated. While the Launchpad X retains the same core design, there's a lot of additional functionality on offer here compared to the original design. The most notable change is the addition of velocity and pressure sensitivity to the pads. As you'd expect, this immediately makes the Launchpad X a considerably more expressive controller when it comes to playing drum and instrument sounds.

As with previous incarnations, this is still primarily an Ableton Live controller, and users of that DAW benefit from simple plug-and-play compatibility. Used with Live, engaging Note mode from the top row of buttons will configure the pad grid to one of two layouts. Used with an instrument, it displays the familiar style of 'scale' mode used across most modern pad-centric controllers – whereby notes of a scale are highlighted from left to right across the grid with root notes delineated by a change in colour. There are 16 preset scales to choose from, and both Scale and Chromatic modes for a choice of whether notes outside of that scale are available or not.

The second layout is used when a track assigned a Drum Rack is selected. In this mode, much like Ableton's own Push controller, the grid can be used to play up to 64 individual sounds from a drum rack, arranged into 8x8 grids which match the software layout. With multiple Drum Rack tracks armed, the Launchpad will trigger all tracks simultaneously, meaning that by laying out each drum rack at different positions on the note grid – ie, one starting at C0, the next at C1, etc

THE ALTERNATIVES



Ableton Push 2

£599

Nowhere near as affordable or compact, but Live's own controller offers unrivalled interaction with the DAW.

ableton.com



Novation Launchkey Mini Mk3

£99

If the Launchpad's look and feel is intriguing but you're not fussed about the pads, Novation's new key-focused Live controller might be worth a look.

novationmusic.com



Roli Lightpad Block M

£140

Roli's 'multi-dimensional' controller pad isn't strictly a live controller, but it can be mapped for clip-launching similar note/drum triggering duties.

roli.com

– it's possible to create a simple, quick hack to play multiple drum instruments simultaneously.

In and of themselves, these Note modes are nothing that new or revolutionary, but now that velocity sensitivity is included, it immediately makes the Launchpad X feel considerably more playable. Using the top row of selector buttons, it's easy to jump between playing and clip launching too, making this a flexible tool for live performers looking to jam and trigger loops/backing tracks from a single device. The velocity sensitivity is put to use elsewhere too. As with the higher-end Launchpad Pro, it's possible to control the speed of mixer parameter changes simply by how hard you press a pad – hitting a new mixer, send or pan position firmly will make an immediate change, while a gentle press will trigger a slow fade between settings. As with previous Launchpads, Novation have done a decent job of incorporating mixer controls into the pad format and, while the Launchpad will never be as well suited to mixing duties as a bank of rotaries and faders, it's easy enough to make on-the-fly adjustments to levels, pan settings, armed tracks and more.

A la Modes

Probably the highlight of this updated Launchpad, however, is its four Custom Modes. As with previous Launchpads, these are user-



PADS: While the controller itself is smaller, the pads are actually larger than those found on its predecessor

COLOURS: There's plenty of customisation available for the pad backlight colours – great for cool performances

I/O: There's just a single USB connection on the hardware, which handles both MIDI and bus power

configurable setups whereby the pad grid can be assigned to send out a variety of different MIDI messages. For this latest controller, that means the ability to send MIDI note, CC and program change messages. Configuration is done via Novation's sleek, browser-based Components tool, whereby each custom mode can be built by adding any combo of

trigger pads, switches and virtual faders to the pad grid layout. It's all very easy-to-use and flexible, making the Launchpad X an excellent option for creating custom performance setups to control your favourite instruments of creative effects. It's just a slight shame the hardware has no MIDI out, allowing these to be patched directly to hardware.

This is a well-designed evolution of a classic Live controller. The hardware looks and feels better than ever, and the upgraded features make it more flexible for modern uses.

As a neat, compact tool for those who want to perform with Live's Session view, the Launchpad is still the king. **FM**

LAUNCH & LEARN

Although Ableton Live remains the Launchpad's primary focus, the X also comes ready-made for use with two other Novation-built tools. The first is Amplify, the company's accessible, DJ-style music-making app that allows users to trigger, manipulate and perform with loops from their mobile device.

There's also an intriguing new browser-based app called Launchpad Intro. This is effectively an interactive tutorial for newcomers. Plug in the controller and head to novationmusic.com/launchpad-intro and it'll guide you through the basics. There are several genre-themed construction kits included, so even users with no DAW experience can quickly learn to perform with loop-triggering, note and mixer modes.

FM VERDICT

9.0

Neat, compact and more flexible than ever before – the Launchpad remains a must-try tool for Ableton Live users