E-mu Xboard 49

Has E-mu's new controller got what it takes to get off the ground? **Byron Delgrande** gives it a whirl...

DETAILS

PRICE £110

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TECH SPEC
Keys: 49 velocity sensitive, semi-weighted with aftertouch
Controllers: 16 rotary controls, 1 slider, pitch bend wheel, modulation wheel
Display: 3 digit blue LED
Power: USB, DC adapter (not included), batteries (3 x AA size)
System Requirements: Mac running OS X 10.2 or greater, native USB port PC running Windows 2000 (SP4) or XP (SP1) or greater, native USB port Software: E-mu Xboard Control, Proteus X LE Desktop Sound Module (Windows only), Ableton Live 4 Lite for E-mu (Windows only)

THE XBOARD 49 is the larger of two new keyboards from E-mu, and represents the company's first foray into the MIDI controller market. The unit's spec sheet reads well with performance-orientated functionality, 16 assignable controllers and posh keys.

While the keyboard's girl-next-door looks don't really set the heart racing, neither are they offensive. The rigid plastic chassis feels slightly less resilient than examples from other manufacturers, and I would think twice before dropping it and hoping not to see any damage.

The juice

Power for the keyboard can be provided via USB, a DC adapter (not included) or three AA size batteries. Alongside the connections for these are the MIDI Out, footswitch input and a power switch.

The 49 velocity sensitive keys aren't the flimsy unweighted variety that you'd expect to find on a controller priced at a little over £100. Instead they're semi-weighted with a synth action and play beautifully – suitable for tinkling virtual ivories and light-fingered synth licks alike.

They also have aftertouch and eight different velocity curves, which can be edited using the buttons on the keyboard or via the E-mu Control editing software. This application enables the user to assign controller values to controls and store set-ups in one of the 16 preset locations.

A snapshot function makes for quick preset creation, while the software's controller matrix enables program change/bank select messages to be sent on multiple channels at the touch of a button.

All of the Xboard's features can also be accessed and programmed using the less than convincing wobbly buttons surrounding the LED display and the lower octave keys. Parameter values can be adjusted quickly using the slider, and programming the controller manually causes no headaches.

Fade in

Most other controller keyboards offer an equal number of rotary controls and faders, but the Xboard 49 has a bank of 16 rotary controls and just a single fader.

The controls themselves have a tactile rubbery finish and operate smoothly with a positive feel. I think that a few millimetres extra space between them would have made them more useable, though.

If your music-making involves triggering loops live, then latch mode is for you. This allows a user-defined range of keys to be used as triggers – one press for on and one for off.

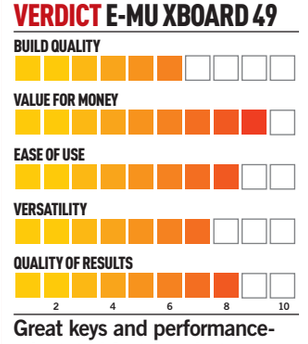
You might also find 16 Channel Control mode useful. With this all of the 16 pots will control, say, volume, for each of the 16 MIDI channels, enabling a quick set-up of mixes, pan positions, and so on.

As an added bonus, Proteus X LE, a lite version of E-mu's acclaimed sound module, is included in the box. You also get Ableton Live 4 Lite, but both are Windows-only versions.

The E-mu Xboard 49 is very much a performance-orientated controller, and a good choice for playing live electronic music. The playability and quality of the keys go a good way towards redeeming an otherwise mediocre build quality – as does the inclusion of the handy latch feature.

At £110 the keyboard represents good value and sports a feature-set beyond that of the competition – a sensible buy for the budget-conscious performing musician. **FM**

VERDICT E-MU XBOARD 49



Great keys and performance-orientated features, but mediocre build quality.

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