



E-mu XBOARD 49

With more and more hands-on software out there, portable USB MIDI keyboards are the order of the day. Hollin Jones gets to grips with E-mu's Xboard 49...

KEY FEATURES

- 49 full-size keys with velocity and aftertouch
- Xboard Control software
- 16 real-time control knobs
- USB and MIDI connections
- Multiple power sources
- Additional software for Windows

MEASURING UP

The USB MIDI keyboard market is very crowded and there is a lot of competition at this price point. The Roland PC300A has a near-identical spec at around £100, as has the M-Audio Radium 49. The Edirol PCR30 at around £120 has fewer keys, but has sliders as well as knobs for real-time control.

XBOARD 49

Manufacturer **E-mu**

Price **£110**

Contact **0800 901 2168**

Web **www.emu.com**

Minimum system requirements

PC Windows 2000 (SP4)/XP (SP1), spare USB port

Mac Mac OSX 10.2, spare USB port

Traditionally better known for making hardware that lives inside your computer – and, of course, for being pioneers of the hardware sampler – E-mu has leapt into the crowded USB MIDI keyboard market with its latest offerings, the Xboard 49 and its smaller sibling, the Xboard 25. The 25 is designed for greater portability, and the 49 as more of a desktop controller, although it's still compact enough to be carried in a bag.

All in one

The concept is now very familiar. A USB connection can carry both power and MIDI data, and a MIDI Out port can send data straight to an interface, or be used to send MIDI to other devices from a sequencer, having first passed through the USB cable. The Xboard can be powered by a regular power adaptor or by batteries, which is helpful when you're in the field and don't want to drain your laptop battery.

There's also a pedal port, which, of course, is a must for any serious keyboard player.

Cosmetically the Xboard is a little uninspiring and isn't likely to be much of a talking point, although design isn't important to everyone. The keys are full-sized with velocity sensing and aftertouch, and are perfectly adequate for a unit at this price. The pitch bend and mod wheels are solid, as are the 16 control knobs, but the function buttons are a bit on the wobbly side.

The variable control knobs have a silky smooth action, and their sheer number is useful for the increasing number of programs that offer real-time control as a feature. Reason 3.0 would be a good partner for the Xboard, for example, because the knobs would be automatically mapped to instruments as you selected them. The three-digit LED readout is quite restrictive, but practically all other keyboards of this kind use the same type of system.

It's a snap

The Xboard's function buttons give you access to a good selection of tools, including patch select, quick octave transpose, Latch mode for triggering drum loops, and knob bypass that temporarily stops the knobs sending out any data. The idea is that you can set the controls directly to the desired position without having to cycle through

values. There's also a snapshot button, which captures and transmits all the current settings.

The keyboard can store patches in its 16 memory locations. Half of the keys are labelled with functions, which makes getting around easier and means you're slightly less reliant on the small screen. With Latch mode activated you can assign a range of keys to act as triggers for loops, while the rest remain playable as normal, which is a handy feature for live performance.

Bonus tracks

With so many competing keyboards at this price point, it's often the added extras that give one model the edge over another. The Xboard is, of course, dual-platform and will work with Mac OSX and Windows 2000/XP, and there's a librarian/patch editor program supplied for both. Unfortunately for Mac users, that's where the freebies end because the rest of them are Windows-only. If you are working on a PC, you get the Proteus X LE software sound module and a version of Ableton's Live Lite 4 to play with. This is slightly odd, given that Live is available for the Mac as well as Windows.

The Xboard is a good controller keyboard, and has everything you'd expect, such as USB power and MIDI, real-time controllers and full-sized keys. The key action is good and 49 of them is a decent number for general MIDI use. That said, it doesn't particularly outshine any of its competitors. There's no killer feature that stands out, especially for Mac users. At least Windows users get the additional software, which may be a clincher. At similar prices there are other near-identical products which all do an equally good job, so in the end the decision may come down to looks, small price differences or whether you prefer E-mu kit. **MTM**

SUMMARY

WHY BUY

- Good key action
- Can be powered in several ways
- Portable, USB power and MIDI
- 16 real-time controller knobs
- Attractive price

WALK ON BY

- Design is unimaginative
- Supplied software is Windows-only
- Doesn't particularly set itself apart from the competition
- Feels a bit plastic

VERDICT

A capable keyboard, but uninspiring compared to the competition. Let down somewhat by bland looks.



BUY THIS PRODUCT AT WWW.MUSICTECHMAG.CO.UK/STORE

MusicTech MAGAZINE October 2005 71