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grand piano.It all depends on what you want from your MIDI keyboard, you'll really want to use those extra knobs and pads. They offer a different way to interact with your DAW, letting you control parameters without having to use your mouse and keyboard which can really speed up your workflow.Similarly pads for inputting beats can feel a lot more inspiring in the heat of the moment, and allow you to be a lot more creative with your beatmaking.It all depends on your DAW. In this guide I've highlighted some popular choices for users of Ableton, FL Studio, and Logic, but most MIDI keyboards now come with some form of DAW control.Being able to control the transport of your DAW and adjust the parameters of your software instruments from your keyboard rather than your computer is always handy. Once you've added remote transport - i.e. via a physical keyboard or controller - you'll struggle to go back to your mouse for actions like playing, pausing and record arming. If you stick to one DAW and find a controller which boasts deep integration - and many do nowadays - then you're in for a treat.With a lot of producers now working 'in-the-box' on a single computer or laptop, you don't necessarily need a MIDI output unless you have some hardware MIDI synths to connect it to, but some controllers do come with traditional 5-pin MIDI out ports. Smaller, mini jack TRS MIDI outputs are also becoming more popular and offer the same functionality. All controllers in this guide can be powered via the USB port, and if you want to play proper piano parts, a sustain pedal input is a must.Yes you can, but an actual piano offers a very different playing experience from a MIDI keyboard, so don't expect to immediately be able to transfer the skills over. What you learn in terms of chords, scales, and notes will apply either way, but the weighted keys of a piano require a different playing style than that of a MIDI keyboard.Key termsAftertouch: A keybed feature that uses pressure sensitivity to add additional expression like vibrato or filter sweeps by pressing harder on the key.Arpeggiator: A feature that allows you to play patterns or scales by pressing a single key.CC (Control Change): A type of MIDI used to control certain parameters like volume or panning.Chord mode: A feature that lets you play full chords by pressing a single key.CV/Gate: An analogue control system that allows you to connect MIDI keyboards to modular or regular synthesizers.DAW (Digital Audio Workstation): The software you use to create music.Faders: Slider controls used for adjusting parameters.Hammer action: A type of keybed that aims to recreate the feel of a gran piano.Keybed: A general term for the keys, action of the keys, feel, or responsiveness.MIDI (Musical Instrument Digital Interface): The communication system that lets musical instruments 'talk' to digital devices.Octave shift: Buttons that move the entire pitch of the keyboard up or down an octave.Pads: Square, velocity sensitive buttons typically used for inputting beats.Pitch bend wheel: A wheel that allows you to change the pitch up or down by a certain amount.Polyphony: The number of notes a controller can play at any one time.Semi-weighted keys: A key action that's lighter than fully weighted or hammer action, but heavier than a synth-action keyboard.Sustain pedal input: An input that lets you add a sustain pedal for holding notes and chords.Synth action keys: A lightweight, springy key action typically found on synthesizers.Touch strip: A touch sensitive slider used instead of a jog wheel.Velocity sensitive: A key that reacts differently depending on how hard or soft you press it.How we test (Image credit: Future)MUSICRADAR IN NUMBERS✓ Over 100 MIDI keyboards tested ✓ More than 9,500 reviews on-site ✓ 17 years of product testingMIDI keyboard controllers come in all shapes and sizes, from small-form desktop units with few controls, right up to 88-note larger keyboards with weighted piano-action style keys. Obviously price is a factor, so we weigh up all of the controls - knobs, sliders, pads and keys - versus the price paid and what style of player the keyboards are aimed at. This can range from the mobile producer, who just needs a small wired or wireless keyboard to throw into a shoulder bag, to the more advanced player who requires the aforementioned professional standard keyboard and where mobility is not so paramount.Like audio interfaces, MIDI keyboards should be easy to set up - hopefully plug and play - and many also come with software bundles to get you up and running in music production. Again we'll look at each of these bundles which usually represent hundreds of \$/£ of software, seemingly thrown in for free, to see how they really do shape up.Finally, of course, the actual controls and keyboards are also tested to see how responsive they can be. Keyboards, particularly at the lower price point, can be very cheap in feel so we also test how well they play for velocity (volume) and aftertouch (when you press the keys down further to trigger different sounds and effects).It's fair to say that the more you pay, the better and more piano-like this response, and the more controls you get, although as with cheap audio interfaces, there are some great controllers out there for less than \$/£100.Read more about how we test music making gear and services at MusicRadar. Disclaimer 18/11/25: Two new products have been added to the guide, including the new Akai MPK Mini IV and the recently reviewed Arturia MiniLab Mk3. The guide has been reordered to better suit users who want a DAW-specific controller. The how to choose section has been updated, as have the FAQs, and a new glossary of key terms has been added to the guide to help users understand some of the more technical terms.17/01/25: We've added expert verdict boxes to each of the product entries to add more insight from our review team. There's now a spec comparison table to allow readers to easily compare different models at a glance. MusicRadar's got your back Our team of expert musicians and producers spends hours testing products to help you choose the best music-making gear for you. Find out more about how we test. At a GlancemacOS 10.15 or later, 64-bit Intel or Apple Silicon Windows 10+, 64-bit Buy at Plugin BoutiqueTracktion's Waveform has been quietly becoming one of the best cross-platform DAWs on the market, all thanks to a series of updates in recent years that have added just about every feature the modern DAW use could ask for. Waveform's panel-based UI is not exactly unique, but it has a brilliant way of customising what you see so you can tailor your music production to your workflow. Recent updates have seen this UI redesigned, the engine upgraded, a slew of instruments and effects added, and lots of modulation and MIDI extras that both Bitwig and Ableton would be proud of. But this latest v13 update is the DAW's most significant as it adds clip launching and a decent wavetable synth to the Waveform arsenal. (Image credit: Tracktion)Tracktion Waveform Pro 13: Performance and verdictIn many ways, Tracktion has become a 'best of' compilation of the best elements of other DAWs, borrowing popular features and workflows, and the latest clip launch addition is obviously a feature made famous by Ableton Live. But Tracktion is by no means the first developer to lift the idea - stand up Apple and Bitwig, among others. And rather than being just a Hoover of great ideas, when Tracktion lifts a feature, it integrates it into the Waveform philosophy, like it's been there from the start. Also consider... (Image credit: Future)• Ableton Live 12 The daddy of clip-launching DAWs had a superb recent update to v12. • Bitwig Studio 5 Almost crazily creative, Bitwig Studio is redefining the DAW.The new Clip Launcher is a case in point, offering easy drag and drop clip filling and copying. Do this either from the browser or arrangement window, then play back in the now traditional vertical individual clip launching and horizontal scene launching for playing different sections. Even the mixer and arrange windows can be toggled using the tab key - familiar stuff!You can also record live performances (with Performance Recording) to edit later, and Follow Action options specify how (and how many) clips are played, while an Action Probability slider adds some chance to proceedings. Overall, the new Clip Launcher is obviously a highlight of Waveform 13 and slips effortlessly into the Waveform workflow, and it will be a feature that opens the DAW up to a whole range of new composers and live performers. Tracktion has also ensured the new Clip Launcher feature can be controlled by the big names in hardware so you can set it up with Novation's Launch and Akai's APC controllers. Aside from the new Wavetable synth (see below), other updates include improvements to the UI (v13 adds lots of colour options) plus user requested additions including mute while recording and an auto-monitor record mode. Want all the hottest music and gear news, reviews, deals, features and more, direct to your inbox? Sign up here. (Image credit: Tracktion)More waves for WaveformThe new Clip Launching feature has obviously been the big news for Waveform 13, but hopefully hasn't overshadowed the arrival of Wavetable, a fine new plugin synth. It looks like a lot of wavetable synths - probably because it is a lot like other synths of that nature - but don't let the rather flat UI fool you as there's a lot going on behind it. Wavetable has two wavetable oscillators, each of which has access to a very decent 150 wavetables spread over categories including Analog, Digital, Spectral, Synth and Vocal. You can also drag and drop your own .wav's onto each oscillator or load in Serum compatible tables. You only get around 50 presets but these are quite varied - everything from bold basses, to ethereal atmosphere with some realistic orchestral and string sounds thrown in. There's plenty to do modulation wise too, with four LFOs and macros plus three envelopes, making Wavetable a worthy addition to the Waveform fold.Making waves?Of all the major updates to Waveform over the last five years - and there have been a lot - this is the most dramatic as it gives the DAW all the tools it needs to compete with the big boys. There are four bundle options to choose from with the basic Waveform Pro (with Autotune and Melodyne) costing just \$199, so it can be one of the cheapest DAWs out there too. The price does max out at \$999 for the Everything Bundle, but that does include some of our favourite plugins, including Dawesome's Kult and Myth synths. There's also a free version (Waveform Free), which Computer Music magazine regularly highlights as one of the best free DAWs around. It might well have borrowed a lot from the big guns, but it has made these additions very much its ownSo any negatives then? You'll need to decide early on how you want your UI to stack up -there are so many options that it's easy to get bogged down with what you want, and we'd suggest having a couple templated that you can switch between, but to keep it a lot simpler than the one we have shown top left (for demonstration purposes only!). Waveform Pro might well have borrowed a lot from the big guns, but it has made these additions very much its own, and has become one of the sleekest and most powerful 'alternative DAWs' out there. And given its good value, it comes highly recommended.MusicRadar verdict: Great value, great features and a very slick workflow, Waveform 13 deserves to be right up there vying for your cash with the big names of the DAW world.Tracktion Waveform Pro 13: Hands-on demosTracktionSoftware Waveform 13 | Wavetable - Overview - YouTube Watch On Audio Tech TV Tracktion Waveform 13 - What's New? - YouTube Watch On Tracktion Waveform Pro 13: SpecificationsmacOS 10.15 or later. 64-bit Intel or Apple Silicon.Windows 10, 11. 64-bit.CONTACT: Tracktion

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