Reviews

Arturia KeyLab Essential Mk3 review

We don a white coat and mull this 'refreshed' batch of controllers

(Image: © Future)

MusicRadar Verdict ★★★★½

Better and slicker than its predecessor, delivering great controller features, quality design and easy DAW integration at a good price.

Pros

- + New screen with integrated backlit soft keys.
- + Excellent integration with Arturia Analog Lab V.
- + Advanced DAW scripts for the big five DAWs.
- + Good quality key bed.
- + MIDI output.

Cons

- - No CV outputs.

ARTURIA KEYLAB ESSENTIAL MK3: WHAT IS IT?

Arturia's affordable KeyLab Essential range has just been overhauled. Available in 49-note and 61-note versions in either black or white, we've got a white 61-note unit.

The core controls look much like its predecessor, but on closer inspection it's obvious the whole thing has had a considerable upgrade, with an excellent new display, improved backlit buttons and pads, and overall slicker casework.

Round the back, things have also changed, with a regular MIDI output joined by a software definable footswitch input (sustain, expression and footswitch). Meanwhile computer connectivity is now via USB-C, which doubles as a power input for standalone use. Alas, there are no CV outputs but we don't think that's much of a surprise at this price point.

(Image credit: Future)

ARTURIA KEYLAB ESSENTIAL MK3: PERFORMANCE AND VERDICT

The top panel has been reworked around the new display, which incorporates four backlit contextual buttons allowing flexible feature implementation. There are no longer specifically labelled Ableton Live or Arturia Analog Lab buttons. However, what you now have is a multifunction Part button that accesses a 2-layer editable keyboard split (a new feature) and also allows you to switch between two parts in Arturia's Analog Lab V. Further panel controls include arpeggiator, note hold and both scale and chord modes.

As before, behaviour of the faders, encoders and panel controls is defined by one of three program modes (Arturia, DAW and User), but this is now supported by the much more informative screen. Arturia mode is designed to control Analog Lab V and other Arturia synths, with faders, encoders and display soft keys assigned accordingly. The main rotary encoder is used for preset navigation and loading. Meanwhile grabbing other controls reveals their parameter names and values onscreen.

(Image credit: Future)

For DAW control mode, there are installable scripts for five main DAWs. As an example, in Logic Pro the channel navigation uses the main rotary encoder, meanwhile channel mute and solo are screen soft keys, and channel pan and level use fader and encoder nine. The remaining encoders and faders are automatically assigned to instrument controls. The assignments work better for some instruments than others, but with full parameter feedback on the display, it's easy to see what you're modifying. If you do want more specific assignments, the User program mode can be used in conjunction with Arturia's MIDI Control Centre software. This same software is used to adjust other settings such as the footswitch mode mentioned above.

The Keylab Essential Mk3 action is a hybrid synth-piano feel that is precise and reasonably springy, and mechanical noise is kept in check, which we like.

Meanwhile, the mod wheel and pitch bend are physically a bit lightweight, but function fine. Users benefit from a solid software bundle that includes Arturia Analog Lab V, Ableton Live Lite, two piano instruments (NI The Gentleman and UVI Model D), 40 free music lessons on Melodics and a 2-month trial subscription for Loopcloud.

All told, we really like this controller and it offers good features for the money. It's at its best integrating with Arturia's Analog Lab V, but the new display delivers good and immediate feedback, working very well with the script supported DAWs.

MusicRadar verdict: Better and slicker than its predecessor, delivering great controller features, quality design and easy DAW integration at a good price.

ARTURIA KEYLAB ESSENTIAL MK3: THE WEB SAYS

"A clean and tidy refresh that brings decent DAW integration to an already deeply embedded Arturia control party."
Sound On Sound

ARTURIA KEYLAB ESSENTIAL MK3: HANDS-ON DEMOS

Arturia

Sanjay C

JohnPaul Music UK

Patrick Breen

ARTURIA KEYLAB ESSENTIAL MK3: SPECIFICATIONS

- **KEY FEATURES** 61-note velocity sensitive keyboard with hybrid synth-piano feel, 8 touch and pressure sensitive pads, 2.5" bright LCD display with backlit contextual buttons, 1 main encoder, 9 rotary encoders, 9 x 30mm faders, 8 transport and 4 command buttons.
- **CONTACT:** Arturia