



# Arturia MiniLab MkII

£89

PC MAC

With a reduced library of bundled sounds, can the second version of this miniature keyboard make up for software losses with hardware gains?

> It's been over three years since Arturia released the original MiniLab (8/10, **cm196**), combining a two-octave MIDI keyboard controller with the Analog Lab software sound library. The keyboard itself impressed us with its stellar build quality, while Analog Lab gave it 5000 presets culled from the company's V range of vintage synth emulations, each with pertinent parameters auto-mapped to the hardware's rotary encoders.

It's with some dismay, then, that we have to kick off our review of MiniLab MkII with the bewildering revelation that one of its most notable new features is the ditching of 4500 of those presets in the transition to the new Analog Lab Lite, based on the also-new Analog Lab 2. You can upgrade to Analog Lab 2 from Analog Lab Lite for €89 (or the full-on V Collection 5 for €399), but this is certainly a very uncomfortable downgrade. You do also get licenses for Ableton Live Lite and UVI's

Grand Piano Model D Steinway piano ROMpler, the latter worth €79; but while both are welcome inclusions, we don't think they make up for the wanton slashing of Analog Lab. Live Lite is bundled with all manner of hardware these days and the piano, albeit excellent, doesn't feel particularly at home in such an obviously synth-orientated package.

"The touchstrips are now located above the left-hand end of the keyboard rather than next to it"

With that understood and taken into account, let's see take a look at MiniLab MkII on its own terms...

## Solid as a rock

A bus-powered USB device for Mac, PC and iOS, MiniLab's array of keys and controls remain unchanged with MkII. It's still a 25-key 'board with pitch and mod touchstrips in place of wheels, 16 rotary encoders and eight trigger pads. It also still features dedicated buttons for shifting octaves up/down and switching the pads between two banks (1-8 and 9-16), and a Shift modifier for using the pads to flit between eight MIDI maps in internal memory, and the first 16 keys for MIDI channel selection.

The layout has changed slightly, though, in that the touchstrips are now located above the left-hand end of the keyboard rather than next to it. This makes the unit almost 2cm

“MiniLab MkII’s brawn, fit, finish, playability and general air of confidence put it in a class of its own without compromising too much”

narrower, but a 29mm increase in depth counteracts that shrinkage by increasing the footprint from 373x191mm to 355x220. With the profile remaining at an acceptable 50mm, however, it’s still a pleasingly compact package, slipping comfortably into the average laptop bag.

Arturia state that MiniLab MkII has been comprehensively beefed up in every material department, and we can confirm that its already admirable solidity has only been improved. It might be all-plastic apart from the base, but there’s none of the creak and flex that controllers in this price range all too frequently exhibit – this is the level of quality we generally expect in keyboards costing three times as much. The upgrade has brought with it a 50% increase in weight (up to 1.5kg from 1.03kg), but we’re quite happy to trade a bit of shoulder ache for such tank-like construction.

The unit as a whole also looks a bit more modern, mostly thanks to the switch from ‘diving board’- to piano-style mini-keys, the switch from black to white touchstrips, and the dramatic reduction of the faux wooden end cheeks down to inlays (they might as well just get rid of them altogether, when it comes to the crunch). It all comes together to give the whole thing a more concise, airtight, aesthetically coherent appearance.

## Better buttons

MiniLab MkII’s functional enhancements are few but significant. The pads are now pressure- as well as velocity-sensitive and RGB backlit, with colours editable in the free MIDI Control Center mapping editor; and rotary encoders 1 and 9 double as push buttons and serve a different role in Analog Lab Lite. While rotary 1



Design MIDI controller maps in MIDI Control Center, then store up to seven of them within the MiniLab MkII



In Analog Lab Lite, you still get a good wedge of classic synth sounds

## Analog Lab Lite

While owners of MiniLab v1 can continue to enjoy the 5300-odd V Collection-derived presets of Analog Lab 2 (last year’s free upgrade to Analog Lab, introducing a new look, improved browser and extra presets), investors in MkII only get a tenth that number in Analog Lab Lite (VST/AU/AAX/standalone). Nonetheless, it’s still a worthy inclusion, comprising 500 sounds from Arturia’s 17-strong roster of classic and vintage synth emulations – Minimoog, Prophet 5, CS-80, Jupiter 8, ARP 2600 et al.

Getting up and running with Analog Lab Lite is a quick and painless process thanks to the perfectly amenable Arturia Software Center, which acts as a hub for registering, downloading,

updating and activating all your Arturia stuff. Enter the serial number and unlock code on the base of the MiniLab MkII to activate the software and you’re all set. Loading sounds is done by selecting synths in a virtual studio-style GUI or navigating the tagged browser, and the keyboard’s rotary encoders are automatically assigned to the most relevant parameters for the loaded preset (filter cutoff, LFO depth, envelope time, etc), with reassignment to a handful of alternative made possible in the software. A handful of Multis layer or split two sounds in a single preset, with the encoders switchable between controlling either one, or serving as macros, governing multiple parameters from both.

controlled the master volume and knob 9 scrolled through presets in the original Analog Lab, loading your selection after a brief pause, in Analog Lab Lite (and, indeed, the full Analog Lab 2) both are instead used to navigate the browser. 9 rolls through the filters on the left, while 1 scrolls through the filtered list on the right, and pressing them activates the currently selected filter or loads the currently selected preset.

The sensitivity of the touchstrips has been boosted, too, and we didn’t encounter any of the cut-off note issues reported in our MiniLab review last time around.

## Lab report

While there are smaller, lighter MIDI keyboards out there at the same price point, MiniLab MkII’s brawn, fit, finish, playability and general air of confidence put it in a physically superior class of its own without compromising too much on portability. We’re not at all happy about the software situation, clearly, but if you put that to one side and approach MiniLab MkII as a supremely affordable MIDI controller for studio and mobile use that happens to come with what amounts to a demo of the full Analog Lab, it’s an absolute belter. **cm**

Web [www.arturia.com](http://www.arturia.com)

## Alternatively

**CME Xkey cm197 » 9/10 » £89**

Full-size keys and polyphonic aftertouch, but no knobs

**Novation Launchkey Mini cm199 » 7/10 » £90**

Great feature set, plus Ableton Live integration, but lesser build quality

## Verdict

**For** Amazing build quality  
Great keyboard  
Analog Lab Lite is cool  
RGB pads with aftertouch  
Insane price!

**Against** A tenth of the sounds that came with v1

MiniLab MkII places less emphasis on bundled software than its predecessor but improves the hardware beyond its already high standard. We love it!

9/10