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M-Audio Axiom Pro 61 Quick Pick Review

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Oxygen, Keystation, Axiom — why does M-Audio need yet another line of MIDI controllers? In a word: HyperControl, M-Audio's answer to the question, "Isn't there an easier way for me to get my buttons, knobs and sliders to control my software in a useful way?" When directly supported by host applications,



M-Audio's Axiom Pro series keyboards offer extraordinarily tight bidirectional integration with DAWs, thanks to their new HyperControl protocol.

HyperControl gives the Axiom Pro 61 (\$559) control over channels, transport, plug-ins and more. At the same time, HyperControl relays information about what it's controlling to the Axiom Pro.

The current list of applications that support HyperControl includes Steinberg Cubase, Apple Logic, Propellerhead Reason, Digidesign Pro Tools and Ableton Live. The Axiom Pro can also use MIDI to control any DAW or stand-alone virtual instrument. M-Audio's familial relationship with Digidesign means its engineers were able to achieve a level of Pro Tools support not present in most third-party control surfaces or in any other keyboard I'm aware of. In each of the directly supported applications, the Axiom Pro recognizes and displays the names of tracks, plug-ins and parameters.

KEYBOARD CONTROL CENTRAL

The Axiom Pro comes in three sizes, with 25, 49 or 61 semiweighted keys that have mono aftertouch. Each is outfitted with illuminated transport controls, eight continuous rotary encoders, eight velocity- or pressure-sensitive pads, octave up/down buttons, a mod wheel, a pitch wheel and a graphic 128x64-pixel LCD with associated function buttons. The 61- and 49-key versions add a few more function buttons, a numeric keypad and nine faders with corresponding illuminated buttons. Their feature set is similar to that of the Axiom series, but the Pro's keys, knobs and sliders are all upgraded — and then there's HyperControl.

Street prices for the Pro series are as much as \$260 more than for the corresponding Axioms, so you'd expect a lot of advantages from HyperControl. That's a lot of money to a cheapskate like me, but I understood why it could be worth it the first time I fired up Native Instruments FM8 in Pro Tools and saw 137 pages of parameters available by name on the Axiom Pro's LCD. Every other plug-in and virtual instrument I tried worked just as smoothly. Operation in Pro Tools and Logic was almost completely glitch-free.

Because paging through parameters is too time-consuming in performance, the Axiom Pro is fully programmable. You can save as many as 50 onboard presets to recall whatever configuration a particular gig or tune calls for. You can program many controls — the numeric keypad, the transport, the slider buttons, the F-keys and the pads — to send ASCII keystrokes with any combination of modifier keys.

BETTER CALL A PRO

The Axiom Pro makes a very good controller keyboard with a positive semiweighted action. The throw of the keys feels slightly shallower than that of my Keystation Pro 88 before the aftertouch zone kicks in. The pads are responsive and precise — I had no trouble playing a crescendo that looked in velocity view as though I had drawn it with the line tool. The keyboard and the pads have adjustable velocity curves to fit your playing style. The sliders wait until you catch the previous value before taking effect — a behavior I strongly favor because it prevents parameter jumps. The LCD shows the previous value, so you can see exactly where to expect it to catch.

The rotary encoders are continuous, so there's no need for this behavior; however, I'd still like to see the parameter values update on the LCD when changing pages or functions.

I encountered two minor bugs when using the Axiom Pro with Pro Tools 8: The wrong slider button lit when I selected tracks that followed hidden tracks, and occasionally, when tracks were hidden and then shown, I could no longer bank the faders back to the first track. M-Audio is aware of both issues and expects to fix them in a free update. In addition, the keyboard and pads sometimes double-triggered notes; it didn't happen often, but it wasn't a fluke. I couldn't reproduce the double triggers except by flicking the edge of a key, which admittedly is not a typical playing technique. Still, it concerned me enough that M-Audio promptly sent me a replacement unit. The second keyboard also double-triggered when I flicked the edge of a key, but it has not misbehaved under normal playing conditions.

As a keyboard, the Axiom Pro is good, but HyperControl makes it a winner. It neatly bridges the gap between control surface and controller keyboard.

Overall rating (1 through 5): 4

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