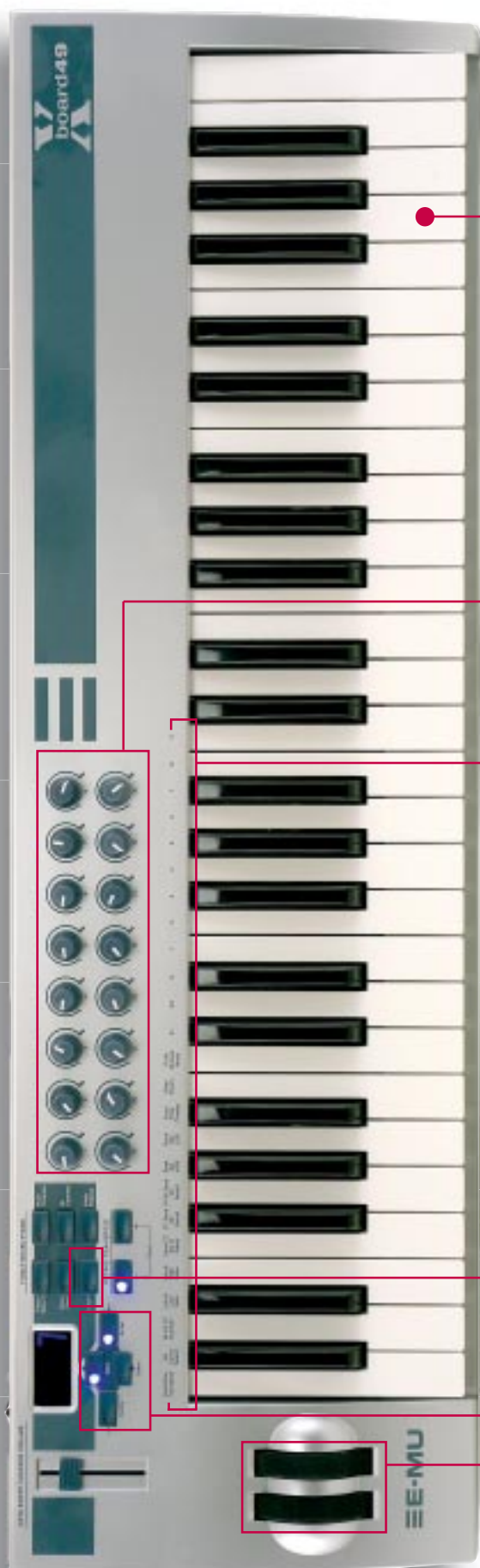


E-MU XBOARD 25 AND 49

25- AND 49-KEY USB/MIDI CONTROLLERS

by Michael Gallant



Keyboard action is impressive, especially given how little the Xboards weigh.

Keys are labeled with different program-mable parameters, so you can quickly customize in Edit mode.

Sixteen control knobs let you do deep tweaking in real-time.

Edit buttons make for fast, intuitive programming of the Xboards 16 available patches.

Latch mode lets you define a zone and toggle notes on and off, leaving your hands free to do other things.

Pitch and mod wheels have a textured grip and provide good resistance.

25- and 49-key USB/MIDI controller keyboards with editing, recording, and virtual instrument software.

PROS
Keyboard action is arguably the best in its class. Light and portable. Editing/programming is fast and intuitive. Multiple power source options, including AA batteries. Inexpensive.

CONS
Buttons feel cheap.

E-mu,
www.emu.com,
888-372-1372

\$229.99, Xboard 49;
\$199.99, Xboard 25



OVERVIEW

Two of the newest — and least expensive — entries in the featherweight keyboard controller category are the internally-identical E-mu Xboards 25 and 49, super-totable tools that can just as easily be USB'd to your DJ set in Ableton Live or MIDI cabled to your Roland V-Synth XT. Along with an impressive keyboard action and intuitive editing capabilities, the Xboards also come with three pieces of software — a programming interface, Ableton Live 4 Lite (full version reviewed November '04), and E-mu's Proteus X LE, a scaled-down version of their excellent soft synth (reviewed July '05). And with street prices well under \$200, both axes offer an intriguing amount of production power for the dollar.

HARDWARE

The Xboards' synth keyboard action is surprisingly solid and satisfying, especially given the lightness of the controllers. "The action feels good and smooth," commented Matt Moldover, New York producer/electronic artist/mash-up specialist and my guest set of fingers for this review. "And it's got aftertouch, which is very cool." Sixteen control knobs give you lots of tweaking power, and each knob can either be assigned to its own MIDI channel and controller number, or set to affect the same parameter on 16 separate channels via the aptly-titled 16 Channel mode. The knobs are sturdy enough and provide good resistance, though Matt said, "I prefer the feel of the knobs on the M-Audio Oxygen 8." Matt and I agreed that the buttons on the Xboards didn't feel as robust and well-put-together as the keyboard action, and they rattled slightly with heavier playing. "They feel kind of cheesy," said Matt. "They float around."

A useful controller in a number of settings, the Xboard can receive power from a number of sources — USB from your computer, an optional 6-Volt adapter, or three AA batteries. I was impressed by the battery life; as of publication, a fresh set of Duracell AAs has given my Xboard 49 well over a week of juice, and it's still going strong.

INTERFACE AND EDITING

E-mu built their Xboards with easy-to-learn, comprehensive editing capabilities. It's a simple matter to find your way around the user-friendly interface and use it to send program changes, adjust velocity curves, set parameters for Latch mode, and so on. The Edit button gets you into Edit mode, pressing the appropriately-labeled key gives you access to the corresponding parameter, and both the master slider and keys assigned to digits 0-9 help you set that parameter's new value. MIDI experts will have this down in seconds, and newbies won't be far behind them.

The attractive blue LED screen gives useful prompts — telling you to select a parameter or indicating what MIDI channel you're currently working on, for example — and the blinking Enter button is also useful, indicating when it's time to select and execute an edit value. With the help of labeled keys and a well-written

CREATE AND CUSTOMIZE

As inexpensive, light, and easy to play as they are, the Xboards sparked my creativity in an unexpected way. What if I were to bolt a pair of them back to back, attach a neck and a strap, and use it like a dual manual keytar? Or what if I could fix one upside-down to some sort of boom stand? Or better yet, get five of them, link them to Cycling '74's Jitter software, put them in a circle hanging from the mast of a yacht . . . well, you get the idea. The point is, the Xboards are inexpensive, light, sturdy, and they get the job done, making them ideal candidates for whatever crazy MIDI customizations you can dream of. Since the units I got to play on belonged to E-mu, I erred on the side of caution and kept my duct tape and electric screwdriver safely in the toolbox, so I can't report first-hand on how the Xboards would hold up under West Coast Chopper treatment. If you've tried anything like this, though, *Keyboard* would love to hear how you fared — don't hesitate to send your pictures and stories our way!

CLAIM CHECK

Derk Hagedorn, E-mu's marketing manager, writes: "E-mu designed the Xboards to offer musicians competitively-priced USB/MIDI controllers with full-size keys and playability superior to other USB keyboards, as well as innovative performance features and easy-to-use programming software. The Xboards are meant for any musician who cares about the quality of the keyboard action of their USB/MIDI controller, and wants the flexibility to easily program patches. No competing controller comes close to the kind of programming that the Xboard Control software offers.

"The Xboards are remarkably compact for having full-size keys as well as ultra-portable — perfect for stage and studio use — and run on USB, battery, or AC power. The included Proteus X LE software gives users a powerful software instrument with over 1,000 sounds that have already been set up for all of the real-time control knobs, and unlike most 'LE' instrument versions, can be further expanded with any E-mu Proteus X or Emulator X expansion soundset, including the sounds of E-mu's most popular modules like Mo'Phatt, Virtuoso 2000, and many more."

owner's manual, programming the Xboard is more like exploring with a well-drawn map than wandering in the desert. And speaking of editing. . .

SOFTWARE AND DRIVERS

The Xboards come with an intuitive computer-based editor application that works bidirectionally with the controllers and lets you program patch setups, filters, velocity curves, etc. (see "Xboard Control," at left). I installed the drivers for the Xboards in both my Toshiba Satellite laptop (running on a Pentium 4 2.8GHz processor with 480MB of RAM) and a *Keyboard* studio Mac G4 (1.42GHz and 1GB of RAM) and found the process quick and painless. Also nice is that both the 25 and 49 work with the same drivers, so you can swap one for the other without any trouble.

Bundled with the Xboards are limited versions of two excellent pieces of software: E-mu's own Proteus X and Ableton Live 4. Beginners will definitely benefit from getting a controller, a virtual instrument, and recording program all in one box, but more experienced music techies may well want to upgrade to the full versions, assuming they don't have them already. Note that, while the Xboard editor program works on both PC and Mac, the bundled versions of Live and Proteus X are PC only.

IN USE

I used the Xboards in a number of contexts: linked via MIDI cable to a Dave Smith Evolver, as a second keyboard manual for the Yamaha P250, and as a controller for sequencing and playing soft synths in Steinberg Cubase SX and Ableton Live. As previously mentioned, I was impressed off the bat by the Xboard's quality touch. When I had it hooked up to the P250, for example, I felt good playing both distorted organ sustains and dynamically-diverse jazz riffs, something I'm generally not comfortable doing on synth-action keys. Furthermore, the facility with which I could adjust the keyboard's velocity curve (four button presses to complete the change from start to finish — not bad at all for that level of editing) made it easy to customize my instrument to the style and patch I was using.

I found the other parameters of the controllers easy to edit as well, and had particular fun with the Latch mode capabilities, at one point laying down an oboe drone, then using one hand to tweak the drone's filter in real time on the Xboard and the other to improvise a melody over it on the P250. Matt's experiences were on par with my own — he found the keyboard's editing and programming capabilities instantly accessible and intuitive, simply from the data entry labels attached to the controller.



XBOARD CONTROL

As communicative as the Xboards' blinking screen is, the computer-based interface is very helpful in its own right — parameters are clearly labeled and you can see the results of your tweaking in real time. There are also several programming functions you can do *only* through the Control software: Assigning individual knobs to separate MIDI channels, naming controllers and patches, and reassigning the pitch bend wheel, among others. I found it especially cool how the program's virtual knobs became brighter shades of blue the higher their values are, making it easy to get an instant idea of where all of your parameters are.



DISPLAY

Not only is the Xboard's blue LED display easy enough to see even in the darkest club setting, it also indicates whenever MIDI parameters are being shifted — twirl a knob, for example, and the display will show the exact values you're scrolling through, 0-127. And after you've tweaked whatever you're tweaking, the display proceeds to flash in quick succession the relevant continuous control value, MIDI channel, and internal patch.

Michael Gallant plays and composes in northern California.

VITAL STATS

KEYBOARD ACTION

Synth action, 25 (Xboard 25) or 49 (Xboard 49) full size keys with aftertouch.

MIDI CONTROLLERS

16 knobs, pitch and mod wheels, one master slider.

PROGRAMMABLE PATCHES

16.

POWER SOURCE

USB, battery, or AC adapter.

BUNDLED SOFTWARE

Xboard Control, Proteux X LE (Windows only), Ableton Live Lite 4 (Windows only).

DIMENSIONS AND WEIGHT

Xboard 49, 3.12" H x 9.5" D x 31.12" L; 8.5 lbs.; Xboard 25, 3.12" H x 9.5" D x 18" L; 4.9 lbs.

It was also nice to find that the Xboards — even the larger of the two — weigh less than my Toshiba laptop. I never thought twice about tossing an Xboard in the car along with my computer for some off-site music creation. Feeling inspired by the redwoods to sequence some fat beats? As long as you've got your USB cable, you're good to go.

While I was playing and tweaking away, I did notice that the knobs each gave me slightly different tactile resistance. For my uses in MIDI sequencing, composing using notation software, and even playing and tweaking soft synths in real time, this didn't bother me. It might be something to think about for folks like Matt, though — DJs, remixers, and mashers who depend more on buttons, knobs, and sliders in live, real-time settings.

The mod and pitch wheels felt solid and gave me nothing to complain about, and the blinky-light-guided editing proved smooth throughout. I did have a rough spot with the buttons at the beginning of the testing process — the first Xboard 49 E-mu provided seemed to have several faulty switches. They assured me it was an isolated incident, though, and hooked me up with a new one, which worked perfectly, even after rigorous use.

CONCLUSIONS

If you're in the market for an inexpensive and super-portable MIDI controller, the Xboards are well worth looking at, and the easy, intuitive editing features also make the Xboards particularly attractive. The Xboards are knob-centric machines, so if you prefer to tweak with sliders, M-Audio's Radium49 could be good to check out. M-Audio's Oxygen 8 is a comparable competitor to the Xboard 25, though in a side-by-side comparison, I prefer the Xboard's keyboard action and greater amount of knobs. Interestingly enough, the closest thing I found to the Xboard's wedding of quality keyboard feel and portability was the M-Audio Ozonic, an axe that doubles as a Firewire audio interface and resides in a higher price bracket.

With the sounds from the Proteus and the sequencing abilities of Live, E-mu offers quite a tasty all-in-one package with their Xboards. If you're a beginner looking to dive into the world of MIDI, a pro shopping for a versatile featherweight controller, or a mad scientist looking to create the wildest Frankensynth ever to walk the earth, E-mu's latest definitely deserve to be checked out. 