



Fig. 1. The Graphite M32 provides enough keys for melodic, chordal, and bass sequencing while remaining small enough to slip into a carry-on bag.

Samson Graphite M32, M25, MD13, and MF8

Portable USB MIDI controllers for nearly every occasion

BY GINO ROBAIR

SUMMARY

STRENGTHS Portable and lightweight. Convenient layout. Software editor. Stores user presets.

LIMITATIONS No footswitch inputs.

Graphite M32 \$69.99 street

Graphite M25 \$79.99 street

Graphite MD13 \$59.99 street

Graphite MF8 \$59.99 street
samsontech.com

SOMEONE ONCE said that controlling a DAW with your mouse is like painting a picture through a keyhole, and most of us would agree. A MIDI controller is one of the best workflow enhancements you can have. The more affordable and robust it is, the better.

The four products in Samson's Graphite M Series—M25, M32, MD13, and MF8—are suitable for use with desktop and laptop setups, as well as with the Apple iPad. In addition to being lightweight and housed in hard, sturdy plastic, all four controllers are USB bus powered and designed for a variety of settings—onstage, in the studio, and traveling.

Each controller includes a cable with standard USB connectors. (iPad users will need an Apple Camera Connection Kit.) Samson offers a free software editor that works with all four units. (You'll find it under the Download tab for the M25 and M32 product pages at Samsontech.com.) Simply launch the editor, select your controller from the pull-down menu, map the controls to your DAW, and then save the mapping as a preset to the controller itself. To recall the preset, use the pads on the M25 and MD13 or one of the F buttons on the MF8. The M32 stores only one preset at a time.

With Keys, Please As you would expect, the Graphite M32 and M25 have 32- and 25-note velocity-sensitive keyboards, respectively, yet each weighs a mere 2 lbs.;

they fit easily into the pocket of a carry-on bag or backpack. Both keyboards offer Aftertouch and include a Prog button that initiates Program mode, in which the upper 11 notes on the keybed (labeled 0 through 9, and Enter) can be used to send Program Change data.

Besides having the most keys, the Graphite M32 (see Figure 1) has the fewest controllers—pitch bend and modulation strips, a programmable volume knob and data slider, and five buttons (Oct -, Oct +, Sustain, CC, and Prog). As you would expect, pressing Sustain holds the notes you're playing for as long as you press the button, and CC allows you to send Control Change data.

The Graphite M25, on the other hand, has a data wheel, Pad and Preset buttons, five transport controls, four velocity-sensitive pads, and eight rotary encoders (see Figure 2). Hold down the rewind and fast-forward buttons to engage Panic mode, which quickly resets channel and port connections if a MIDI note gets stuck.

The Pad button switches between two assignable pad banks. The pads also send Aftertouch and can transmit Control Change messages when you're in CC mode. Use the software editor to set the pads into momentary or latching behavior. You can access your MIDI presets by hitting the Preset button and selecting the pad that holds the configuration you want.

Fig. 2. Despite having fewer keys, the Graphite M25 has pads and rotary encoders that are perfect for real-time control.



Fig. 3. The velocity-sensitive pads on the Graphite MD13 offer Aftertouch and can be used melodically or as percussion and event triggers.



Fig. 4. The Graphite MF8 provides plenty of DAW control in a highly portable package.



Twistin' and Slidin' The MD13 offers 13 velocity-sensitive pads with Aftertouch, arranged chromatically in an octave (see Figure 3), six rotary encoders, a crossfader (useful in DJ-related apps or programmable as a generic continuous controller), a data wheel, and eight buttons. CC and Prog work as they

did on the keyboards; in this case, Program Change data is sent from pads P1 through P10.

The Shift button works in combination with the Play/Record button to send a secondary data message. To select one of the MD13's five presets, press Preset and hit pad P1 through P5.

If you don't want pads or a keyboard

on your controller, the MF8 is the ticket. It provides eight tracks of controls, each with a separate knob and fader, as well as buttons for solo/mute and record-enable (see Figure 4). Using the Shift key allows you to send a secondary message from the solo/mute buttons; they light red or green depending on which message—primary or secondary—you send, making it easy to keep track of the function of each.

The MF8 gives you a full complement of transport controls (play, stop, record, fast forward, and rewind) and five function keys, in addition to Preset and channel-increment and -decrement buttons. A data wheel and crossfader complete the picture.

The MF8 also holds five presets, which you select by pressing Preset and the appropriate function button. On their own, the function buttons can be programmed to send control information or MIDI Note messages, with the option of setting them in momentary or latching mode.

The More the Merrier I used all four of the Samson controllers with Apple Logic Pro X and Ableton Live 9 Suite, and they are essentially plug and play, working easily without a hitch. The controller you use will depend on the style of music you make and where you are in the production cycle. For example, you might use the M25 for sequencing parts while mapping the knobs to important performance parameters such as filter cutoff or modulation rate. On the other hand, keyboard players might prefer having more notes over real-time parameter control, so the 2.5-octave MD32 is the place to start.

If you prefer a pad interface for sequencing percussion and bass parts, the MD13 is perfect and provides a data wheel, slider, and knobs for real-time tweaking. And when it comes time to mix, you could call the MF8 into action and use it to write automation on banks of eight tracks at a time.

The good news is that you can use several of the Graphite controllers in tandem, giving yourself access to the number of knobs, faders, buttons, and keys that makes the most sense for your personal style. The footprint of each controller is small enough that having two or more doesn't require much space, and their low cost doesn't take much of a bite out of your pocketbook. And the more you use them, the more you'll wonder how you worked without them. ■

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