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A MUSIC PLAYER PUBLICATION

**First Look!** Mackie DLM Series Portable P.A.s  
Rock a Hybrid Analog/Digital Production Rig  
**Reviews:** Sonic Charge Permut8 • Izotope Iris

## Samson Graphite 49

USB keyboard/DAW

control surface

\$299.99 MSRP, \$199.99 street

[samsontech.com](http://samsontech.com)

Keyboard controllers range from “I just want a keybed with a minimal budget hit” to elaborate affairs with enough faders and buttons to look like a mixing console with a keyboard attached. Samson’s Graphite falls between those two extremes—but its capabilities lean more toward the latter, while price leans more toward the former. It’s compact, cost-effective, solid, and definitely worth a close look.

**Overview** Graphite 49 has 49 full-size, semi-weighted keys with velocity and aftertouch. (It’s not “afterswitch,” but rather, is quite smooth.) Controllers include nine 30mm faders, eight “endless” rotary encoders, 16 buttons, four drum pads, transport controls, octave and transpose buttons, mod wheel, and pitch bend. Connectors consist of a standard-sized USB connector, 5-pin MIDI out, sustain pedal jack, and a jack for a 9V adapter—generally not needed as Graphite 49 is bus-powered, but if you’re using it with something like an iPad and Camera Connection Kit, tone module, rack synthe, etc., you’ll need an AC adapter.

Despite the low price, I don’t think reliability will be an issue—the box showed obvious signs of serious “UPS abuse,” but it worked as soon as plugged in.

**Operational Modes** Graphite 49 has four main modes. Performance mode is optimized for playing virtual synthesizers or hardware tone modules, and provides full access to its hardware controllers. Zone mode has a master keyboard orientation, with four zones to create splits and layers, but the controllers aren’t in play except for pitch bend, modulation, and pedal. Preset mode revolves around control surface capabilities for several popular programs, while Setup mode is for creating custom presets or edits.

There’s a relationship among these modes; for example, any mode you choose will be based on the current preset. So, if you create a preset with Zone assignments and then go to Performance mode without changing presets, the Performance will adopt Zone 1’s settings.

**Control Surface Options** The control surface capabilities are under-documented; you’d never even know that Graphite 49 is Mackie Control-compatible. Fortunately there’s now a link at the [samsontech.com](http://samsontech.com) site that details how to use Graphite 49 with various programs, but you’ll need some controller and MIDI savvy to create your own presets.

I tested the presets for Apple Logic, Avid Pro Tools, Ableton Live, Cakewalk Sonar, Propellerhead Reason, MOTU Digital Performer, Sony Acid Pro (also Sony Vegas), and PreSonus Studio One Pro. They all worked exactly as advertised, but note that Reason control is intended for individual modules (e.g., you can control the mixer, synth, or effects devices, but only individual channels in the “SSL” mixer as each channel is a separate device). There are also presets for Steinberg Cubase and Nuendo, Mackie Tracktion, MK Control (whatever that is!), Adobe Audition, FL Studio, and Magix Samplitude as well as 14



user-programmable presets and a default, general-purpose Graphite preset. I’d like to be able to save and load presets via Sys Ex, but 14 user presets will likely be all most people need.

The faders control level while the rotaries edit pan, with the buttons usually controlling solo and mute, with some variations. The Bank buttons change the group of 8 channels being controlled (e.g., from 1-8 to 9-16), while the Channel buttons move the group one channel at a time (e.g., from 1-8 to 2-9), and there are also transport controls. With Pro Tools, you need to select HUI mode, which doesn’t support the Bank and Channel shifting.

The adoption of the Mackie Control protocol is vastly more reassuring than, for example, M-Audio’s proprietary DirectLink control for their Axiom keyboards, which usually lagged behind current software versions. We’ll see whether these presets can be updated in the future, but it seems that the “DAW-specific preset element” relates mostly to labeling control functions, as the Mackie protocol handles the inherent functionality; besides, you can always . . .

**Roll Your Own** Editing follows the usual cost-saving arrangement of entering setup mode, then using the keyboard keys (with—thank you!—highly readable labels above the keys) to enter data. The relatively large and informative display is also helpful. Thankfully Samson has developed a software editor, but the front-panel programming is pretty transparent.

Rather than describe all the possible edits, some of the highlights are choosing one of seven velocity curves as well as three fixed values (individually selectable for the keyboard and pads), reversing the fader direction for use as drawbars with virtual organ instruments, assigning controls to the five virtual MIDI output ports, changing the aftertouch assignment to a controller number, and the like. Also note that the pads, sliders, rotaries, and buttons have *two* separate banks so you can access double the number of parameters compared to the number of physical controls.

**Pretty Darn Slick** Overall, this is a highly capable and appealing controller—it even comes with Native Instruments’ *Komplete Elements*, which is a sweet bonus. Although Samson is a new name in controllers, Graphite 49’s full-size keys, compact footprint, comfortable keybed, control surface capabilities, and pleasing aesthetic design are a big deal—and at this attractive price point, you’re also getting serious value. Samson is a new name in controllers, but Graphite 49 and its related keyboard Carbon 49 (less expensive and very iPad-friendly) have made an auspicious beginning. Graphite’s full-size keys, compact footprint, comfortable keybed, control surface capabilities, and pleasing aesthetic design are a big deal—and at this price, you’re also getting serious value.