

NOVATION REMOTE SL

Where there's software there's got to be control.
Novation has the hardware.

Text: Derek Johnson



► The world will never go completely soft. The fact is that people require hardware to interact with the virtual world. This is especially the case in music circles, where the computer's mouse and keyboard are not *enough* hardware.

Knobs, sliders, buttons and keys are where it's at, and few companies do it as well as Novation. Its ReMote 25 controller keyboard, released a couple of years ago, scored through packing a lot of controls into a compact USB-equipped 25-note keyboard controller. It formed the basis of a small family (siblings were equipped with more keys) and sold heaps.

The time inevitably came for the range to undergo a revamp. And Novation has really gone to town. The ReMote 25 SL is a little pricier than other USB controller keyboards in its size bracket, but it offers a feature set unmatched by any other manufacturer. It goes without saying that the unit, again equipped with a 25-note keyboard (transposable over the full Midi range, with four key-splittable controller zones), offers a lot of controls. But the real interest starts with the controller's two huge (two-line by 72-character) liquid crystal displays: editing and interacting with controller templates has seldom been such a pleasant experience. This is the SL – Soft Label – side of things, and the new ReMote's LCDs beat the interchangeable cardboard labels of its predecessors hands down.

You may have never wished that a controller could look at your plug-ins and instantly set up a template, but the engineers at Novation obviously have. That's what ReMote 25 SL does, to a certain extent, and with certain software. Welcome to Automap, SL's unique selling point No. 2!

THE PACKAGE

The look of the ReMote 25 SL is definitely a good one – a shiny black and chrome mix that's contemporary without looking tacky. It's a solid, weighty design and the keyboard itself, though small, has a quality feel to it. The quality spreads to the package as a whole: an excellent printed start-up guide is joined by a DVD that offers not just some bits

of useful software but a great video tutorial and a free copy of Novation's quality Virtual Bass Station VST instrument. Note that no drivers are required for Windows XP or Mac OSX – truly, it's just plug and play (with the supplied USB cable). You may be advised to buy an external PSU if you work with a laptop, though; otherwise the controller is bus powered with batteries also an option (rechargeables trickle charge from the USB connection).

Most of the SL's huge control set are arranged in 'eights' on the front panel: four rows of eight buttons, eight stepped rotary controllers, eight end-stopped knobs, eight sliders and finally eight velocity sensitive trigger pads. Most kinds of Midi data can be assigned to these controls – note data, continuous controllers, SysEx and so on. These controls all line up, logically, with the big LCDs, which means that when tweaking you're looking at the ReMote 25 SL, not your computer monitor – that's a good thing.

Another good thing is that each control row can effectively be assigned to three sets of parameters, with subsidiary assignments accessed via some discreet selector buttons to the left or right (depending on which side the controls are on). It's all fiendishly clever. Further buttons navigate the SL's operating system, and scroll through 'pages' of assignable parameters in Automaps – we'll summarise this side of things shortly.

That's not the end of the controls: a set of buttons labelled as Standard Sequencer Transport switches are also user-defineable, and a pair of pedal sockets can be found on the back panel. Don't forget assignable aftertouch from the main keyboard, either.

A full range of Midi In/Out/Thru connections – there are two Outs, by the way – make the 25 SL a good all-round Midi interface for your computer, too.

GET INSIDE

Let's jump straight to the Automap side of things. As the unit stood when I played with it, the SL was Automapped for two packages: Propellerhead's Reason virtual studio and a large collection of VST instruments accessed within Steinberg's Cubase SX or SL. [Novation has recently added Nuendo 3, Ableton Live and Logic Pro 7 to the Automap family – Ed.] Essentially, an Automap is a little software widget stored on your hard drive that is instantly loaded into the ReMote SL whenever a given device is called up. It may sound simple when you see it work, but it represents a lot of work on the part of the developers. Perhaps this is why no one else has done it before. You can also see why it'll take a little while for other applications and environments to be covered – watch the Novation website for details.



The closest link is with Reason: select any devices in the Reason rack from your computer or from the SL, and that device's parameters are automatically mapped to the SL knobs. Novation has tried to be consistent here, such that similar parameters across devices – filter frequency and resonance, say – are always mapped to the same SL knobs. Even the ReMix mixer and major transport controls are accessible from the hardware front panel. Currently, I'd have to say that the ReMOTE SL is the best all-round controller for Reason – it truly revolutionises the Reason experience.

With Cubase, only VSTi's can be accessed, and then just those for which Novation has created Automaps. The impact, though, is similar to what's experienced with Reason: onscreen software devices start to feel a lot more substantial and tweakable. Basic transport controls are available, but be prepared to get programming if you want to access the Cubase mixer (or the facilities of any other sequencing environment).

And never worry if a given plug-in (or Reason device) is too complex for the controls as you see them: handy buttons near the LCDs scroll through multiple screens of parameter assignments so that you can explore the depths of whatever is on screen just as you would a modern hardware synth.

THE HARD WAY

The Automap feature doesn't mean that ReMOTE SL has nothing to offer if your requirements are outside the covered applications. The controller functions brilliantly as a standard generic device, with full editability, not to mention lots of profiles for existing software. Three dozen standard parameter maps are provided, covering a wide range of Novation's own devices, as well as from developers such as Native Instruments, GMedia and Korg. (Again, check the website as templates are being added all the time.) In some cases, a profile is split across more than one preset.

All presets can be overwritten if you need to create your

own from scratch. Customising controller-to-parameter assignments has seldom been easier from a front panel, but even so, the recently released ReMOTE SL Editor makes life even easier. It's simple to look at but offers as much depth as you need. This is currently a download from the Novation website (not a part of the software DVD package), and is highly recommended. If you really want a laugh, have the software scan any VST plug-in and *automatically* create a template for you. Told you it was easy!

REMOTE PATROL

There are few issues with ReMOTE SL, most relating to a lack of comprehensive mix templates or Automaps, and the lack of more Automaps in general. The future holds all this and more! I'd like to see velocity switchable/cross-fading layers as well as key splits, too. Especially because:

Novation has more recently released three new ReMOTE SLs. If you're attracted to the idea of the SL but can't get your head around using just 25 keys, then read on. Novation has released a 37-key (I know that's an unusual configuration) version and a 61-key version of the SL. What's more, the ReMOTE Zero SL is about to be unleashed, which is a keyboard-less version of the SL series, designed to cater to those that require an Automap control surface but already have a Midi keyboard. All variants work in exactly the same way, with exactly the same feature set.

So that's that: an SL for just about everyone (except perhaps for those waiting for the 88-key fully-weighted version!). I can hardly recommend the ReMOTE SL more highly. If it initially seems a little pricier than its competition... well, I'd say there are grounds for suggesting it *has* no competition. Compare like for like, and no other controller offers a similar feature set.

The link with Reason is unmissable. If future Automaps are as tightly designed, the SL will continue to be the controller to aspire to. It doesn't often get better than this. ■



NEED TO KNOW

Price:
 ReMOTE 25 SL: \$899
 ReMOTE 37 SL: \$1099
 ReMOTE 61 SL: \$1199

Contact
 Innovative Music
 (03) 9540 0658
 sales@innovativemusic.com.au
 www.innovativemusic.com.au

Pros
 Big LCDs & Automapping
 Loads of controls
 Easy to use

Cons
 External PSU not supplied

Summary
 Novation's ReMOTE SL isn't the only range of controller key-boards around, but it is the only one with the Automap feature... and what a feature it is!