THE DIGITAL DJ GEAR BUYER'S GUIDE 2023/24

The ultimate guide to picking the right digital DJ gear & software while avoiding all the common pitfalls

DIGITAL DJ TIPS
THE GLOBAL DJ SCHOOL

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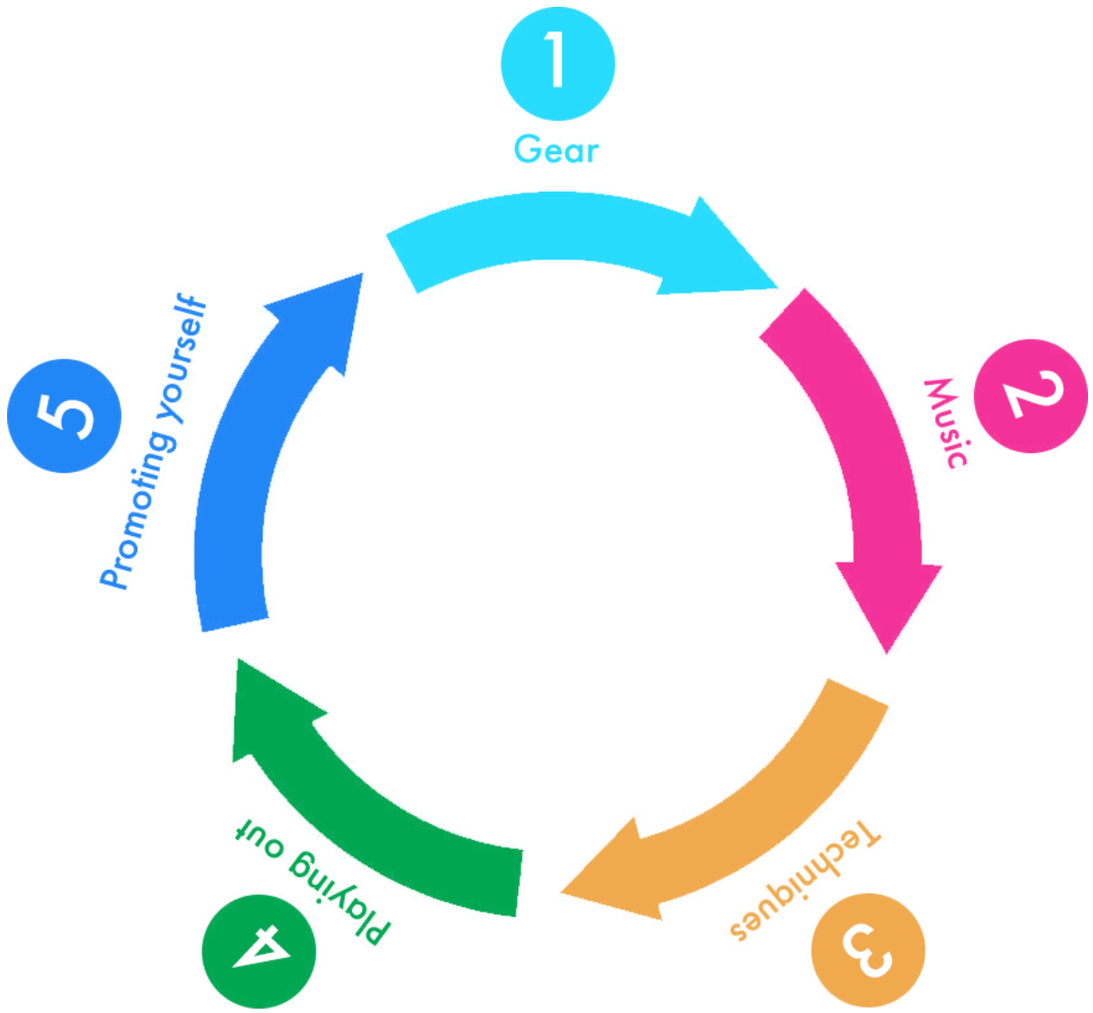
THE FIVE STEPS TO DJING SUCCESS



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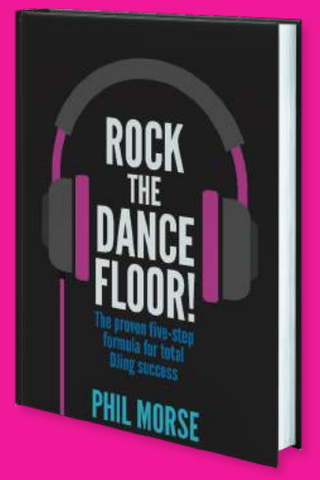

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A WORD FROM THE EDITOR

THE RANE ONE IS A MODERN, MOTORISED-PLATTER DJ CONTROLLER.

DJING HAS CHANGED SO MUCH THAT people returning to the game after a break may feel it is unrecognisable nowadays. In the past, everyone from beginners to the best-paid DJs in the world used basically the same gear to do basically the same thing. But in the last decade the options available have exploded, making DJing not only more accessible to more people than ever before, but also in many ways more complicated.

With the explosion in ways to DJ has come a big change in how the actual DJing is done, too. New features mean that the possibilities are wider than before, with DJs able to nail the basics in a fraction of the time it used to take, and those with elevated skill and creativity now able to do incredible things with today's gear that could barely have been dreamt of back in the old days.

But whether you're just starting out as a DJ, trying to up your game having dabbled a little, or indeed getting back into the hobby after a break (maybe an extended break...), it can be difficult to know where to start and what choices to make, given this huge range of systems, software and approaches.

Nowadays there are "DJ controllers" - clever boxes that plug into your laptop and let you DJ with software. There are "standalone" or "all in one" DJ systems, that let you DJ with music files saved to USB drives or SD cards. Then there are "digital vinyl" systems (usually shortened to "DVS") where you use traditional

turntables and mixers to control DJ software. Plus, you may have seen DJs playing with just a laptop, or just an iPad, or even a phone, leading you to wonder: "Do I even need specialised hardware at all to DJ nowadays?"

As soon as you start to seriously consider a purchase, you'll find yourself mired in decisions around what software platform to go for and whether you should choose a laptop or a tablet to DJ with, which systems have the features you need, how much it's really going to cost you once you factor in things like software and music subscriptions, and on and on. It's a far cry from the old days when everyone from Carl Cox to your mate Dave used Technics turntables and a simple DJ mixer!

That's what this guide is here to help you with. At Digital DJ Tips, we're the leading DJ school in the world, and we teach DJing in five areas: Gear, Music, Techniques, Performing, and Promoting Yourself. This guide is all about the first area: Gear. If you're just starting out down the digital DJing route - whether you're new to DJing entirely or just new to this way of doing things - this guide will ensure you make the right decisions, hopefully save you time, and just as importantly, help you to avoid expensive mistakes.

It draws on our many years of experience helping DJs take their first steps, and so we are pretty sure you'll find it useful in answering lots of the questions you're no doubt asking yourself, and to help you clear some of the confusion around buying digital DJing gear.

We're excited about how digital has changed DJing. It's brought the ability to DJ within the reach of practically any music fan who is motivated to learn. No longer do you need to invest many thousands in bulky equipment that's hard to move around and difficult to master; nowadays, you can spend a fraction of what it cost to get yourself set up 10 or 15 years ago, and - using easy-to-learn features - get yourself at least good enough to play your first "public" show in a fraction of the time it used to take.

Now of course, there's a big difference between mastering all the tools that digital offers you and actually becoming a good DJ! The effort that goes into doing that - developing the ability to read a crowd properly, learning to sensitively move from one track to the next, complementing rather than upsetting the flow of the music, developing deep musical knowledge - is a lifetime's work, as it always has been.

That's why we've made it our mission to help as many people as possible become great DJs and DJ/producers, through our world-leading training courses. We've trained over 37,000 students since 2010 - so once you have the gear you need and are ready to learn the skills, head to DigitalDJTips.com and browse our training. We work with some of the biggest names in the world, like DJ Jazzy Jeff, James Hype, Laidback Luke, DJ ANGELO and more.

However, you are going to need some gear... and that's what this guide is all about.

The beauty of digital is that it lets anyone have a go. Who's to say you might not be the next big DJ superstar? There's only one way to find out.

Happy digital DJing!

Phil Morse
Digital DJ Tips founder
August 2023

THE LAST 12 MONTHS IN DJING

THE DJING WORLD HAS CERTAINLY BOUNCHED BACK SINCE THE unprecedented COVID-19 times, with much activity from manufacturers putting new products and ideas into the market in the last year. Also there's been an explosion, it seems, in demand for DJs, with DJ fees rising fast according to promoters. And while there are still issues with the supply of equipment caused by the wider global supply chain issues, things do seem to be easing somewhat in that area, too.

The big shifts in the DJing world in the last few years - the move to subscriptions for software and services, "standalone" DJ systems catching up with laptop DJing as far as features go, and a slow but sure shift towards the cloud for music delivery - have continued apace, but in the past 12-18 months particularly, new trends have emerged that look set to define how DJing will develop for the next few years.

The first of these is (you won't be surprised to hear) AI. It's even crept into the name of one of the DJ apps, Algoriddim's djay Pro AI. AI is cropping up everywhere from music production to creating DJ set lists. Our view on AI is that it is good for doing the simple stuff so we can concentrate on the stuff only us humans can do. As DJs, we should be approaching it with an open but cautious mind, not thinking it will make us obsolete (or give us an unfair advantage over those not using it), but rather, as something that can make our daily DJing tasks more fun.

There's nothing wrong with using AI to suggest playlists, or to improve your DJ mixes, or to help you write your website, or to speed up your social media work - but our advice is just to remember that us humans add the creativity, the originality, the "devil may care", which is exactly what's needed on the dancefloor. Don't fear it, experiment with it - but don't ignore it, either.

One application of AI is stems - or more accurately, "real-time stems", the new battleground in DJ software. The ability for your DJ system to separate at least the vocals and music, but also the drums, melodies, basslines and more in your songs, in real time, so you can mute or solo any of those parts, is mind-boggling. At last, you've got access to instant acapellas, and can make convincing-sounding mashups and remixes, on the fly.

THE DENON DJ PRIME 4+ IS THE FIRST EVER STANDALONE DJ SYSTEM TO GET REAL-TIME VOCAL/INSTRUMENTAL SEPARATION, SOMETHING WE'RE EXPECTING TO BE ROLLED OUT TO ALL ENGINE DJ SYSTEMS IN THE NEXT 12 MONTHS.

KRK'S SMART NEW PORTABLE GOAUX 4 SPEAKERS COME WITH A MICROPHONE WITH WHICH YOU CAN TUNE THEIR AUDIO TO SUIT YOUR LISTENING ENVIRONMENT.

This year has seen Serato and Rekordbox software (now both owned by Pioneer DJ) both getting stems, joining VirtualDJ and djay Pro AI, who innovated in this space. Also this year, incredibly, we've seen a beta of stems on the Engine DJ platform, which is notable because Engine DJ is "embedded software" - in other words, it runs on DJ equipment that is standalone, without requiring a laptop to be plugged in at all.

This tech is still in its infancy (VirtualDJ and Serato's efforts actually sound pretty good, but djay Pro AI, Engine DJ and Rekordbox could definitely do with audio quality jumps to be more accepted by DJs), but this nonetheless is one of the most exciting changes in DJing for many years.

Another area where we've seen innovation is in the automating of DJ mixes. If DJing is about playing the right songs, for the people in front of you, right now (which, spoiler alert, it is), then frankly anything that can help you to do that is to be welcomed. Whether it's the simple mixing aids added to beginner controllers such as the Pioneer DJ DDJ-FLX4 or Hercules Inpulse 300 MkII, both launched this year, or "Mix Point Link", a way of automating mixes up to four tracks ahead added to the also new-for-2023 Pioneer DJ DDJ-FLX10, or the auto BPM transition feature on the brand-new Pioneer DJ DDJ-REV5 for Serato, DJ systems are offering DJs ever more ways of performing daring transitions more easily.

And while we're at it, why should a 60-minute DJ mix actually take 60 minutes to perform? Radio DJs, people making mixes to use in gym classes, and just busy DJs looking to throw a mix together to showcase their new tunes, might benefit from looking at a wildly innovative new piece of software launched this year called DJ.Studio, that at its heart helps you get a whole pile of tunes into a rough order, and presents you with a finished mix in seconds, for you to use as-is or dive in and tweak to your heart's content. It's a long way from two turntables and a pile of vinyl, but there's certainly a place for this kind of thing.

Finally, look out for smarter DJ and production studio speakers. One thing it's becoming increasingly common to see is speakers that can be "tuned" to suit the listening environment. From the decidedly pro approach adopted by Adam Audio in its new range (we reviewed the A4V this year), that use laptop software and a long process of sampling audio in the listening environment, to the simple room tuning offered by KRK's new GoAux4 portable monitor speakers, the idea of Digital Signal Processors (DSPs) improving your room audio is an exciting one, especially for hobby DJs who rarely get the perfect studio to DJ or make music in.

These are just some of the themes we've been covering over on Digital DJ Tips this last year, so as we look forward to the second half of 2023 and to 2024, rest assured that all of us here at Digital DJ Tips will be here to help you make sense of it all, make the right choices in your DJing, and ultimately to become better DJs and DJ/producers - that's what we're here for, after all!

Phil Morse - August 2023

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

THIS GUIDE IS DESIGNED TO BE USED ALONGSIDE THE online reviews on the Digital DJ Tips website. There, you'll find lots of recommended controllers, standalone systems, modular gear, production stuff, mixers and more in one place, with in-depth reviews and videos to help you in your buying decision.

The summaries here in this guide will help you to make sense of the masses of information we provide for you in those reviews. We suggest you immerse yourself in all the information in this guide first, in order to make sure you're aware of your options, and then browse the online reviews next, referring back here whenever you find something that you need clarification about. Should you just want to buy something right away without doing all the research, we offer you our top recommendations here too.

Finally, a couple of tips on how to approach choosing a DJ controller or standalone system. Practically all choices nowadays are good enough for you to learn to DJ on. Also, there is no "best" DJ set-up. When buying, it's best to trust your instinct a little; as a DJ, you're going to be using the system you buy a hell of a lot, at least if you want to get good at this game. If you think a piece of DJ gear looks too small, or too big, or is too heavy or too plasticky, or you don't like the shape of it, or you think it makes you look like you're playing with a toy - act on that instinct. That stuff matters! So choose something that not only gets good reviews, but that you feel you'd be comfortable using. Because remember, hopefully you'll end up using it not only in your bedroom, but in front of other people too.

As we all know, DJs are increasingly dabbling in being DJ/producers, so we also have a section highlighting some of the production software and hardware we use and teach with. Music production is a great extra thing for DJs to try, and having released production courses with James Hype and Laidback Luke in the last few years, we wanted to share some of the products we use and recommend. So whether your ultimate aim is to be a great DJ or a great DJ/producer, read on - there's lots for you here!

THE TYPE OF DJ GEAR YOU CAN CHOOSE FROM IN 2023

BACK IN THE "OLD DAYS" IT WAS ALL SO simple. You had two turntables, and a "mixer", which was a box that sat between them and made them blend together. That was it. Boy, how it's changed! Nowadays we are bombarded with weird, wonderful and ever-changing DJ technology, each innovation promising to wipe the floor with the last, each manufacturer refreshing, revamping and relaunching its gear every year, shouting loud about the new features as if they're the only thing worth knowing about.

And while "DJ controllers" (a single DJ unit that plugs into a laptop) are the most popular way to digital DJ today, with more than half of our audience and students here at Digital DJ Tips using a DJ controller and a laptop to DJ with, they're not the only choice - far from it. While this guide contains lots of this type of DJ controller - again, we're talking about single boxes with two "decks" and a mixer, plus audio circuitry and a way to connect a computer of some kind - you do need to be sure that this is the right route for you in the first place.

So let's start by looking at all the other types of DJ system you'll come across out there...

A TECHNICS SL1210 TURNTABLE: ONE OF THE ORIGINAL TOOLS OF DJING

DJ CONTROLLERS ARE THE MOST POPULAR WAY TO DIGITAL DJ NOWADAYS, WITH OVER HALF OF OUR AUDIENCE AND STUDENTS USING A DJ CONTROLLER AND LAPTOP.

"TWO DECKS AND A MIXER"

THE CLASSIC DJ SET-UP: TWO TURNTABLES (usually Technics) and a DJ mixer (usually a Pioneer DJM-something). I saved for years to be able to afford just such a set-up as a twenty-something DJ. There are still pockets of DJs who use such gear, and there are scenes where it's a badge of honour to perform from real vinyl on a system like this. Trouble is, most music isn't even pressed on vinyl nowadays, it's expensive, these systems are bulky, and to perform in this way is really to ignore any of the changes that have happened in DJing since, well, the DJ CD player...

“TWO DJ MEDIA PLAYERS AND A MIXER”

A MEDIA PLAYER IS WHAT YOU USE TO “SPIN” YOUR MUSIC. A traditional media player was basically a CD player designed for DJs, where once you slid the CD in, a platter let you control it as if it were a record. Indeed, some early CDJs even had “real vinyl” on them, and span around. Most, though, were and continue to be “fixed platter”, which means the round bit doesn’t actually turn when the music is playing, but nonetheless can be used to control the music when touched.

Back in the day, the first media players gave vinyl DJs their first opportunity to shout “it’s not real DJing!” (something some of them have been doing regularly ever since...), but nonetheless CDJs caught on really quickly, and are still dominant in much of the world as the standard way to DJ - although nowadays most DJs put their music on USB drives or SD cards instead of using CDs (and modern units don’t even have CD slots, just like modern laptops don’t have DVD drive slots).

Today’s media players are becoming more and more complex, too. Nowadays, they have most of the functions and features associated with laptop DJing - even the “sync” button so hated by some vinyl DJs. In recent years, this kind of set-up has become more and more like a type of big, expensive DJ controller, only with the computer effectively built-in. Currently the dominant brand in clubs is Pioneer DJ with its CDJ-3000 (and the previous incarnation, the CDJ-2000NXS2), though Denon DJ has issued a challenge by way of its SC6000 Prime and SC6000M Prime media players.

As well as working “standalone”, all of these players can also be used as “controller decks”, capable of controlling DJ software, too. This means you can often plug your laptop straight into them and play from software just like you can when you plug your laptop into smaller, more consumer-focused DJ controllers, giving you the best of both worlds.

A MODERN PIONEER CDJ SET-UP. CDJ DJING HAS COME A LONG WAY SINCE THE FIRST UNITS APPEARED OVER 20 YEARS AGO.

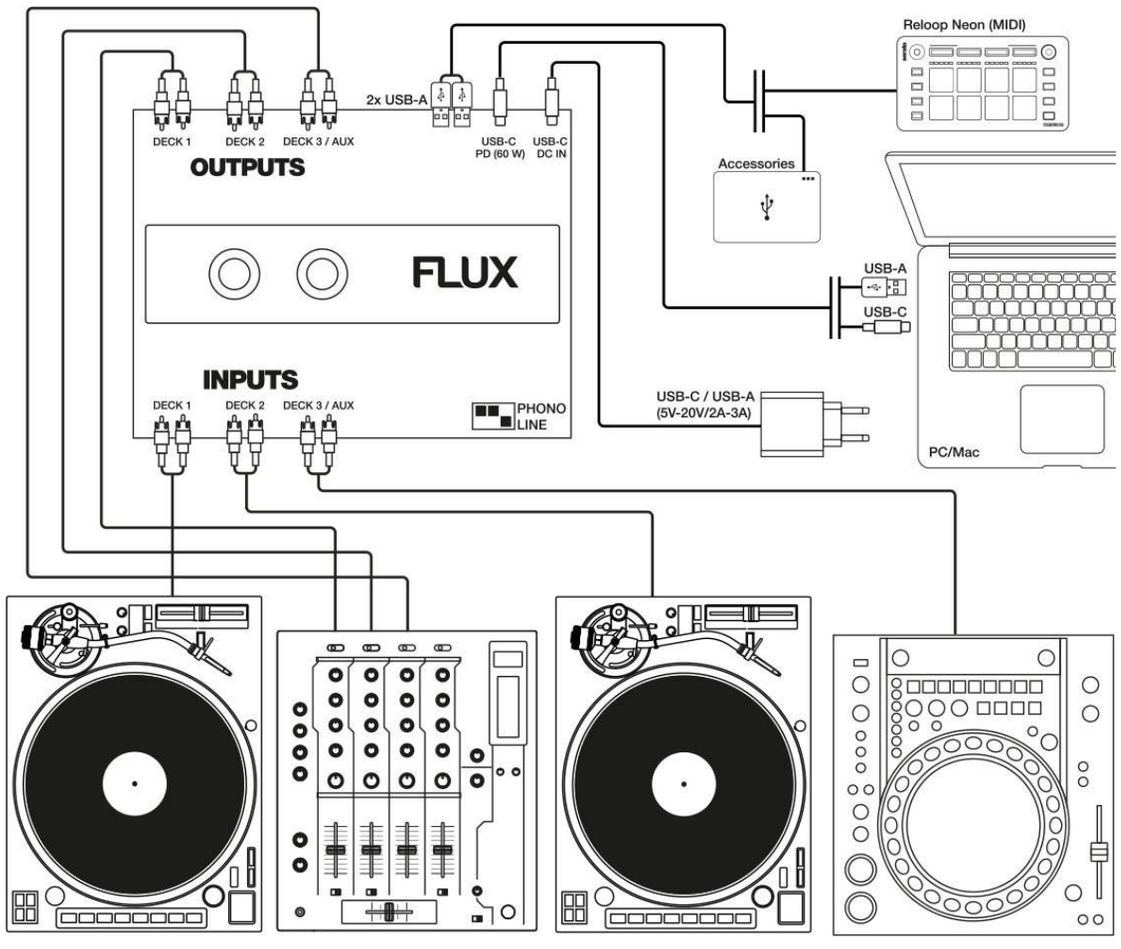
DIGITAL VINYL SYSTEMS (DVS)

A DVS TRADITIONALLY COMPRISED CONTROL VINYL AND AN AUDIO INTERFACE THAT HELPED TURN A STANDARD TURNTABLES AND MIXER SET-UP INTO A DIGITAL DJ SYSTEM - ALTHOUGH NOWADAYS, THE AUDIO INTERFACE IS USUALLY BUILT INTO THE MIXER ITSELF.

A DVS SYSTEM CAN BE THOUGHT OF AS A WAY OF "ADAPTING" either of the above set-ups to turn them into laptop DJ systems. In that respect, a DVS can be seen as a "half-way house", bridging the old, analogue way and the new digital world.

Here's how it works. You use special "control" vinyl or CDs, that instead of containing music, contain computer code (shrill, screechy and very much not music if you accidentally listen to it). You then either attach a special box, often referred to as a "breakout box", in-between your record decks/CD players and mixer, or just use a DVS-enabled mixer. Plug your laptop in, and your DJ software intercepts the computer signal from the control vinyl or CDs, and sends music from your hard drive to the mixer and speakers, following your every manipulation of it on your decks or CDJs. You get to use "normal" DJ gear, but you also get to use DJ software at the same time.

Advantages? Well, you can use your existing gear (or the club's) and still have many of the benefits of using DJ software. It "looks" like "real" DJing (even though you get all the advantages of digital nonetheless). It can feel more natural to DJs coming to digital having used analogue in the past. And because many clubs still don't have the kind of modern, digital-friendly media player set-up described above, but most do have at least some kind of DJ CD players and mixer, DVS is a failsafe for DJs who can't be sure what they'll find when they turn up to play at any given venue, and for this reason DVS remains popular. Disadvantages? Tricky to set up (although the wireless "Phase" system makes it easier), and expensive if you have to buy the analogue gear first and then add on a DVS system to make it "digital".



STANDALONE DJ SYSTEMS

THIS TYPE OF GEAR, SOMETIMES ALSO CALLED 'ALL-IN-ONE", LOOKS SIMILAR to the controllers that the majority of digital DJs use, but with the vital difference that you don't need to use a laptop to DJ with them. With standalone all-in-one systems, you don't only get the two "decks" and a "mixer" like with a controller, but you also get a built-in dedicated "computer" and screen. The idea is that you add your music (via a USB drive or SD card, usually) and then you can do most of the same things you can do with DJ controllers. That means you get waveforms, beatgrids, sync, musical key features, search, hot cues and so on.

Pioneer DJ led the way with its XDJ-RX (now up to the XDJ-RX3, a hugely popular device), but Engine DJ is currently the tech leader here, with its Denon DJ and Numark models having superior technology, for smoother operation and better features. It's important to note that for best operation you do still need to use a laptop to prepare and output your music to a USB drive to use with these systems. Standalone all-in-ones like these are a serious alternative to using a DJ controller and laptop - although the most cutting-edge features will almost always come to laptop systems way before reaching hardware systems such as these. But with onboard samplers and stems creeping into these set-ups, they're never far behind what laptops can do..

NUMARK'S MIXSTREAM PRO GO WAS A GROUND-BREAKING STANDALONE SYSTEM RELEASED THIS YEAR.

IOS/ANDROID APPS

BEING ABLE TO DJ ON YOUR IPAD, ANDROID TABLET OR EVEN smartphone is now a reality. Not only is it a reality, but it's incredibly addictive and a lot of fun. It's truly amazing what you can do on such devices, and with apps like Algoriddim's djay Pro AI proving enduringly popular, and Rekordbox v4 for iOS/Android launched in 2023, tablet and smartphone DJing isn't going away any time soon.

Really this is just a tablet/phone take on the laptop-only DJ system described on the next page, and it's actually coming full circle, with a number of DJ controllers now able to work with tablets and phones, so you can use your iOS or Android device as a direct replacement for a laptop in such set-ups. Like with laptop-only systems, you'll need an audio interface for those all-important audio outputs, because of course most tablets and phones don't have headphones sockets at all nowadays.

By the way, DJing with iPads or iPhones is a bit easier than on Android: the apps tend to be updated first and more frequently, and sometimes offer better features. Android's tech is roughly comparable with iOS/iPadOS tech, but the Android ecosystem is more fragmented, which is maybe why developers find it harder to code on that platform.

MODULAR DJ SYSTEMS

REMEMBER HI-FI SEPARATES, WHERE YOU'D HAVE A TUNER, AN amplifier, a CD player, a record deck and a tape recorder, instead of just buying one box with the lot in? That's how a modular DJ system is. A modular digital set-up is where instead of all being in one box, the parts are separate. You get to pick and choose the items that make most sense to you and to your DJing style, dependent on size, weight, functionality and so on. Turntable and DVS set-ups are two types of modular set-ups.

Do you only need one "deck" and a load of buttons? Then buy a pad controller, a single "deck" controller or DVS turntable and maybe a small software mixer. Really interested in triggering samples? Buy a "button" controller designed to unlock that part of your DJ controller. Got a DVS system (as described earlier) but want extra control over parts of your software that your record decks and control vinyl can't give you? Grab a small device that unlocks that stuff for you, and wire it in alongside the DVS.

Modular systems let experts "build to measure", and can be popular with DJs who want to squeeze their custom set-up into cramped DJ boxes. Essentially, a digital modular system does some or all of what an all-in-one does... but simply split across more than one physical unit.

THE TRAKTOR KONTROL X1 MK2 IS A GOOD EXAMPLE OF A COMPACT MODULAR CONTROLLER.

LAPTOP-ONLY DJ SYSTEMS

REALLY, DJ CONTROLLERS ARE JUST AN alternative to using the mouse and keyboard to control your DJ software. Sure, they're a great fun alternative, but all DJ software can also be controlled without anything else plugged into the computer at all. And some DJs do just that.

Whether because they're just starting out and can't afford a DJ controller, or they want to travel light, or they just love the whole minimal thing, for these DJs, a controller is one box too many. I actually started out like this, because in 2004 I couldn't find a Midi controller ("Midi" is the technical word for how digital music devices talk to each other and to computers) that was good enough for my needs, so I hacked and adapted how all the keys of my computer controlled my software... and DJed like that for several years!

If you go down this "laptop only" route you're still going to need some kind of audio interface to give you two audio outputs (one output for your headphones and one for your speakers) - but nonetheless, this is still just about as minimal as digital DJing gets.

WHY MOST DJS STILL CHOOSE A DJ CONTROLLER

WHEN ALL'S SAID AND DONE, YOU'LL PROBABLY CHOOSE A DJ CONTROLLER (AND BY that, just to reiterate I mean a device with "decks", "mixer" and "audio interface" all in one box, that needs a laptop to function). Here are the assumptions I'm making about you to make that call on your behalf.

I'm guessing the idea of playing on traditional, simple all-vinyl or CD systems is not of appeal to you - mainly because you're reading a digital DJ guide! I'm also guessing that a full nightclub-style system is an expense that's prohibitive to you. Likewise, while adding DVS to a vinyl or CD system to make it digital will give you an awesome set-up, I'm guessing the commitment, complexity and large ticket price of setting up such a system from scratch will rule this option out for you too.

DJing from just a laptop, tablet or phone would be tricky (and look rubbish), you're thinking, and probably wouldn't even feel like DJing. You're right. Likewise, laptop-only DJing is great as a backup or for those of us who learned on "real gear", so can compensate for its weirdness, but it's no way to learn the DJing hobby. (This is also why manufacturers put out controllers that work with iOS and Android devices: The touchscreen is not so hot for truly immersive DJing, even with the best DJ apps.)

Nowadays, out of all the "alternative" system types we discussed, the one most likely to appeal to you instead of a "normal" DJ controller is an all-in-one standalone system that can work without your laptop too if you want it to, such as the Denon DJ Prime 4+ or Pioneer DJ's Opus Quad.

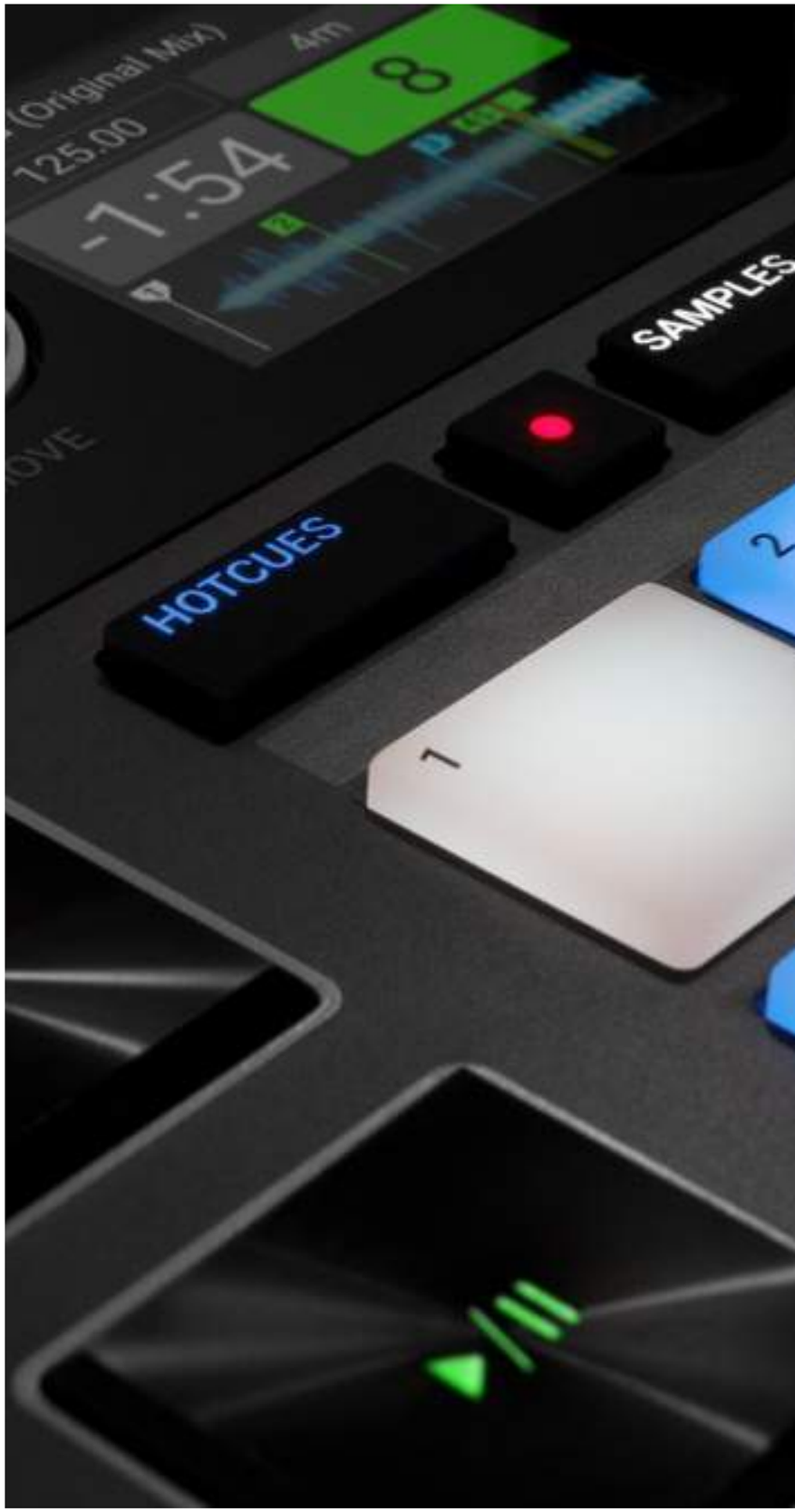
They're often very appealing to mobile DJs, who enjoy the reliability and convenience of not having to set up a laptop at every gig, for instance - but as they have become more and more powerful, they've also become a truly viable alternative for a wider audience too.

Later on in the guide we round up the best of these - but most people still decide that standard DJ controllers are the way to go, coming back to cost efficiency, portability and choice. So controllers will be the first thing we look at in this guide. However, just to be sure that we go into this with our eyes wide open, let's look at some of the disadvantages of using DJ controllers.

Depending on where you are in the world, you may find there is considerable resistance to using DJ controllers in your local venues. While in some parts of the world DJs are literally given a table to set up their own gear on (so you can bring what you want), often bars, lounges and clubs have gear they've invested heavily in, and rightly or wrongly the managers of such venues can't understand why "these new DJs" are insisting on bringing small, cheap-looking plastic boxes to DJ on when the venue has provided pro-grade gear to use. (This may explain why there isn't so much of a stigma attached to using DVS systems in such venues, as such systems utilise the existing gear.) Even when you have club management that's happy for you to bring a DJ controller or standalone system to play from (at least, in theory), there's the issue of finding the space to set up. That's why certain DJs occasionally settle on more minimal, modular systems; having maybe a single slimline controller and a laptop is more likely to be tolerated in cramped DJ booths than a big all-in-one. As long as you're comfortable with using such gear - and many experienced DJs are - this can be a great alternative. (Often, DJs combine this with some kind of DVS control for a truly powerful digital set-up, that still uses the club's gear too.)

Another disadvantage of any digital system is the chance of crash or failure, as this means curtains for the music; this is why digital DJs should always have a backup plan in place, even if it's just a short mix on your phone that you can switch in should your system fail and need a reboot for some reason.

But all that said, I bet you still want a DJ controller, or maybe a standalone system - yeah? I don't blame you! So now that we're definitely all on the same page, let's start to make sense of what's out there.



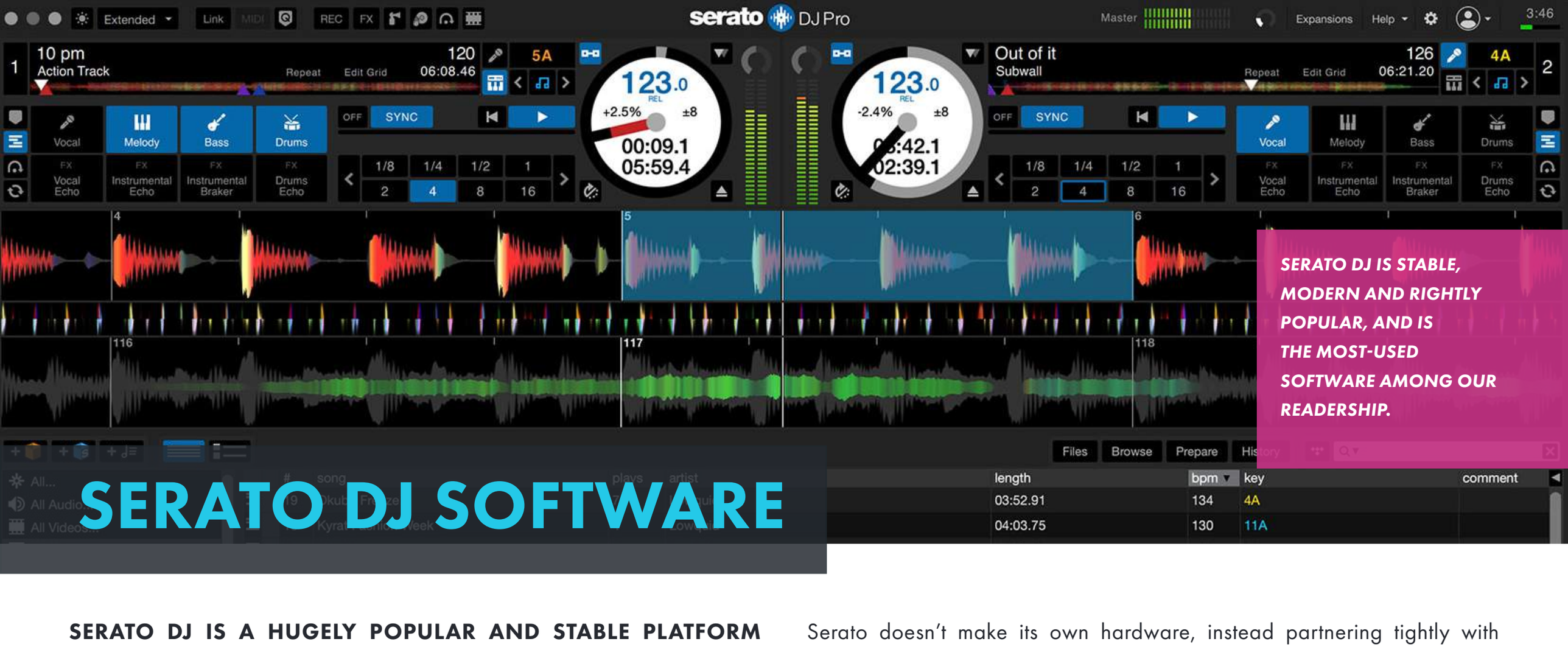
WHY SOFTWARE IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN HARDWARE

EVEN IF YOU'RE USING "STANDALONE" DJ system, you'll still need software to prepare your library to work with it. But if you are going down the laptop and DJ controller route, the software pretty much does everything for you. Indeed, apart from giving you an audio interface for separate headphones and speaker outputs, all a controller really contains is a bunch of specialised controls that make your DJ software easier to use. It's the DJ software that actually does all the clever stuff.

It's the DJ software that loads the music from your hard drive into your computer's memory for playback, or grabs the next track from your streaming service. It's the DJ software that monitors what you're doing on the transport controls (play, pause, forward, back, speed and so on) to manipulate the music. It's the DJ software that watches your every move on the mixing controls, not only the volumes but all other controls, and then alters the audio to your exact instructions. It's the DJ software that gives you two decks, or four decks, or a load of clever samples, or all the amazing effects like echo and filter and the rest. Think of your DJ controller as a "dumb box" that takes all the glory, and you're not far wrong. Even if you go for a flashy controller with built-in screens and all the rest, it's still the computer that's doing the hard work.

So in order for you to be able to choose a DJ controller wisely, you're going to need to understand DJ software, and the choices that are out there for you, especially because it isn't cheap. That's why before looking at the best controllers for each piece of software, we are going to take a short while to explain a bit about each software platform itself. If you haven't made up your mind what software platform to go for, this will help you to narrow down your hardware choice considerably. Changing software is much harder than changing your gear: Pick your software for life, even if your DJ controller is "just for Christmas"!

IT'S THE DJ SOFTWARE THAT WATCHES YOUR EVERY MOVE ON THE MIXING CONTROLS, NOT ONLY THE VOLUMES BUT ALL THE OTHER CONTROLS, AND THEN ALTERS THE AUDIO TO YOUR EXACT INSTRUCTIONS.



SERATO DJ SOFTWARE

SERATO DJ IS A HUGELY POPULAR AND STABLE PLATFORM for digital DJs. Particularly popular stateside and with its roots in the hip-hop community, it is now used by DJs worldwide and for all types of DJing. It comes in two flavours: Serato DJ Pro and Serato DJ Lite. Serato DJ Lite comes for free with entry-level DJ controllers, but you'll really want to upgrade to Serato DJ Pro if you get serious about your DJing, as Lite has some intentionally annoying restrictions.

Furthermore, many of the features you may want require you to buy a higher level of the Pro software: the "baseline" Serato DJ Pro doesn't even come with key shifting, for instance. And with prices from $249 to $449 (a subscription is also available), it is expensive. Also note that while more expensive DJ controllers tend to unlock Serato DJ Pro rather than Lite, as soon as you unplug the controller your software reverts to a lower version: If you truly want to own it, you still have to buy it.

Serato doesn't make its own hardware, instead partnering tightly with manufacturers (including Pioneer DJ, which this year actually bought Serato), thus guaranteeing a high degree of quality control to ensure great performance. So any Serato-compatible controller will give you a decent DJing experience, meaning you're really looking at what hardware features are important to you when choosing a controller - and factoring in any extra cost of the software itself.

Serato is all about usability and stability, meaning you're more tied to what Serato's engineers have decided than with some other platforms, and developments can be slow. This means that while DJs tend to have fewer "head scratching" moments when learning and using Serato software, it can also feel limited. For instance, while it supports the "big four" music streaming services (Soundcloud Go+, TIDAL, Beatport Streaming and Beatsource Streaming), you can currently only use one at a time. However, with all the latest features including great-sounding Stems, it'll more than likely do all you need.

SIX OF THE BEST
CONTROLLERS FOR SERATO

1

RANE FOUR

FOR OVERALL CONTROL OF SERATO'S many features, the Rane Four is a wonderful controller. It has full stems integration for real-time acapellas and mashups, is beautifully built, and has lots of hardware effects on board to make its "standalone" mixer (for plugging in external music sources) sound great. It's the most rounded, professional Serato DJ controller there is, and you'll likely never outgrow what it lets you do in your DJing. It unlocks Serato DJ Pro of course, but also comes with Pitch 'n Time, meaning you don't need to buy or subscribe to Serato DJ Suite to get the necessary key manipulation features.

2 PIONEER DJ DDJ-REV5

A DIFFERENT TAKE ON A "PRO" SERATO controller to the Rane Four, this Serato DJ Pro controller (with a Pitch 'n Time licence, meaning you won't have to shell out extra for Suite just to get decent key mixing features) is a slightly scaled-down, fixed-platter version of the also excellent - motorised jogwheeled - REV7. It does appear like a bit of a mish-mash of other DJ gear (CDJ jogwheels, scratch mixer/deck layout) and lacks external inputs apart from an Aux, but with its pro mic and outputs and mixing/mashup innovation features, it's a winner.

3 HERCULES DJCONTROL INPULSE T7

A REAL SURPRISE THIS YEAR, THE BUDGET-CONSCIOUS TWO-CHANNEL Hercules DJControl Inpulse T7 makes quite a few compromises, but nonetheless manages to deliver an utterly convincing vinyl-feel motorised jogwheel experience, which is amazing at this price point (it uses belt-drive inside, but you'd never guess). It's a great choice for beginners - but as it only comes with Serato DJ Lite, you'll need to subscribe to or buy Serato DJ Suite at some point for the full experience, which is a considerable extra expense.

4 ROLAND DJ-707M

ROLAND'S ENDURING DJ-707M (IT'S THE ONLY CONTROLLER in this year's list that wasn't released recently), is nonetheless one of the most thoughtfully designed, powerful and well-priced units in this list, considering what you get - it unlocks Serato DJ Pro, it has fully professional inputs and outputs, and a raft of features designed to make the job of mobile DJs (that's the "M" in the name) easier, like a Zone output and overall EQ and compression. It's not flashy, but if you can see past the plain looks, it's very, very good indeed.

5 RELOOP MIXON 8

THIS REFRESHING UNIT FROM RELOOP HAS AN ace up its sleeve - as well as unlocking Serato DJ Pro, it also works with Algoriddim's djay Pro AI, and even has a stand in the back for your iPad or iPad Pro for working with that software. However, it's in our Serato list because it has an "old school" symmetrical layout (which some DJs prefer, but which is hard to find in controllers nowadays), and - more importantly - full, direct control over Serato's effects, with two separate effects control panels (again, rare nowadays).

6 PIONEER DJ DDJ-FLX10

BEFORE THE DDJ-FLX10 CAME PIONEER DJ'S DDJ-1000 and DDJ-1000SRT, hugely popular controllers for its own Rekordbox software and Serato DJ Pro, respectively. Now there's the DDJ-FLX10, a single unit that unlocks both platforms. It's business as usual - CDJ jogwheels, a four-channel club-style mixer, external inputs for decks and mics, pro outputs. It is better suited to Rekordbox than Serato, as some features don't work as well (or at all) with Serato, but if you're looking for a controller like the now-discontinued DDJ-1000SRT, this is it.

REKORDBOX DJ SOFTWARE

REKORDBOX DJ IS A DEVELOPMENT BY PIONEER DJ OF ITS existing Rekordbox platform, turning Rekordbox from a DJ library/music preparation tool into a fully fledged DJ program, just like Serato DJ Pro and Traktor Pro. There are several reasons why this is important.

Firstly, Pioneer DJ gear is by default found in the majority of DJ booths around the world, and its controller range (for other people's software) sells bucketloads, too. Having its own DJ software means the company can offer its own hardware/software solutions, keeping DJs in its own ecosystem.

Secondly, this software works with the same library system as Rekordbox, the software used by many pro DJs to prepare their music to play on in DJ booths on Pioneer DJ equipment. That's because it IS Rekordbox - Rekordbox DJ is simply an extension of that software. This is actually a crucial selling point, because it means Pioneer DJ can bundle Rekordbox DJ with DJ controllers of its own manufacture to "hook" beginners in, and as those DJs grow into their hobby or career, they can buy more "pro" gear, sticking with the same platform. Therefore all the work done by DJs on their music while they were DJing with a controller (cue points, comments, analysis etc) is not lost in the "switch" to digital CDJ / DJ booth DJing - something none of the other platforms can offer.

As a piece of DJ software, Rekordbox is fully featured, and has recently had real-time stems control added. It has good FX, four decks, a deep and comprehensive tagging system in the library, streaming service support, a decent sampler and sequencer, DJ lighting control, plus video and DVS abilities.

If you want some of the really advanced features or to use Rekordbox's powerful Cloud Library Sync, you'll pay a subscription to move up from the Core/Free package to the either Creative or Pro version - but that said, the version that comes with even the cheapest controllers is much better than the equivalent "beginner" Serato version. Note that there is no outright purchase option with Rekordbox.

FIVE OF THE BEST CONTROLLERS FOR REKORDBOX DJ

1 PIONEER DJ DDJ-FLX10

THE DDJ-FLX10 IS A DIRECT REPLACEMENT IN 2023 for the now-discontinued DDJ-1000, and brings everything the DDJ-1000 had, plus more. You get deep control over Rekordbox's new Track Separation (aka stems) feature, an on-board DMX interface for easy lighting control via Rekordbox Lighting, and improved sound quality. One for pro DJs who play open-format, and those who want an experience that's as close to a CDJ / DJM set-up as possible in a controller. As a bonus, it also unlocks Serato DJ Pro.

2

PIONEER DJ DDJ-FLX4

THIS ENTRY-LEVEL TWO-CHANNEL CONTROLLER TAKES THE CDJ/DJM club set-up as its influence, and distils it into a portable device for home use and maybe bar gigs. The deck controls and Beat FX layout help new DJs get up to speed with Pioneer DJ's hardware workflow for easier transition when they start gigging at clubs. Its predecessor, the DDJ-400, became a much-loved controller even among pro DJs, because it was small, laid out in a familiar way, and sturdy. The DDJ-FLX4 builds on that legacy.

3

PIONEER DJ DDJ-FLX6-GT

IF YOU WANT A MID-PRICED, FOUR-CHANNEL controller for Rekordbox, this is it. Think of it as a DDJ-FLX4 with two extra channels. It's exactly the same build quality, with no extra inputs or outputs. It has some gimmicks: Merge FX is the most successful, giving you "one knob instant build ups" (don't overuse it!), but "Jog Cutter" is a pseudo-scratch feature that's best forgotten. The big sell are its awesome CDJ-style jogwheels, but otherwise it's underwhelming, hardware-wise, for the price.

4

PIONEER DJ DDJ-REV5

FROM A REKORDBOX STANDPOINT, THIS IS AN intriguing controller, because although it is primarily for Serato DJ Pro, which it unlocks, it also unlocks Rekordbox software. It's a well-built software controller, with full-sized CDJ-style jogwheels yet overall, a scratch layout (a DJM-S-style mixer section and the pitch controls horizontal at the top of each deck). If you like the scratch mixer layout, but want CDJ-style jogs, this could be the one for you.

5

PIONEER DJ DDJ-200

A LAST-GENERATION CONTROLLER (AND DISAPPOINTINGLY, it doesn't even have an audio interface built in - now, that's last decade, never mind last generation!), the DDJ-200 is nevertheless the cheapest current way of controlling Rekordbox with hardware that there is. If you simply want a level of control over the software, and don't really care about anything else, it's a no-brainer: It may be small, but it's well-enough built, and if you've ever used any Pioneer DJ gear, you'll be instantly at home on it. Just be clear about what you're *not* getting, should you choose to buy.

TRAKTOR PRO DJ SOFTWARE

TRAKTOR HAS RECEIVED A SHOT IN THE ARM THANKS TO THE release of a string of Traktor Pro 3 updates recently. These have brought the addition of Beatport and Beatsource streaming, an overhauled audio engine, and new single knob Mixer FX, with the promise of more to come. While these updates haven't brought the features revolution that many were hoping for, they've been enough to rekindle the passion of loyal Traktor fans who had been waiting patiently.

Traktor remains popular among our students here at Digital DJ Tips, especially electronic DJs, for whom it is best suited. It's quite complex (many think over-complex), but the flipside of that complexity is that it is capable and customisable to an extent not shared by other DJ software. And while the parent company, Native Instruments, has endured a wobble or two over recent years, its recent merging with the iZotope audio software company could open the door for interesting new features, not least real-time stems separation (iZotope makes some great such algorithms), which has been promised, but not at the time of writing yet appeared.

If you decide Traktor is the way to go for you, your choices of controller that are ideal for it are actually quite limited: Native Instruments has its own controllers, and so maybe isn't massively motivated to help other people's controllers work seamlessly with its software. While it is possible to use Traktor with practically any DJ controller (like several DJ software packages, it can be "mapped" to do this, and comes with "mappings" for many popular models), in practice what users tend to find is two things: One, it's harder than they might have wished for to get such pairings to work properly; and, even when they do, the performance is not as good as with Native Instruments' own controller range.

Traktor is not expensive to buy, but recently, the company has added a "Traktor Pro Plus" subscription version, that adds extra features including an intriguing Pattern Player, so you may want to consider this if the extra features look like things you may use.

THREE OF THE BEST CONTROLLERS FOR TRAKTOR

1

TRAKTOR KONTROL S4 MK3

NATIVE INSTRUMENTS' THIRD UPDATE TO ITS FLAGSHIP four-channel controller comes with motorised Haptic Drive jogwheels that are smooth, silent and feel fantastic to spin on. It's also got onboard effects and Mixer FX controls, onboard deck displays and a streamlined performance pad section. A worthy update to the venerable Traktor Kontrol S4 line.

2 TRAKTOR KONTROL S2 MK3

THE TRAKTOR KONTROL S2 MK3 DOESN'T HAVE THE motorised jogs, onboard displays and comprehensive effects section of its bigger brother, but it's still a capable device that has controls for Traktor Pro 3's Mixer FX. It also retains the streamlined performance pads layout. A solid entry-level controller for beginner DJs, and a good backup for gigging pros.

3 TRAKTOR KONTROL S3

AND THEN WE HAVE THE TRAKTOR KONTROL S3, DESIGNED to sit between the two controllers in spots one and two. While it lacks the comprehensive effects controls of the Kontrol S4, it gets four channels, and an Aux input to make it more useful in pro situations. Whether you go for this will depend on whether you need those features over the S2, and whether you can find the extra money for the S4, which is the better bet over this.

VIRTUALDJ SOFTWARE

VIRTUALDJ IS POPULAR WITH PROFESSIONAL AND MOBILE DJS BECAUSE IT'S FEATURE-PACKED AND WORKS WITH THE LARGEST NUMBER OF DJ CONTROLLERS OUT OF ALL THE DJ APPS IN THIS LIST.

VIRTUALDJ IS A POWERFUL DIGITAL DJ PLATFORM THAT IS popular with professional and mobile DJs because it's easy to use and is packed with plenty of features. Like Serato DJ, VirtualDJ doesn't make its own hardware controllers and audio interfaces, but it's got the largest gear compatibility list out of all the DJ apps in this guide. That includes controllers made by rival manufacturers that have their own DJ software such as Native Instruments and Pioneer DJ; VirtualDJ's programmers just go ahead and ensure their software works fine with as many controllers as possible.

VirtualDJ is a pacesetter when it comes to adding new features, and it's often one of the first to add digital DJ innovations. Hefty updates in recent years have focused on fresh updates for VJs and those who spin with visuals, as well as bolstering its livestreaming features such as having streaming-specific skins baked in for more engaging livestreams. Currently, VirtualDJ is the only laptop DJ app that lets you stream from multimedia content libraries that include music, video, and karaoke files. It was one of the first platforms to offer real-time stems DJing, and has the most flexible (and some of the best-sounding) stems in the business. It's also got advanced features such as cloud-based track recommendations, in-app editors that let you work with your music at a deeper level, and even a special Sandbox mode that lets you "audition" how a mix sounds before you actually execute the transition during a performance.

You can choose to subscribe to it at US$19/month, which lets you use it with all compatible hardware, or pay a one-time US$299 fee for "VirtualDJ Ultimate". If you want access to the streaming catalogues, you'll also need to pay a monthly fee for each that you plan on using.

FIVE OF THE BEST CONTROLLERS FOR VIRTUALDJ

1

PIONEER DJ DDJ-FLX10

PIONEER DJ'S FLAGSHIP CONTROLLER HAS LOTS OF DEDICATED STEMS controls on it. And here's the thing: VirtualDJ has far better sounding real-time stems than Rekordbox as of now, and it also offers more flexibility in the way users can work with stems than Serato (the two platforms the controller is "officially" for). So VirtualDJ users who want really great sounding stem separation, with lots of choice as to how those stems are utilised, now have the option of doing that using the FLX10 - a win-win.

2 RANE FOUR

JUST LIKE THE DDJ-FLX10, THE RANE FOUR CAN ALSO BE used to make VirtualDJ's superior stems shine. Once nice thing is that with LED displays for each pad, using VirtualDJ's customisable pad library is made that much easier on the Rane Four. The VirtualDJ team has done a great job of making the most of the huge number of controls on the Rane Four, and it shows. In short, VirtualDJ users will find the Rane Four an amazing controller to work with.

3 PIONEER DJ DDJ-REV7

THIS CONTROLLER HAS GREAT MOTORISED jogwheels with built-in screens, meaning it is a natural choice for DJs who cut their teeth on vinyl, and who now want an all-in-one DJ controller that is particularly good for scratching. The VirtualDJ integration is excellent, with perfect jogwheel mapping making full use of the high-quality turntable feel this controller majors on, and also using the built-in screens.

4 DENON DJ PRIME GO

THE UNIQUE LITTLE STANDALONE DENON DJ PRIME GO is a portable device, with a built-in battery, and so can work hand in hand with VirtualDJ running off a battery-powered laptop, away from mains electricity. - great for wedding DJs playing, say, an open air reception. Also, the Prime Go's touchscreen can be completely changed through VirtualDJ's "skins". No, you don't even need a laptop to use the Prime Go - but if you choose to do so, VirtualDJ is the best fit.

5 HERCULES DJ CONTROL INPULSE 200

NOT EVERYONE CAN JUSTIFY SPENDING BIG ON A DJ set-up. For beginners who are on a tight budget, the Hercules DJControl Inpulse 200 has always offered an easy route into the DJ world. And when it comes to VirtualDJ, it is the cheapest controller that unlocks all the functionalities of the platform, including stems separation on EQs, for under $150 - that's an awful lot of functionality.

OTHER LAPTOP DJ SOFTWARE (3 TO TRY)

MOST LAPTOP/CONTROLLER DJS USE ONE OF THE PACKAGES MENTIONED PREVIOUSLY, BUT THAT'S NOT THE END OF THE STORY. There are several other DJ software programs out there, and just because they don't have the same user base as the "big boys", doesn't mean that they're not worth a look.

All three of the DJ platforms we're about to look at are capable and established, and although they're very different from each other, for their own reasons, both are worth a look. Bear in mind too that while pro DJs tend to stick to a single platform so they can concentrate on other areas of their careers, there's no stipulation at all for hobby DJs to do so. If you're inclined to experiment and try other things, do so! Manny DJs have a first platform of choice, and a second - and that's fine.

1 DJAY PRO AI

EASILY ONE OF THE BEST LOOKING DJ APPS, djay Pro AI for Mac and iOS is also powerful, packing more and more features just under the hood, in much the same way as other Apple-specific software, keeps it simple for users, but has a lot of power once you start digging. It works on Mac and PC laptops, and it packs contemporary features like stems DJing, cloud-syncing of your music library, AI-powered Automix, music streaming, a pad sampler and sequencer, and support for DJ controllers as well as media players and DVS. One subscription covers both iOS and Mac.

2 MIXXX 2.3

MIXXX 2.3 IS A FREE, OPEN SOURCE DJ APP that's got all the basic digital DJ features you'd expect in a piece of modern DJ software. It's got four deck control, support for multiple audio files including lossless FLAC, sampler decks, the ability to create custom FX chains, and the ability to broadcast your mix online. You can even use it with a DVS and Midi gear for hands-on control.

3 YOUDJ

BILLED AS "THE MOST FUN AND EASY DJ APP", YouDJ runs in your browser, so if you use a Chromebook, for instance, you're in! It comes complete with music for playing with, and is a great way to experience what DJ software feels like, instantly. If it looks familiar, that's because Beatport browser-based DJ app, Beatport DJ, is build by the same developer. This one, though, can also be downloaded to your laptop if you like - and is surprisingly powerful.

FIVE OF THE BEST STANDALONE SYSTEMS

STANDALONE DJ SYSTEMS ARE APPEALING to DJs who just don't want to take a laptop into the DJ booth with them, or have one hanging around when they're practising at home. Nowadays they're starting to feel as if they've basically got a computer embedded in them - which is because they have! And with touchscreens, smooth graphics, powerful DJ features and built-in music streaming services, they're becoming more appealing than ever.

1 DENON DJ PRIME 4+

IF YOU WANT THE MOST POWER AND THE MOST CUTTING-EDGE features, this Engine DJ-powered unit is the one. While it's only a cosmetic upgrade on the Prime 4 that came before it, it has acapella/instrumental stems separation (in beta at the time of writing), as well as built-in WiFi, Bluetooth, access to streaming services for millions of tunes at your fingertips, true four-channel DJing, and even Serato and VirtualDJ support. It can even control smart lights and DMX lighting. A true powerhouse.

2 PIONEER DJ OPUS QUAD

THE PIONEER DJ OPUS QUAD IS THE FOUR-CHANNEL, modern standalone all-in-one DJ system we've been waiting for Pioneer DJ to release for years – ever since Denon DJ launched the Prime 4, in fact. With decent screens, a powerful CPU, on-board track analysis, streaming services, and some innovative DJ features not found elsewhere, it will appeal particularly to mobile and event DJs – especially with its original and striking design.

3 NUMARK MIXSTREAM PRO GO

NUMARK HAS BASICALLY TAKEN ITS ALREADY POPULAR Mixstream Pro and added a rechargeable battery, and in doing so created the world's first 100% wireless standalone DJ controller. With built in speakers, Bluetooth, WiFi for streaming music, an excellent touchscreen and capable built-in DJ software, this is now a true go anywhere, all-in-one, standalone DJ system, and for a great price too.

4 PIONEER DJ XDJ-RX3

THE XDJ-RX3 IS A WORTHY REPLACEMENT FOR THE XDJ-RX2, bringing a bigger screen, faster loading of tracks, much easier browsing, many usability improvements, and the Pioneer DJ look, feel and workflow that made its predecessor so popular. It has got better effects than any other standalone DJ unit, but feels a bit limited in other areas - it offers no cloud music functions, for instance, and we would like to have seen Pioneer DJ's excellent key sync incorporated from its CDJ-3000 players.

5 DENON DJ SC LIVE 4

THE DENON DJ SC LIVE 4 IS A DECENTLY FEATURED SYSTEM with built-in speakers, built-in WiFi for streaming services, and clever built-in control over both home smart lights and pro lighting. Laid out like club DJ gear (a first for Denon DJ), and with fewer features and a lower build quality than the Prime 4+, this comes in at the lowest price any Denon DJ standalone has ever sold for, and is nonetheless still supremely capable.

THREE OF THE BEST DJ LAPTOPS

YOUR LAPTOP IS THE HEART OF YOUR DIGITAL DJ system. It's where you download and manage your music library and, if you decide to spin with a laptop in the DJ booth, it's what your DJ software will run on. Whether you end up spinning with media players and thumb drives or DJ controllers and DVS, your laptop will be an integral part of your set-up and it's advisable to get the best one that fits your budget.

Things to look out for will be its processor, onboard RAM (nothing lower than 8GB, preferably 16GB), hard drive space and operating system. Almost all DJ apps are cross-platform these days, so it's up to you to decide whether you want to take the Mac or the Windows route - but with modern features such as stems needing huge processing power, now is maybe the time to make sure your laptop is, literally, up to speed.

1

APPLE M2 MACBOOK AIR

ANY MODERN APPLE LAPTOP IS FINE FOR RUNNING DJ SOFTWARE, BUT the latest M2 MacBook air is close to perfect. All DJ software works fine on Arm laptops nowadays, and this laptop is light, slim and has a long battery life. Just make sure you specify an upgrade from the base 256GB SSD to something large enough to hold your music collection, and be aware it only has two Thunderbolt/USB ports.

2 DELL XPS 13 OLED 2023

THOUGH IT LOOKS THE SAME AS ITS predecessor, the Dell XPS 15 OLED 2023 has had a thorough internal refresh and is one of the best 15-inch Windows laptops you can buy, with an especially bright display - useful for daytime DJing. Specify enough RAM and a big-enough hard drive and you'll be able to throw anything DJ software has got at it and it should handle it fine.

3 MICROSOFT SURFACE LAPTOP 5

LOADS OF CONFIGURATIONS POSSIBLE here; we'd advise you to specify at least a 512GB SSD, more if you have a huge music library. One novelty is the touchscreen, which we could see creative DJs finding a use for in their performances. Build quality is sturdy too, which is a bonus for the DJ booth. We'd go for the 15" over the 13.5" screen to make that touchscreen easier to use.

THREE OF THE BEST DJ MEDIA PLAYERS

THIS TYPE OF EQUIPMENT IS DESCENDED FROM STANDALONE DJ CD players, the type that replaced record decks in DJ booths almost completely back at the turn of the century. As digital DJing took hold, they were first used by laptop DJs via digital vinyl systems (DVS), with special "timecode" CDs and audio interfaces - and indeed, some DJs still DJ like this to this day. However, DJ media players quickly developed further, adding USB sockets so DJs could bypass the CD slots entirely.

Nowadays, the best of them play perfectly with laptops and DJ software via direct connections, and have amazing screens and features. This makes a pair of them (alongside a digital DJ mixer) a powerful option, whether you want a pro "separates" take on the all-in-one standalones featured on the previous pages, or to assemble what is effectively a huge (and expensive) DJ controller. Oh, and of course the CD slot is history on current devices...

1 PIONEER DJ CDJ-3000

PIONEER DJ FINALLY REPLACED ITS AGEING CDJ-2000NXS2 club-standard CDJ a while back, with the new CDJ-3000. It has a much better screen and lots of new features, such as on-board analysis of tracks not previously analysed in Rekordbox and the ability to play your own music directly from Pioneer's cloud.

2 DENON DJ SC6000 PRIME

DENON DJ'S SC6000 PRIME IS A BEAST OF A MEDIA PLAYER, packing loads of power and next-gen features. It has a dual layer feature that lets you play two songs simultaneously from just one unit. It even has a sampler built in, plus WiFi and access to many streaming services. These players aren't looking like usurping Pioneer DJ in the pro booth anytime soon, but they're great nonetheless.

3 DENON DJ SC6000M PRIME

THIS DEVICE HAS ALL THE GOOD STUFF FOUND ON the SC6000 Prime including the touchscreen and extensive performance controls, but it replaces the jogwheel with a 7" rotating vinyl platter jog that gives you an authentic turntable feel. One for scratch and battle DJs who want a contemporary media player that feels as close to a turntable as possible.

FIVE OF THE BEST DJ MIXERS

DJ MIXERS WERE TRADITIONALLY THE CENTRE "PART" OF EVERY DJ set-up, and still are away from the controller world and in practically every DJ booth in the world. Nowadays, mixers can work with digital-friendly media players, resulting in a kind of hybrid "software controller plus hardware mixer" model - DVS without the timecode, if you like. Mixers offer DJs a versatility not found in even the very best DJ controllers, and are still very much a part of today's DJ climate.

1 PIONEER DJ DJM-A9

THE PIONEER DJ DJM-A9 IS THE COMPANY'S REPLACEMENT for the DJM-900NXS2, the mixer found more than any other in clubs worldwide. It will be instantly familiar to DJM-900NXS2 users, but adds many new features, including dual headphones cueing, a USB-C option for laptops, and a clever new "lock" on the filter knobs for those who hit the Sound Color FX hard, to prevent accidentally turning them past 12 o'clock. Oh, and they've improved the audio quality noticeably too.

2

DENON DJ X1850 PRIME

THE DENON DJ X1850 PRIME IS THE COMPANION MIXER to the SC6000 Prime media players, and it's a robust four-channel mixer that's got onboard FX, a 24-bit / 96kHz sound card, and the ability to sync with the SC6000 Prime players for tightly locked tempo-based effects. A solid offering by Denon DJ that's at the heart of the entire Prime set-up.

3 RANE SEVENTY-TWO MKII

RANE'S LATEST FLAGSHIP BATTLE MIXER has a high-resolution screen onboard for viewing Serato DJ's waveforms, performance pads, fader contour controls, and knobs and buttons for Serato's FX. It makes for an impressive set-up when flanked by a pair of Rane Twelve Mark II controllers, but it can be used with turntables and other media players too. One for digital battle DJs who want nothing but the best.

4 PIONEER DJM-S11

THE DJM-S9 MIXER FOR SERATO SCRATCH DJS was such a hit that it in many ways pushed the art of scratch performing forward - and Pioneer DJ replaced it with not one but two mixers. The "other" one, the DJM-S7, is a modest but worthy update, but this one, the DJM-S11, has a touchscreen to show your Serato settings and allow you to control X/Y FX, that also gives you control over decks 3 and 4 of the software. It's a worthy successor and our pick of the two.

5 NUMARK SCRATCH

THE NUMARK SCRATCH MIXER HAS A built-in audio interface, also designed to use with Serato as a DVS mixer – although it works fine as a standalone DJ mixer too. Simple, nicely done, and loads of fun, and the quality is there where it counts. Sure it makes compromises, but none of them are dealbreakers, and it opens scratching with Serato up to a whole new sector of the market, as it's by far the cheapest mixer in this line-up.

TWO OF THE BEST IPHONE/IPAD DJ APPS

TABLET AND SMARTPHONE DJING HOLDS LOTS OF APPEAL FOR A WIDE range of people. From true "dabblers" (after all, the apps are really cheap - once you own a tablet, of course), to "serious" DJs wanting a second system, to people who simply need something compact that they can use anywhere, as the storage space in tablets has risen along with their capabilities, today's models can match laptops in all the areas that count.

1

DJAY PRO AI

ALGORIDDIM'S DJAY PRO AI FOR IOS SQUEEZES IN A TON OF features, functionality and power into an app made for the iPad and iPhone. It's got stems mixing, four-deck mixing, streaming service integration, and AI automixing built in. You get the ability to mix video in high-resolution 4K, and you get access to the Looper feature that lets you trigger loops and sounds while you spin. It's compatible with the iPad Pro's Smart Keyboard, and if you'd like to spin with actual jogwheels, it works with controllers like the Reloop Buddy, Reloop Mixon 8 and others, and you can now map it to any Midi controller using the Midi Learn feature. The subscription also gets you access to the Mac version.

2

REKORDBOX FOR IOS/ANDROID

THE NEW V4 OF THE REKORDBOX APP FOR IOS AND ANDROID turns what was initially just a music preparation app into a full-blown DJ app too. This makes it far more useful, albeit you'll need to pay a $5-a-month subscription to make it worth using. Once you've done that, you get seamless access to Rekordbox cloud sync (assuming you subscribe to it - yup, it's a separate subscription), for the full Rekordbox experience across all your devices.

TWO OF THE BEST
DJ CONTROLLERS FOR IPHONE & IPAD

HOOKING PHONE AND TABLETS UP TO DJ CONTROLLERS WAS until recently a bit of a Wild West, same way hooking laptops up to DJ controllers was 10 years ago. If you were a geek with time to spare this was all fine, even fun, but for everyone else? It was fiddly. It still is unfortunately for Android (at least, a lot of the time), but for iOS, it's much simpler, with some great software and easy connection. What's more, you can plug just your phone into a full-sized DJ set-up nowadays and DJ immediately from it - it's more like a USB drive with a screen and waveforms built in!

Mostly we're talking about using Algoriddim's djay Pro AI, although other mobile apps do exist, and some are quite good. Also, both of the controllers we feature here are from German brand Reloop, but any class-compliant DJ controller could potentially work with your phone nowadays. That said, you'd be back to the geeky stuff with trying to get some controllers connected and mapped properly. Go with one of the systems featured here though, and you'll be up and running in no time.

1 RELOOP MIXON 8 PRO

IF YOU WANT THE MOST "PRO" EXPERIENCE possible DJing with your iPad and Algoriddim's djay Pro AI, right up to using the iPad Pro, the Reloop Mixon 8 Pro is it. Four-channel mixer, great jogs and pads, decent pro-quality metal construction, and a built-in iPad stand that works right up to the size of the iPad Pro - it's all here. As a bonus, it also unlocks Serato DJ Pro, so you have a choice of platforms to use.

2 RELOOP BUDDY

THIS NEAT LITTLE CONTROLLER FOR ALGORIDDIM'S DJAY Pro AI is the opposite end of the spectrum from the Mixon 8 Pro, being tiny and lightweight. Still, it also has a slot for your iPad or iPhone (up to 11"), and has most of the controls you'd expect on bigger units. It's not the cheapest for what it is, but for true portability with an iPad, this is the one to go for.

TOP FIVE TURNTABLES FOR DJS

WHETHER TO USE IN A DVS SYSTEM, TO LEARN TO SCRATCH "how it's always been done", to rip vinyl, or even for true old-school "vinyl only" DJing, turntables aren't going away. Sure they're still niche, and sure they won't be a purchase for most DJs - but they're definitely still a "thing". Here are our favourites.

1

PIONEER DJ PLX-CRSS12

AN INNOVATIVE COMBINATION OF MOTORISED CONTROL deck, pad controller and traditional turntable, Pioneer DJ's new PLX-CRSS12 tries to be the turntable that does it all - and if you're a Rekordbox or Serato user who also likes to play "real" records, you may well decide that it's succeeded.

2

RELOOP RP-7000

A RIGHTLY POPULAR "STANDARD" TURNTABLE, THIS DOES nothing out of the ordinary, instead, simply doing what DJ turntables ever since the classic Technics 1200/1210 Mk2 have done - and doing it well. These are well-priced units, and you won't go wrong choosing a pair of these for a modern take on a classic turntable set-up.

3

PIONEER DJ PLX-1000

AGAIN, THE PIONEER DJ PLX-1000 DOES NOTHING NEW, BUT THEN again, what most DJs want from a turntable is an experience close to the venerable old Technics SL-1200 - and this is it just subtly changed for the modern age. A classic updated, and a safe if not particularly cheap choice.

4

AUDIO TECHNICA AT-LP1240XP

A PROPER HEAVYWEIGHT TURNTABLE AND GREAT VALUE FOR money at the "pro" end - built for use anywhere, and also optimised for scratch DJs and the "90 degree" layout they prefer, thanks to its second start/stop button.

5

TECHNICS SL-1200/1210 MK7

WHAT TURNTABLE LINE-UP COULDN'T INCLUDE TECHNICS? While the Mk7 version of its 1200/1210 turntable divides people (we think it's lightweight, and prone to bass feedback, for instance), many still sing its praises - and its release in a host of new colours certainly catches the eyes.

SEVEN EXTRAS EVERY CONTROLLER DJ NEEDS

SO THE SHOPPING CART'S OPEN AND you're ready to hit "buy now". Before you do though, time to think about the other bits and pieces you'll need to finish your set-up. Two pieces of good news here: First, you probably have some of them already, and second, you don't need much. Here's what you've got to have covered:

1

SPEAKERS

HAVE YOU GOT A HOME CINEMA SYSTEM? HI-FI? 2.1 SYSTEM FOR GAMING? Loud portable speaker? Yes? As long as you can have that in the room you want to DJ in, you're sorted. Your controller can plug into that. (You'll need a cable, though. Don't use Bluetooth. There's a delay, see? DJs don't like delays.) Still want to buy something? On a budget, go for a loud twin satellites-plus-woofer gaming computer speaker system - the Logitech type stuff. Bit more? I love Pioneer DJ's DM-40s. More? Look at the Rokit range from KRK (you'll need two, they're sold separately). These are all "powered" meaning you don't need separate amplifiers. Oh, and *don't* use them for parties. You'll blow all of the above if you do, sooner or later. Rent a PA, or use someone else's speakers (I didn't tell you the last bit).

ADAM AUDIO'S ADVANCED A SERIES OF SPEAKERS OFFER DSP-BASED ROOM CORRECTION AND VOICINGS, ENABLING YOU TO TUNE THEM FOR YOUR ROOM AND YOUR EARS.

2

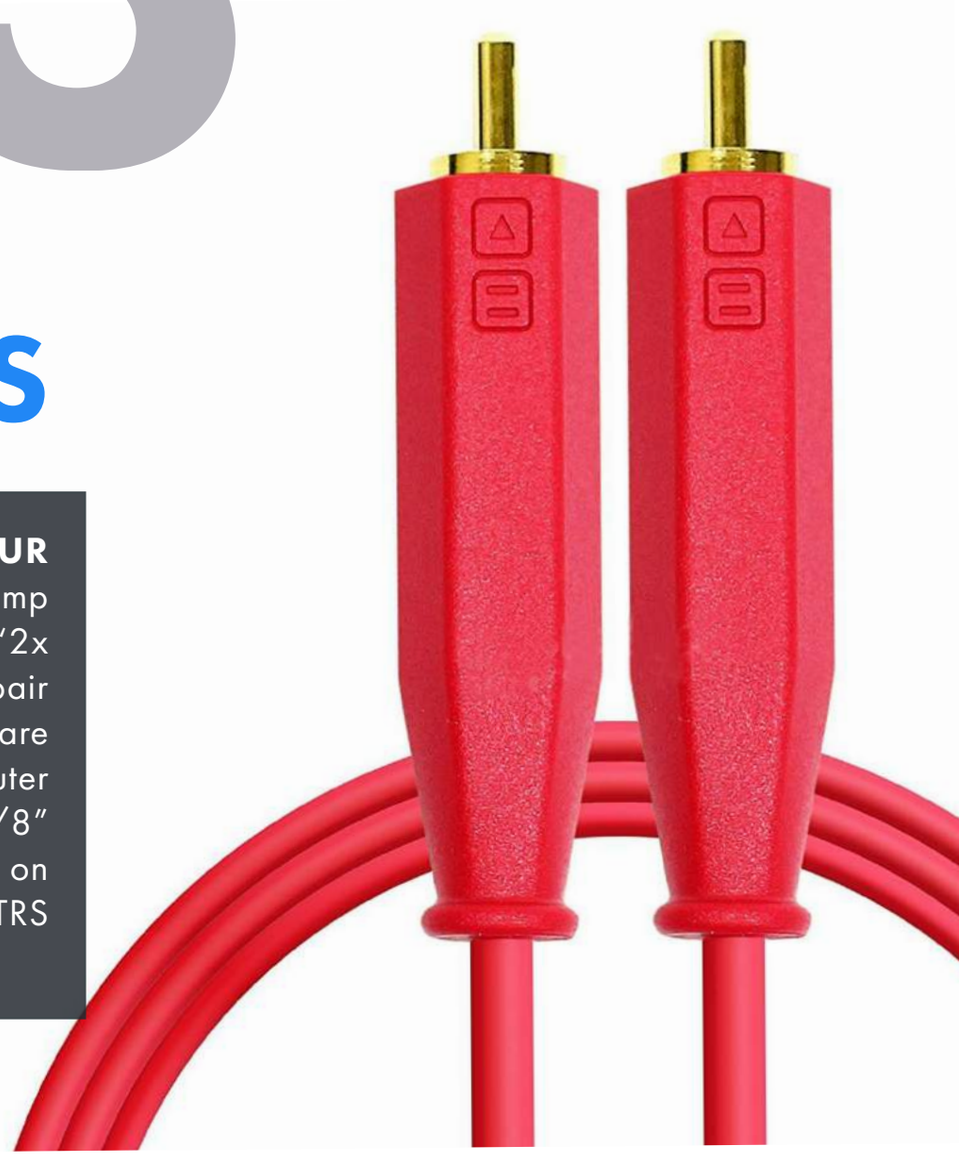
HEADPHONES

MORE IMPORTANT THAN SPEAKERS, headphones are absolute essentials for any DJ. They need to be able to cover your ears to isolate you from ambient noise, be durable, and be loud. Traditionally, DJs have flocked to the Sennheiser HD-25 II, which we wholeheartedly recommend. Another current favourite at the Digital DJ Tips office is the Pioneer DJ HDJ-CUE1 which are great value, sound fantastic, and can be customised with your own colour of earpads and cable. Coiled cables are preferred by most DJs (you don't trip on them as easily), and detachable cables mean you can replace them if they break.

THE PIONEER DJ HDJ-CUE1 IS OUR CURRENT FAVOURITE HERE AT DIGITAL DJ TIPS BECAUSE IT BLENDS GREAT SOUND WITH COMFORT AND SUPERIOR NOISE ISOLATION.

3

THE MINIMUM YOU'LL NEED IS A CABLE TO GO FROM YOUR CONTROLLER TO YOUR POWERED SPEAKERS OR AMPLIFIER AND SPEAKER. THE USB CABLES FOR THE COMPUTER ALWAYS COME WITH THE CONTROLLERS, THOUGH.



CABLES

YOUR CONTROLLER WILL COME WITH A USB CABLE TO CONNECT IT TO YOUR computer, but you'll need cables to connect its audio output to your powered speakers (or amp and speakers). If your speakers have "RCA connectors" (a red and white pair of sockets), a "2x RCA male to 2x RCA male" cable will do; it will usually have two wires joined together with a pair of sockets on each end, red and white, for right and left channel. DJ Techtools' Chroma Cables are awesome and durable, plus they come in different colours and lengths. If you're using computer speakers that have an 1/8" TRS socket for an input, you'll need a "2x RCA male to stereo 1/8" TRS male" cable. If your computer speakers are the cheap type with only a headphone jack on them that's meant to be plugged in to a computer headphones socket, you'll need an 1/8" TRS female to 2x RCA male lead. Buy one longer than you think you'll need.

THE SOUNDBOKS GO IS A MONSTER BATTERY/BLUETOOTH SPEAKER

4

PORTABLE SPEAKER

WHILE YOUR "STUDIO" OR "MAIN" SPEAKERS WILL BE GREAT FOR practising at home, you're often going to want to listen to your DJ sets, your streaming service, or even do a bit of DJing with your controller (especially if you choose a small one, or DJ from some iOS software) away from those speakers. Enter your portable speaker. Chances are high you'll buy a Bluetooth one, which is great, but just make sure it has a latency-free Line In so you can plug a cable into it from your DJ set-up when needed; Bluetooth can have a delay on the signal making the gap between what you "do" on your gear and what you hear noticeable, and highly annoying! We love the Soundboks Go, which is a monster, loud, yet portable speaker with many DJ smarts.

5

STAND

LAPTOPS NEED RAISING IDEALLY FROM their "sitting position" at the table you'll no doubt be setting your gear up on, so a laptop stand is pretty much an essential, especially if your eyes struggle at all reading your computer screen. We are particular fans of the Hercules Stands laptop stand and last time I checked you could still get the Hercules stand.

A DECENT STAND WITH MANY POSSIBLE ADJUSTMENTS IS DEFINITELY WORTH INVESTING IN, AND CAN BE A GODSEND IN CRAMPED DJ BOOTHS WHERE YOUR LAPTOP NEEDS TO BE CAREFULLY ANGLED TOWARDS YOU.

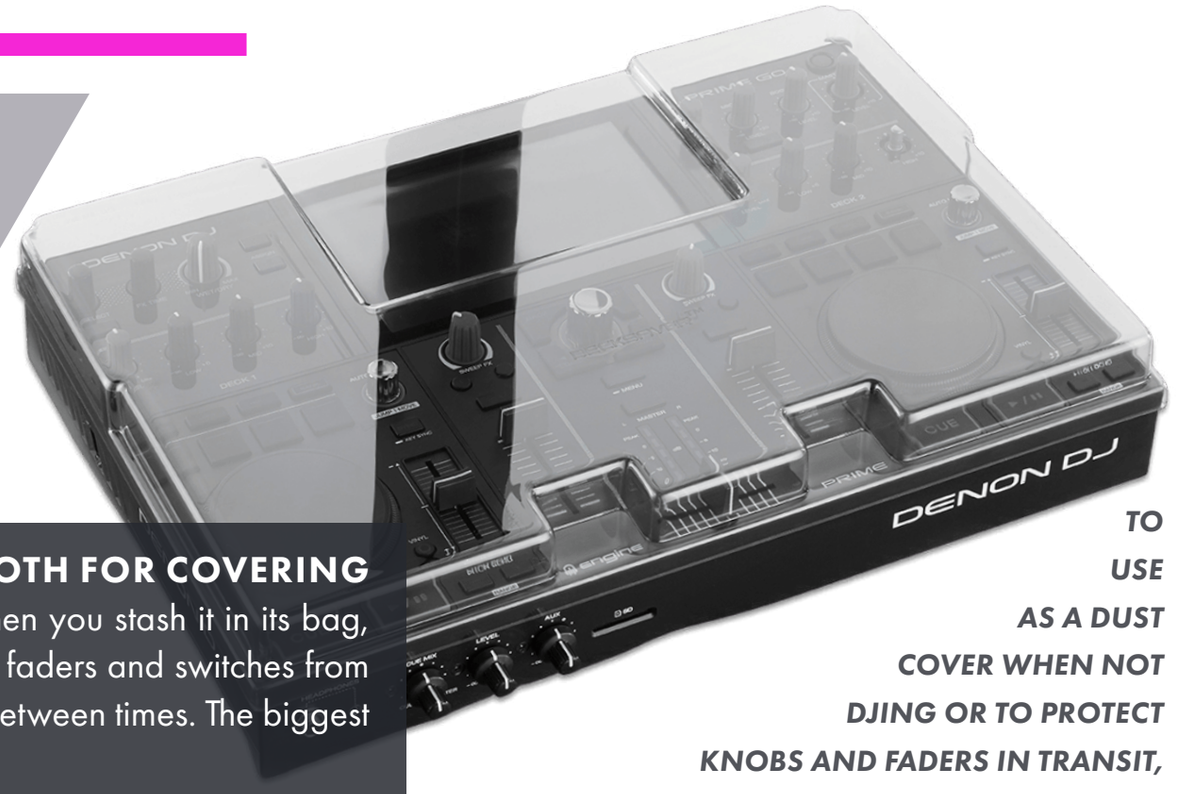
6 BAG, CASE OR BACKPACKS

YOU REALLY DON'T WANT TO BE CARRYING YOUR DJ GEAR around in a plastic bag, in the box it came in, or even worse, under your arm. And nowadays, you don't have to. All the manufacturers of bags and cases - names like Magma, UDG and more - now have "budget" no frills cases, with models that go all the way up to all singing, all dancing trolleys, backpacks and even "true" hard cases made of plywood and aluminium. For most, a mid-range backpack or shoulder bag will suffice.

A DECENT DJ BAG WILL PROTECT YOUR INVESTMENT AND WITH MODELS FROM BASIC (AND CHEAP) UP TO PRO DJ BACKPACKS AND TROLLEYS, THERE'S SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE.

7 TRANSPARENT PLASTIC COVER

THIS TYPE OF SNUGLY FITTING PLASTIC LID IS A GREAT IDEA BOTH FOR COVERING your controller up at home when you're not using it, and for putting over it when you stash it in its bag, case or backpack to travel with. These polycarbonate cases protect the knobs, faders and switches from accidentally getting bent in transit or worse, as well as keeping the dust out in-between times. The biggest name in the game is Decksaver.



TO USE AS A DUST COVER WHEN NOT DJING OR TO PROTECT KNOBS AND FADERS IN TRANSIT, A COVER IS A GREAT IDEA.

KIT FOR LIVESTREAMING YOUR DJ SETS

MANY DJS ARE LIVESTREAMING DJ SETS NOWADAYS, AND many more want to. It's not hard to do with the right kit - and you don't need an awful lot of it, either. Here are some outstanding pieces of livestreaming tech that we've been using heavily these last 12 months...

1 OPEN BROADCASTER SOFTWARE (OBS)

IT'S FREE, IT'S UBIQUITOUS, AND IT WORKS GREAT - there's little not to like. Get OBS for your Mac or Windows laptop and turn it into an instant live broadcasting studio. You can even run it alongside your DJ software, so you don't have to have a second computer for livestreaming at all.

2 LOGITECH STREAMCAM

THESE LITTLE CAMERAS ARE WEBCAMS ON STEROIDS. THEY can be tripod mounted, are full 1080 resolution (the highest for livestreaming), are really well made, and give great results. Plug one of these into your laptop, and that's your video sorted.

3 IK MULTIMEDIA IRIG MIC HD2

THIS SMART HANDHELD MICROPHONE PLUGS DIRECTLY INTO your computer so you don't need an audio interface to get your voice into your DJ livestreams. It is ruggedly built, sounds great, and is reasonably priced.

4 YAMAHA AG03 AUDIO INTERFACE

IF YOU DO NEED AN AUDIO INTERFACE TO get your music and voice into your computer for livestreaming, our favourite is the oldie-but-goodie Yamaha AG03. It's like a hybrid between a mixer and an audio interface, and is supremely flexible (we also love the bigger AG06).

5 MEVO START

DON'T FANCY USING A LAPTOP TO GO LIVE? The Mevo Start is a camera that can go live to Twitch, YouTube etc directly, no computer required! It has a stereo audio input to feed your music into, and can easily be mounted on a tripod. Control is via a smartphone app. It's the ultimate in simplicity, and it works great.

MAKING MUSIC ON YOUR LAPTOP

A DIGITAL AUDIO WORKSTATION, OR DAW, IS A PIECE OF SOFTWARE that you run (usually) on your Windows or Mac laptop for making music with. Nowadays you can make complete songs without the need for any additional hardware at all, just on a computer, with one of these packages - and that's exactly what many DJ/producers do.

The software will contain at its heart a timeline where you can lay out multiple tracks of music - be that drums, instruments, vocals, whatever - to construct your song. It'll come with software synthesisers, samples, drums and instruments, effects, a mixer... everything you need to make a track from start to finish.

You may choose to add extra hardware (often, producers like to add "pad" controllers for finger drumming, or a control keyboard to make entering chords and playing melodies into the computer easier), and some musicians like to buy synthesisers and samplers to "jam" on which they can also hook up to the computer, making "hybrid" production set-ups.

But the important thing to know is that the kind of music-making power that once was accessible by very few people and called for dedicated studios to be built in order to even exist, can now happen in your home, and is by comparison ridiculously affordable. DAWs and modern music making hardware have democratised the world of making music, so that if you want to have a go, you can.

FIVE OF THE BEST
MUSIC-MAKING PACKAGES

1

ABLETON LIVE

THIS MAC/WINDOWS PACKAGE IS THE BIG ONE, used by more electronic music producers and DJ/producers than any other by far. It has everything you need, doesn't tie you to any particular workflow, and - as its name suggests - is also a great live music tool. It has some pretty cool "jamming" features too, to help you come up with ideas.

2

FL STUDIO

FORMERLY "FRUITY LOOPS", THIS IS A MUCH-LOVED Mac/Windows program, the starting point in music making for so many of today's top producers, and a package that has been at the heart of many hit records. Their scrupulously fair pricing policy and "outsider" status appeals to many, and the package has a lot of loyal proponents.

3

LOGIC PRO

MAC-ONLY, THIS APPLE PRODUCTION SOFTWARE comes from a slightly more traditional music making background than the first two in our list, but nowadays it can do an awful lot of what, say, Ableton can do, while retaining the Apple polish that will appeal to Mac fans. You get a lot for your money here, too.

4 SERATO STUDIO

A BIT DIFFERENT FROM THE OTHER THREE MENTIONED SO FAR, the Mac/windows Serato Studio is a much more simple tool, designed as a kind of sketchpad or beatbox, with particular appeal to hip hop producers, and to existing Serato users, because it looks and feels similar, and uses the same music library.

5 GARAGEBAND

THIS APPLE-ONLY PACKAGE GETS A MENTION HERE mainly because it is absolutely free. It's sort of a "Logic Pro Lite", but it is a capable program in its own right. One appealing feature is that its project files are compatible with Logic Pro should you decide to continue working on an idea on Logic at any point in the future.

FIVE PIECES OF MUSIC-MAKING HARDWARE

THERE IS A LOT OF HARDWARE OUT THERE for making music, but here are five items we've enjoyed this year and find ourselves recommending to our community regularly, a mix of old and new...

1

NEW PUSH ABLETON LIVE CONTROLLER

THE BIG NEWS THIS YEAR IS THAT THERE IS A NEW option when you buy a Push (Ableton's own-brand controller for its Live software): Namely, you can choose a fully standalone unit, no laptop required, giving you the best of both worlds. It's now modular too, so can be repaired or upgraded whenever you like.

2

NOVATION FLKEY MIDI KEYBOARDS

THESE ARE THE FIRST EVER MIDI CONTROL KEYBOARDS MADE specifically for the FL Studio DAW, so one of these is a no-brainer if you want a keyboard for that package. That said, the makers also have a more general versions that works with Ableton and Logic (the Launchkey keyboards) - they're basically just a box of keys, so can be mapped to most software.

3

IK MULTIMEDIA UNO SYNTH PRO SYNTHESISERS

WANT AN ANALOGUE SYNTHESISER FOR ALL THOSE FAT dance basslines and snarling lead sounds? The Uno Synth, which comes in small and large versions, is a supremely capable, genuine analogue synthesiser that shames products many times its price. Usefully, it has onboard effects, too.

4 ROLAND SP-404 MKII SAMPLER

THIS PAD-BASED SAMPLER IN ITS MKII GUISE HAS HAD A SHOT in the arm this year with an awesome firmware upgrade, making a much-loved sampler (that in itself improved massively on the original version) even better. It's a supreme tool for making beats live, with its big pads and its useful long, thin design. It looks great next to DJ gear in a hybrid set-up.

NOVATION CIRCUIT TRACKS GROOVEBOX 5

IF YOU WANT TO MAKE MUSIC AWAY FROM THE computer, this portable, battery-powered groovebox can do it all. It has a four-track drum machine, two synthesisers, a built-in sequencer and mixer, onboard FX, and Midi control over two external instruments, too. For sketching down musical ideas quickly, there's nothing else quite like it.

FINALLY...

DIGITAL DJ TIPS EXISTS TO INFORM, ENTERTAIN AND EDUCATE the modern generation of DJs. Our guides, website and seminars at DJ shows are all designed to help DJs get started in this game, either as a great hobby or to earn a part-time or even a full time income. But did you know we are also the biggest online DJ school in the world, with over 37,000 students in 163 countries having taken our courses? We have over 27 online training courses covering all aspects of DJing, mixing and music production, from beginner to pro. Check out all our online DJ courses here.

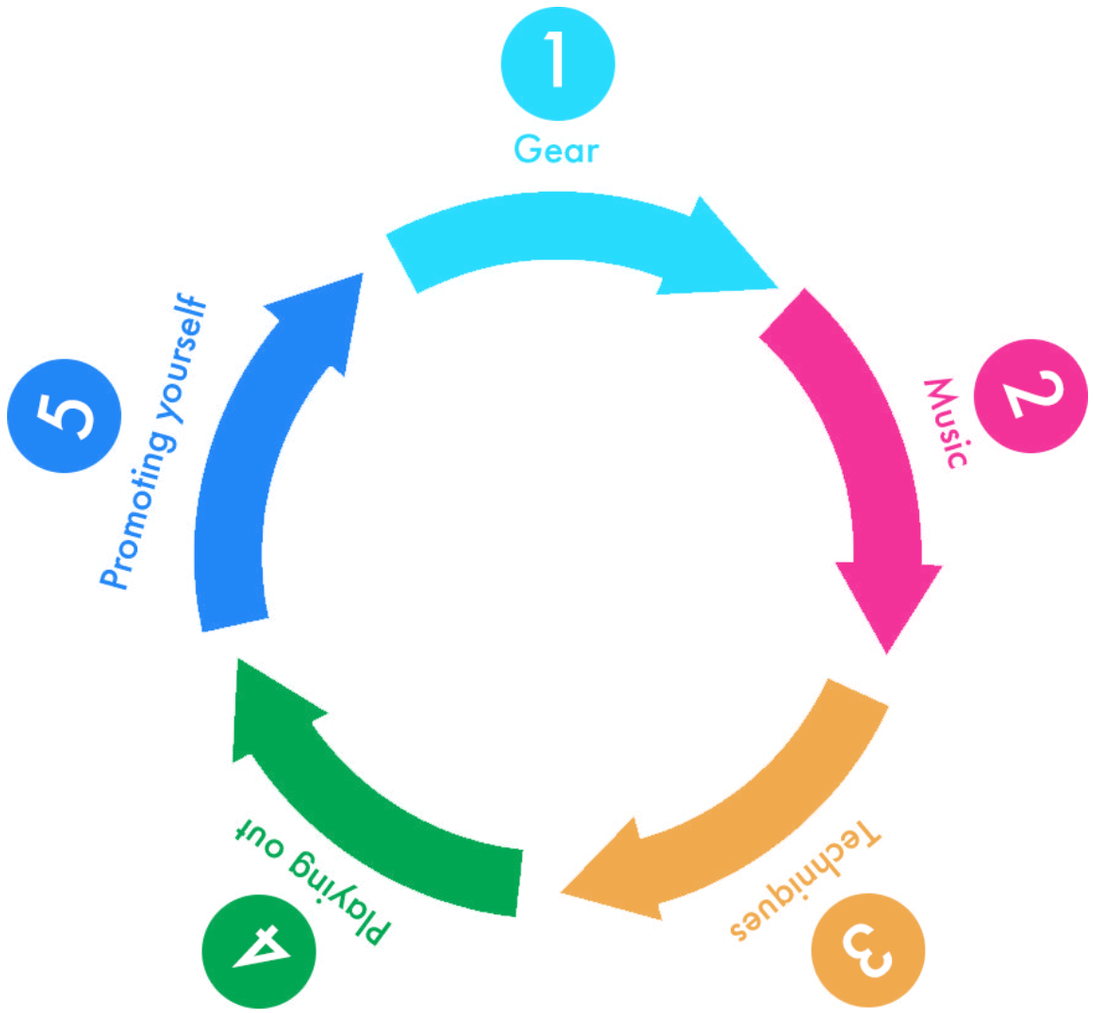
For instance, our popular The Complete DJ Course is where most DJs start when they're new to DJing, or new to digital DJing having done it a different way in the past. Following our proven five-step DJ training process, it gets you from nowhere to playing confident DJ sets with modern gear and digital music, fast, and is a phenomenal investment in your DJing.

To make sure you're getting the latest DJ news and opinion first, be sure to join Global DJ Network, the private Facebook Group for our Digital DJ Tips community. It's the perfect place to hang out and meet DJ friends, ask for help, get advice, talk DJing, post gear pics and talk about gigs - and it's FREE to join! Click here to join Global DJ Network.

If you have any questions please either email us at info@digitaldjtips.com, or reach out to us on Facebook, Instagram, or YouTube channels.

DIGITAL DJ TIPS
THE GLOBAL DJ SCHOOL

THE FIVE STEPS TO DJING SUCCESS



OUR REVOLUTIONARY TRAINING METHOD ensures you improve quickly, by making sure you're not neglecting any of the five key areas of your DJ development.

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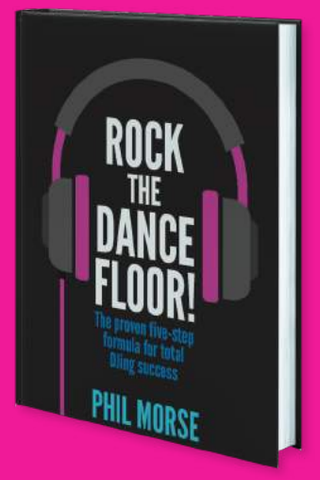

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