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Light Factory PC-Based Lighting Controller

Written by Richard Rutherford
 Wednesday, Mar. 15, 2006



As an experienced sound and lighting contractor, I am often put upon by manufacturer reps to "...take a look and let us know what you think" about this piece of gear or that. Sometimes, there may be an actual potential need for the product, a free lunch or sometimes just plain old curiosity on my part. In this case, however, the stars aligned properly and I came across this product that I wanted to check out.

Light Factory is a PC-based software solution for lighting control that is laptopcapable. At first glance, it seems to be just another click-and-go software-based DMX control program, but I found that there is more to it than that.

First of all, I am one of those overconfident types who reads the first page of a manual and then starts pushing buttons just so I can get really frustrated. Light Factory seems to know me. They laid out their Web site with a logical path to FAQs, system requirements and hardware accessories. Very little reading is required to get to the meat of features and operation. Their quick setup manual was almost too clear and simple, and once the software was downloaded, I had dimmers and fixtures patched in about three minutes.

The attention to detail with regards to operating both intelligent lights and dimmers is probably the outstanding feature that goes almost unnoticed because the software is so intuitive in this regard. There may be cooler graphics out there, but the visual response to the mouse and keyboard was logical, useful and functional. Upgrading to the 5,120-channel version and using a couple of large monitors would be great for writing programs for a complex show. The specs say you can get 450 channels up on a single screen, but the company actually recommends a dual monitor display. I agree—not because you really need it, but because the software does so much that you just wouldn't want to miss anything. The simple color-coding of active channels is really effective, and making on-the-fly changes to fixtures and dimmers only takes a confident glance.

I also really liked the photographic icons for individual fixtures and being able to simply "mouse" intelligent fixtures to X and Y coordinates. This is the way software should be, where most of the detailed front end work is done for you. While the open USB interface is certainly fast enough at 40 frames per second, I suspect that some heavily burdened laptops might bog a bit. However, some interfaces such as the Soundlight/Sunlight USB interface have separate microprocessors, so I don't see this as an issue if you are willing to spend a couple more dollars. I have to think that any of the optional Ethernet interfaces would also work even better, especially if you require multiple DMX outputs.

Submaster control and interface is always an issue, especially for facilities that may have excellent programmers but less than experienced operators. The Light Factory supports 1,000 submasters that are easily accessed through any conventional DMX desk. This is simple enough both in programming and hardware requirements. I suspect this capability alone will make this a logical upgrade for the theatre, house of worship, large corporate and touring markets. I would love to use the submasters on a touchscreen or one of the optional ErgoDex shortcut keyboards.

Visualizations are not included, but considerations for interfacing with software like Capture and WYSIWYG are handled nicely enough. At less than a dollar per control channel, the software is very reasonable in cost considering the quality, and if you pony up for all 10 DMX universes, then you are paying less than 40 cents a channel.

There are also a mind-boggling number of possible macros, task schedulers, effect and show runners, all of which can be hot keyed or triggered just about any way you want because of the open architecture of the software.

I suggest taking a few minutes and test drive this software for yourself. Go to www.stageresearch.com/products/Lighting Software.aspx and take a look. We like toys, and this is one that is especially fun. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to go read the manual and see what I missed.

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What it is: Light Factory PC-Based Lighting Controller, distributed in North America by Stage Research (www.stageresearch.com)

What it's for: Clubs, theatres, houses of worship, corporate events and small tours

Pros: Up to 10 DMX universes (5,120 channels); up to 2,000 lighting fixtures; output to industry-standard USB or Ethernet devices; unlimited cue lists each supporting millions of cues; multiple effects engines; built in scheduler, macros, palettes, user security and fixture library; audio, MIDI and time code triggering; up to 1,000 external submasters using any existing DMX desk; unique LED/matrix control; simple media playback (video, audio, flash); Capture & WYSIWYG visualization support

Cons: PC-based, no dedicated hardware

How much: U.S. \$499