

# Jazzmutant Dexter

Take a touchscreen and make it the controller for your DAW — well, that's the theory.

**ROB JAMES** gets all touchy-feely with this interesting solution.



Touchscreens are a touchy subject and I'm not talking touchy-feely here in 'nineties and noughties' management-speak. Emotions run high and arguments are common. Mention touchscreens in professional audio company and the room divides like the Red Sea. The history is long with the estimable DAR SoundStation as the first workstation to make touchscreens familiar. I've always sat on the fence maintaining that they are useful in some applications and disastrous in others. I've never been convinced that they are suitable for fine control applications such as mixing and editing but equally convinced that they are absolutely ideal for others.

The first touchscreen system I conceived and specified controlled an audio router and a sound effects database driving a CD-Jukebox. This was a notable success in a high-pressured production environment, but it was partnered with a full-on digital console, an AMS-Neve Logic 2 to be precise. I have always believed that this touchscreen was successful precisely because it was not controlling real-time mix parameters. Like a hole-in-the-wall cash machine it was an interface for dummies that obviated the need for complex and expensive custom control surfaces by presenting a restricted set of logical options. The operators had quite enough to keep in their heads staying on top of the rest of the kit and dealing with the production teams without over complicating these peripheral functions.

In the past, one reason for dismissing touchscreens in the context of mixing and editing was that they were all single input devices like mice and tracker balls. In other words, you could only alter one parameter at a time. Now we are entering the age of the multi-touchscreen and the UK£1599 (+VAT) JazzMutant Dexter is an early example of this technology aimed at the audio workstation market. The other reason for eschewing touchscreens for mixing and editing remains valid. With the best will in the world, if you have your hand over the screen in order to touch and change parameters then you are likely to be obscuring potentially vital information. However, re-thinking the standard 'copy of a physical

mixer' paradigm could circumvent the problem.

JazzMutant markets two variations on the theme of touchscreen controller — the Lemur and the Dexter. The hardware is identical. A sleek, glossy black, low profile aluminium case houses a 12-inch, 800 x 600 pixel TFT touchscreen, four internally illuminated buttons and, at the rear, an RJ45 100 base-T Ethernet port and the usual concentric low voltage power inlet with an on/off switch. The power supply is an in-line block, not the usual wall-wart. Installation is straightforward. The networking is comprehensive and you can connect peer to peer with a crossover cable (Not necessary on many modern PCs) or via a LAN switch. The IP address can be set manually or, if there is a DHCP server on the network, completely automatically. In my case, automatic worked perfectly.

Dexter requires neither a light touch nor a heavy one. My first instinct to caress it failed miserably. Perhaps surprisingly, fingernails work best and at medium pressure. This is absolutely fine for buttons but I'm not so convinced when it comes to precision control of faders and knobs.

It is important to understand that the Dexter screen does not show the DAW GUI screens. It has its own purpose-designed screens with faders, buttons, knobs and surround controller that remain much the same regardless of the host DAW. Some of the interface elements are really rather beguiling and give a tantalising glimpse of where this technology might take us. I've always liked the idea of dragging points on a graph to control EQ, for example, and Dexter provides this option. The surround panner has a couple of novel features. You can control a number of sources simultaneously and, by using two fingers, move them all closer to or further away from the centre. However, there are some issues. For example, there's no way to control LFE send and divergence in the surround panner and although there are meters in the strips these are resolutely single bargraph. Not much help with stereo or multichannel sources.

The elegant Dexter also suffers from the familiar problem that afflicts many DAW hardware controllers i.e. it requires a specific driver to operate with each third party DAW. At present the list is restricted to

Steinberg's Cubase and Nuendo, Apple Logic Pro and Cakewalk Sonar. (In their latest versions. I used the PC version of Nuendo.) This approach confers the benefit of a tailor-made synergy with the target DAW that requires little effort on the part of the user to set up. Conversely, you are stuck with JazzMutant's ideas of how a mixing surface should look and operate.

For the more adventurous there is a JazzMutant alternative, the Lemur (£1435 + VAT). Dexter and Lemur can co-exist in the same unit. Once the 'Dual-Mode' firmware is installed you can re-boot into either. The good news is that this 'dual-mode' software is now available, free for Dexter owners, Euros 399 for Lemur owners. Thanks to JazzMutant's Jazzdaemon driver the Lemur is an altogether more versatile device. It can control any application that speaks MIDI and/or the OpenSoundControl (OSC) protocol, or indeed up to eight applications on multiple computers thanks to the network connectivity.

OSC is a network-based controller protocol with a number of claimed advantages over MIDI: low latency, higher data capacity, 32-bit numerical precision and easy configurability.

Lemur gives you a kit of resizable parts or 'widgets' together with logical and mathematical operators to build your own interface or interfaces in the JazzEditor, a cross-platform (Mac/Windows) application. Mappings can be made manually or via a 'learn' function. The resultant interfaces can be uploaded and be stored in non-volatile memory on-board the Lemur. A project can include a number of interfaces all available at the same time. The buttons above the display are used to page through these. There is a built-in browser to manage projects from the screen.

The widget library comes with a goodly number of customisable standard user interface objects (pads, switches, vertical and horizontal faders, knobs, LEDs and digital displays, scopes, etc.) together with some new and powerful objects such as the MultiSlider, the Multiball and the RingArea, which have no direct analogy in a hardware control surface. Although the emphasis is on music, performance and VJ applications there are obvious possibilities here for wider use.

Dexter provides an interesting glimpse of what might be possible with a touchscreen for editing and mixing control but I remain to be convinced. This may in part be due to lack of support for my favourite applications but, even allowing for this, I still find the touchscreen interface less positive for simultaneous multiple fader-type control than multiple physical faders. The touchscreen Mackie DigitalXBus console also had a row of 'real' faders and knobs and, despite only having single-touchscreens, was a lot more useable as a result.

Would I buy a Dexter/Lemur? Probably not for my own use unless I was a lot richer, but I would definitely specify one for a number of applications. Most notably this would be for theatre and exhibition/theme park play-out systems, router control and possibly sound effects selection. ■

## PROS

Robust; good looking; interesting control possibilities especially with the Lemur option.

## CONS

The Dexter on-screen interface is fixed architecture; touch control of variable parameters is a lot less positive than physical controls; GUI needs further development.

## Contact

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