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DMX Apps: Fast, Cheap, Good (Pick Any Three)

By: Richard Cadena

Austin is the self-proclaimed “live music capital of the world,” but what many people don’t know is that there is a fairly robust movie production industry here, too. A friend who is working on a movie recently asked me about low-cost options for the simple control of DMX-controlled fog machines and fans without having to purchase an expensive console and learning how to use it. All he wanted was to turn on his equipment and quickly and easily control the levels of fog and airflow, and he wanted to do it with free software, if possible, that could be used on a laptop or iPad.

tablet, or laptop into a DMX signal. This is becoming a popular way of gaining quick control of all kinds of gear for quick focusing, a rig check, or other applications where you don’t need a full-sized console.

I go to Burbank and/or Los Angeles two or three times a year, and it seems to me that the most popular way of doing this in Hollywood is probably to use Luminair on iPad (see *Lighting & Sound International*, February 2017, “Luminair 3 Mobile Lighting App,” page 70) with RatPac Cintenna wireless dimmers. Gaffers seem to love

several low-cost gateways and a Wi-Fi router to convert the control signal from Luminair to DMX. Some of these include the DMXking eDMX1 Pro (retail \$129), ELC dmXLAN Buddy (retail about \$200), Enttec Open DMX Ethernet or ODE (retail \$275), Sand Systems Sandbox Portable DMX Nodes (ranging from \$200 to \$600, depending on the number of DMX universes and the features), Eternal Lighting EliteNet (retail \$250), and more. For the more ambitious, you can also roll your own by buying a Raspberry Pi, which costs about \$40, and putting the OLA software on it.



The key to controlling DMX devices with a laptop, tablet, or smartphone is a gateway that can convert the signal to DMX. Three examples include the DMXking eDMX1 Pro, ELC dmXLAN Buddy, and Enttec OpenDMX Ethernet gateways.

Not everyone who uses DMX needs or wants to learn how to patch and program a full-sized lighting console. There are lots of instances where all you want is to use a handful of faders to control a few simple effects like fog machines, DMX-controlled fans, and maybe some practicals. There are many options: Some are free, others are inexpensive, and others cost a bit more. All of them require the use of intermediate hardware to convert a wired or wireless control signal from a smartphone,

the freedom and minimum amount of hardware that this end-to-end wireless solution offers. It’s also simple to use. Once you configure your layout on Luminair, you can have a page full of faders to control each device, or you can create submasters to control several devices with one fader. Although the Luminair app costs only \$90, to build a system like this you’ll need to spend about \$1,000 for a Cintenna transmitter and receiver pair, plus the cost of an iPad.

Or you could also use any one of

(See <https://www.openlighting.org/ola/tutorials/ola-on-raspberry-pi/>)

On the other end of the cost spectrum are free or inexpensive apps that you can download and run on a smartphone to control any DMX device through a gateway, like those listed above, and a Wi-Fi router. These include DMX Assistant (\$42), DmxControlPro (\$32.99), Remote DMX (free), Osram DMXController (free), and probably many more.

All of these solutions use a Wi-Fi

connection, which can be sketchy at times and much less reliable than a wireless DMX system or hard-wired connection. There are many other options for quick, easy, and inexpensive control of a handful of DMX channels that don't use Wi-Fi, including the Chauvet DJ FlareCON Air (retail \$200). It's probably not the only DMX controller app that can run on Android or iOS, but it's one of the few that I could find. It comprises a wireless DMX unit (retail \$200) that connects directly to the tablet, so there is no need for a Wi-Fi router or Ethernet

switch. There is also the Elation Emulation Touch (street price about \$360 to \$400), which is an Ethernet-to-DMX solution that works with the Cuety Emulation Touch Programmer app running on an iPad. And if you want to use a laptop, there are many more USB-to-DMX hardware solutions with compatible software in the same price range as the range of gateways listed above.

For those who just want a simple, battery-operated, handheld fader console that won't break the bank, the Pocket Console is probably the

most affordable and easy to use. There is now a variety of Pocket Consoles in the range, but the simplest is the Basic Pocket Console DMX, which retails for \$320. It offers a single scene with eight faders and one universe of DMX.

I've used several of these solutions, and my favorites include the Pocket Console, Luminair, and, depending on the situation, any simple app, like the Osram DMXController, that outputs sACN and/or Art-Net. If a fixture or device accepts Art-Net or sACN directly, all you need is a simple app and a Wi-Fi connection to control it.

A few weeks ago, I was conducting a lighting controls workshop, and we set up a Wi-Fi network to demonstrate wireless best practices and to talk about IP addresses and subnet masks. I had connected an ARRI SkyPanel to the wireless router via an Ethernet cable, and it mysteriously began fading up and down, and changing color. Unbeknownst to me, someone in the class had downloaded the Osram DMX Control app and had taken control of the fixture through the Wi-Fi and without any other hardware. That was only possible because the SkyPanel works directly with an Art-Net control signal without the need for a gateway. Once we all realized what was going on and the guilty party confessed, everyone in the class downloaded the app. Before long, they took turns stealing control of the fixture from one another, raising and lowering the intensity, and changing colors on it—so much for an orderly classroom. 📶



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