Flock Audio Patch LT

GEORGE SHILLING sorts out the connection between inputs and outputs with this digitally controlled analogue patch system

Digitally-controlled analogue is hardly a new concept in audio. Think of the late, lamented Euphonix consoles, the SSL Matrix, and the ever-expanding series of Bettermaker outboard processors. SSL's X-Patch — a useful MIDI-controlled analogue patchbay — disappeared in 2013, but in 2017 Flock Audio stepped into that void with the elegant and modern Patch, with 32 I/O, controlled by the dedicated Patch App, running on macOS or Windows. Since then, the company has introduced the cheaper LT version with 16 I/O, utilising the same software control app which cleverly supports combinations of Patch units (including also the ethernet-controlled Patch XT 96 I/O) while keeping all audio analogue.

Inputs or outputs?

The LT ('Light') is actually a pretty weighty 1U box, neatly constructed, accompanied by an inline PSU with a pro-spec latching connector, and a generously long USB B-type to A-type cable for connecting to the computer. There was the recurrent macOS security permission fandango to install the app, but once up and running it was smooth sailing. Well, apart from my slight aberration of knowing the difference between inputs and outputs! The rear panel audio connections comprise two pairs of DB25 connectors for the 16 inputs and outputs, wired up using the usual Tascam convention. here's also a single alternative I/O connection on the front, (activated in the software), for a handy quick hookup.

So... outputs from your gear go to inputs in the box, and vice versa — all well and good — but then in the software, you need to label inputs as your gear outputs (and vice versa too, of course). I know, I'm old and daft, but I did scratch my head for two minutes before realising this! The other thing I struggled with — also undoubtedly age-related — was the tiny sizing of the app's window and text within, which had me squinting at first. Then I discovered that I was on the 'Default' option for the App Scale Size in the Preferences, which — bafflingly — was tiny compared to 'Small'. Selecting 'Large' allowed it to fill the screen and made everything easier. Sadly, there's no plug-in version, which would be handy (though we've been told one is in the works).

Plenty of other fiddly bits are tweakable in Preferences, from the choice of screen font, to the hardware fan control; though, after an initial burst on power-up, it was generally inaudible in default mode. The main app window looks like a spreadsheet to show audio Paths, and once you've named your gear and saved it in the Hardware Setup window, it's easy using drag-and-drop to create patches.

/ **The Patch software — simple when you get the sizing right!**

A simple click on something puts it into bypass, and Option-click removes it. The multi-level Undo and Redo buttons come in handy too. And a stereo pairing function means simultaneous patching of left and right when required.

For recording setups, the Patch LT even provides individual switching of 48-volt phantom power for inputs (or is that outputs?!), with plenty of safety options to prevent you from flicking it on by accident.

Excitement

The prospect of testing the Patch LT hadn't filled me with excitement, but once up and running I found it to be revelatory. My Thermionic Culture Rooster for example has no EQ bypass button, but with the Patch LT it was easy and simple to pop both channels into bypass with one click — without having to lean across to the rack. Switching bypass is somehow utterly silent and seamless, while swapping processing order results in a brief mute while things are shuffled. But there are no relay clicks or suchlike. Each 'Path' has its own Solo, Mute and Clear buttons. Stored routings are easily accessed from a drop-down selector.

Linking inputs and outputs with a padlock icon allows you to create 'objects' — such as outboard compressors — where one block can have an input and an output. By contrast, you'd want separate input and output blocks for your interface in order to place items between them. The PDF manual provides lots of information and examples of objects and routings like this, but it could have explained some of the workings more clearly and concisely.

Yes, Master

For a mastering setup, the Patch LT is ideal. Audio paths are completely transparent. Using one stereo insert point you then have the possibility of seven stereo processors, which you can easily re-order and bypass singly or in combinations, all at the click of a mouse button. Mults are easily created, allowing signals to easily split into more than one processor. You can use this to simultaneously record, say, a compressed and uncompressed signal from the same mic.

The neat Patch app makes routing and patching a breeze compared to the old fashioned tangle of a conventional patchbay. You can combine the two systems easily though, for an excellent hybrid setup. All kinds of audio professionals including recordists, live engineers, mixers, broadcast and mastering engineers will enjoy the power of this marvellous system.

resolution/ VERDICT

PROS Pros: Great sound quality; instant bypass and instant comparison of outboard processors and signal paths; handy Link, Mult and Pair options, onboard phantom power

CONS Confusion of inputs and outputs labelling — probably just me, though; manual could be better; no plug-in version of the app yet

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