

Lexicon MX400

Would you believe it? A dual stereo/surround reverb effects processor that you bolt into a rack. **ZENON SCHOEPE** says it can now be regarded as retro and is therefore cool.



HAVE TO ADMIT that it has been a quite a while since I last looked at a new dedicated hardware effects unit. In fact I had a quick look around and was somewhat dismayed, but not altogether surprised, that the Lexicon MX400 has its price bracket and feature set largely to itself. There was a time when a box like this would have had some ferocious competition. It strengthened the breed, so much in fact that many simply went soft and retired from the hard game. Mind you, the MX400 has that angle covered too as the USB port on its rear let's you connect to a computer and employ the supplied MX-Edit software as an editor/librarian (how quaint) while VST and AudioUnits software allows the box to appear within your workstation as a hardware plug-in and benefit from its automation. The point to remember is that the audio will be passing through the physical box, which is what I want to concentrate on here.

Two versions of the MX400 exist: one looking at the outside world through balanced jacks, another with XLRs — called the MX400XL. I can't pretend I'm not baffled by this as it seems an unremarkable distinction to make when all else remains the same. The MX400 costs £425 (+VAT) while the XLR version hits £468 (+VAT), which, to put it into some context, is within around 50 quid of the MPX1 and that offers both types of I-O. Admittedly what differentiates the MX400 is that it offers two fully independent stereo channels of processing and the rear panel has two pairs of inputs and two pairs of outputs to reflect this. The fact that these pairs are marked Front and Rear tells you that it can be configured as a surround processor in an LR LsRs sense. Phono SPDIF I-Os also reflect this convention and run at 44.1 or 48kHz.

You can switch the MX400's mode to stereo, dual stereo or surround and you'll be presented with appropriate varieties of presets to experiment with. I wasn't entirely happy with the monitoring setup I threw together to demo the surround capability and the fact that I didn't have a broad enough selection of programme to pipe through it. But the algorithms are certainly linked for 4-channel reproduction and display some interesting movement between the front and rears while giving a convincing impression of being of one space. That said, for most people the surround processing is unlikely to be the main reason for buying the MX400, it'll be an added bonus. The strength, to my mind, is in offering two really rather

good stereo reverbs.

I say reverb but this unit does embellish this palette with more. It offers 17 reverb types though halls of various size and application, to plates, rooms and other spaces plus seven delay types, a compressor and de-esser, and eight essential mod effects.

Operation is fairly straightforward if you understand Lexicon's take on using assignable dials to alter parameters values. The screen starts to get a little crowded and compromised when running two stereo processors simultaneously as it becomes divided in half horizontally at the top menu level to display one preset identifier in the top half and the other in the bottom half. In order to get in and adjust one of the two stereo processors you have to first select it on the Page/Select dial and then activate it with a press. Doing this reliably was a source of continued frustration for me because I kept getting it wrong, or thought I had, requiring regular back stepping with the Exit key. Once you are into the edit, matters improve as the whole screen is dedicated to the stereo processor you're working on. It certainly helps if you can get the box up to a position where you can see the screen straight on.

The front panels, has individual input pots for the two stereo channels with rather meagre 4-LED metering that is largely redundant as the unit is pleasantly unfussy about keeping levels high to keep the processing sounding good. Four display-related mode LEDs indicate whether you're in surround, stereo or working on stereo channel A or B in dual stereo mode. The Page/Select dial accesses menu levels and an Exit button takes you back a step and usefully has an integral LED to tell you there is something to go back to. A Tempo key also flashes to tell you to 'tap tempo' in a relevant preset. A 'local' Bypass allows you to mute a selected effect process for instances when you're working on another constituent in a preset. Then there are the three edit knobs that adjust particular parameters in editing; not always logically but if you've used this type of Lex arrangement before you'll get the drift.

Store commits your edit to the user memories. Stereo mode has 99 factory and 99 user locations, dual-stereo has the same, while surround has 25 factory and 25 user programs. These are scrolled through on the Program dial with press to make. Finally there's a global Bypass.

All effects boxes are judged on their presets, it was always so and it's why plug-ins, with their

gargantuan libraries, eventually wear the user down into believing they've got some great presets in there somewhere if only they could find them when they really need them. To my ears the MX400 delivers a credible presentation of its abilities with a selection of immediately usable patches.

The Lexicon sound means different things to people now than it used to but I like what I heard through this unit. It's not overly bright and sparkly in an artificial and forced way but neither does it pretend to play the convoluted reverb card. It's a synthetic reverb that draws from some excellent algorithms that have been perfected over years of experience because they have been found to work. That really is the key here. You can edit, but it's structured in a way that allows you to adjust the things that make most difference most immediately. If it's not what you want then there will be another algorithm that can be adjusted so it will be. It's fast, you're using your ears and not looking at a distracting screen, and you can get on with the production like you are meant to.

There was time when I might even have considered joining the army to own a box like this. Today I'm just very impressed with the value and performance of the MX400 but I suspect that I may not be a typical user and there will be some for whom the prospect of a physical rackmounting processor will seem a little archaic even with its hardware plug-in capability. To them I'll say that there is no substitute for the convenience and immediacy of this density of power, sound and practical control on a hardware unit that sounds this good for this sort of money.

It's a shame that people don't get quite as excited about the retro concept of an outboard effects processor as they do about compressors and EQs. Maybe that time will come. Until then I still think this is a remarkably proficient and fine sounding unit and there is not much else to touch it at the price. ■

PROS Fast; convenient; sounds great; high value.

CONS Some won't see the point; XLR or jack? Oooh, decisions, decisions!

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