Dangerous Music Liaison

Analogue is great but its reconfiguration, especially if you only want to try something quickly, can be inconvenient. BILL LACEY tries a box that makes life easier.

*D*angerous Music is a company that has positioned itself to bring the audio community extremely high quality products that allow for the smooth integration of digital and analogue devices. The latest in a long line of offerings is the Dangerous Liaison, which is described as an 'audio neural network'. Designed to interface with analogue gear, it is a well conceived device that will allow users a remarkable degree of flexibility in routing audio in a variety of workflows. As we'll see, the Dangerous Music credo of 'Audio Integrity: non-negotiable' is in full view.

The Liaison is a 2U device with six stereo XLR insert points — five in the rear and one in the front. It offers two primary independent stereo signal paths, labelled Buss A and Buss B. Any one of the six inserts can be assigned to either bus, but not simultaneously. Three Flip buttons exist for pairs of inserts (1-2, 3-4, 5-6) that allow you to swap their order. Buss B offers an additional Parallel Processing Loop that removes the insert from the signal path and allows the user to blend a specified amount back at the output of Buss B with a continuously variable pot. A nice touch is being able to use the Flip button to send the first insert device in the pair to the Parallel loop. Additionally, there is a Polarity switch to remove any undesirable phase cancellation induced by parallel processing. Physical relays are hard wired, ensuring inserts are completely removed when bypassed.

The front panel is clearly labelled, aided by signal flow diagrams — white for primary signal path, orange for parallel process path. The first series of buttons is used for managing preset combinations. There are six buttons used to store and recall the four presets. An enabled preset button glows orange when engaged, and flashes when the stored condition is modified. A further tap of a blinking preset button allows you to toggle between the stored setting and the modified setting. That modified setting is temporarily stored, allowing you to enable another preset and then return to the previously modified one intact. Provided you don't power cycle the unit or press the Clear button you can effectively have eight preset combinations to work with. The Clear button temporarily disables the current preset, allowing you to audition the unaffected signal. This causes the Preset button to blink, and a further tap of the Preset button restores its condition, allowing for effective before/after comparisons.

The six inserts have two buttons, one for each bus. An insert button changes to green when engaged. The Flip button turns red when engaged, reversing the order of the insert pair. Active inserts are always green. The Parallel Processing Loop button is blue when enabled, indicating the insert signal has been removed from the main bus. This colour-coded scheme allows for essential visual confirmation, and is easy to see from a distance.

Additional flexibility is offered by physically connecting the output of Buss A to the input of Buss B. Doing so allows you to have a device that is physically connected on a later insert to appear earlier in the processing chain. For example, let's say you have a compressor on insert 2 and an EQ on insert 5 that you would like to place before the compressor. Engaging the EQ on Buss A and the compressor on Buss B now puts the EQ earlier in the signal chain.

It's worth noting that gear equipped with phantom power is not supported for use in the insert loops by Liaison. The proper location for those is at the input stage to the A or B Buss, connecting the preamp line output to the bus inputs.

To further assist in comparing the before and after signals, a DB25 cable connection is provided on the rear that allows you to audition pre and post Buss A and Buss B signals. With some careful planning — and a flexible monitoring setup, such as the Dangerous Music Monitor ST or similar — it's possible to create a pre/post comparison that can bypass the level increase induced in the signal chain. This is a great offering that mastering engineers will truly appreciate.

The power switch is located on the rear, which can be an annoyance depending on where the unit is installed. Some users will appreciate the front insert connections, especially studios that may have a client bringing in their favourite piece of gear with them to a session. Others using the box in more permanent setups may find the front connections inconvenient, having to expose cables in what may be a cleanly designed rack setup. However, there just isn't any more room in a standard rack enclosure, and I think Dangerous Music has made the best choice here.

On the surface the Liaison is relatively simple to operate, but you need to give some careful consideration to the best way to integrate the device into the chosen workflow. It can take a while, but the end results will be worth the effort. Even though much of what Liaison offers can be cobbled together in one way or another, it brings to the user an extraordinary convenience, immediacy and ease of use that is sure to be appreciated with extended use.

When testing the unit I used it effectively to compare different combinations of compressor and EQ on a mix, swapping the order of compressor and EQ, sending drums to a compressor inserted in the Parallel Processing Loop, and routing bass guitar to Buss A and lead vocals to Buss B. Using it in a mastering chain was particularly useful, instantly swapping the order of inserts.

So who is this for? Mastering studios should find this an essential addition to their workflow; flexible routing and audition options make the Liaison a sure bet. Recording studios should find the dual buses and parallel processing worthy of consideration. Studios with an over abundance of outboard gear can still make meaningful use of it, leveraging their patchbay by integrating with the Liaison. Spending time considering the best place to fit it within a studio's workflow should yield results that justify the investment (Euro 1760). I would bet that once you get used to working with the Liaison you won't ever let go of it.

After working with the Liaison and becoming used to its flexible A/B comparison offerings, I began to wonder why a typical DAW can't do the same. I have to make considerably greater effort to implement a before/after comparison of an insert chain in my DAW. Forget about quickly swapping the order. Ah, if only software had real buttons! Dangerous Music has configured the device to meet a plethora of demands. It's flexible, sounds neutral, and brings an unsurpassed level of flexibility to our analogue gear. ∎

PROS Solid build; flexible routing; Parallel Processing Loop.

CONS Requires considerable planning to get the most out of it; only four presets.

EXTRAS The Dangerous Source monitor controller is a portable desktop unit

designed as a complement to a DAW for the centralised control of speakers and headphones. It sports many of the key professional features of the Dangerous D-Box, such as speaker switching for two sets of speakers, speaker volume, AES/SPDIF digital in, two Stereo Analogue in, dual headphone out with a separate level control, and in addition, it can connect directly to a computer for monitoring of digital audio over USB. Dangerous Source is capable of up to 24-bit/192kHz on both digital inputs and there a 1U panel option.

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