I finally found the RDM controller I’ve been looking for. It’s called the DMXcat and it’s new from City Theatrical. When the Remote Device Management (RDM) protocol came out in 2006, I honestly thought that the entire industry would latch onto it like a stagehand to a donut. But that didn’t happen, and I couldn’t understand why. I thought it might be because there were so few lighting consoles that had RDM. Later on, I realised that, as great a tool as RDM is for production electricians and technicians to configure and monitor devices, it could actually be more of a liability to programmers. They seldom have enough time to programme the show, much less worry about configuring and monitoring fixtures during programming time. So, I came to the conclusion that having an RDM controller separate from a lighting console was a much better solution.

This was only about two years ago. There were starting to be a lot more lighting consoles with RDM, and almost every new fixture being manufactured had RDM capabilities. There was also some RDM software that could run on a laptop computer, and there were also some handheld RDM controllers and tools. But I really wanted one that could run on my smartphone and that could connect wirelessly - because I don’t like to bring my laptop to gigs for fear that it will get lost, broken or stolen. But I always have my iPhone with me.

When I saw a demo of the DMXcat at LDI 2016, it was as if City Theatrical had granted my wish and threw in some extras for good measure. Gary Fails, the founder and CEO of the company, showed the app on his Android phone (it also works on iOS), connected to the wireless dongle, which was connected to a fixture, and demonstrated some of its capabilities.

The dongle is small enough to fit in the pocket of my Dickies cargo pants that I like to wear on gigs (1.63” W x 3.75” L x .94” H or 41.4mm x 95.3mm x 23.9mm), light enough that I will barely know it’s there (about 5 ounces or 140 grams), and the rechargeable battery can hold a charge long enough to get me through the longest of days (about 20 hours). It also has a multi-colour LED indicator and a built-in LED flashlight so that you’re never in the dark.

Not only does DMXcat work as an RDM controller, it’s also a DMX testing and troubleshooting tool with the ability to control any DMX-controlled fixture, which is one of the motivations behind its development.

“As an active professional lighting user who has watched the lighting world grow more complex over the last 15 years as LEDs have gained wide acceptance,” said Fails, “I thought it was crazy that it had gotten nearly impossible to turn on a DMX fixture without a console and an experienced programmer.” Fails said City developed the DMXcat “so anyone, even with little lighting experience, can turn on a DMX fixture.” Fails still goes out and works on shows from time-to-time, which gives him a unique perspective as a manufacturer. And it shows in this product.

The RDM implementation is far and away the best I’ve ever seen. One of the best features is that it has a huge database of fixtures and media from 145 different manufacturers . . .

For Richard Cadena, the road to authoring books and magazine articles ran through High End Systems and Martin, took a left turn at designer, tech, and electrician, and is still under construction.
library and it will load a graphical user interface with virtual encoders that give you easy control of every parameter. If we were assigning a grade to this device, the database would help it get an A+. And when you’re in the database there is a drop-down menu that links to the selected fixture’s user manual. It works really well. Imagine never having to wade through a manufacturer’s website to find a user manual or never having to Google it again. That feature deserves extra credit.

The DMX Controller is designed to control simple fixtures like LED colour changers. It can be configured with two different displays: one with faders and the other with a keypad that works like a traditional lighting console keypad. You can record looks without timing, and it appears that there is no way to record looks using the moving light Fixture Controller (as opposed to the DMX Controller).

But that’s not what this device is about. It’s more about setting up, testing and troubleshooting - which is why it has a DMX tester that allows you to analyse DMX signals, view DMX levels, find flickers, and configure the DMX output. The analyser displays the break time, mark after break time, interslot time, mark before break time, number of DMX slots, and the DMX refresh rate (update rate). If those mean anything to you, then you’ll appreciate its troubleshooting capabilities. If not, then you’ll still appreciate the DMX Levels display that allows you to confirm that a console is outputting DMX. And if you have a flicker problem, the Flicker Finder will help you find the source of the problem.

Tracking down a DMX problem can be tricky, and one of the ways you can do it is to change the refresh rate of the DMX output to test the receivers at different speeds. I’ve often used that function to track down problems, because some DMX devices have trouble keeping up with the maximum 44Hz refresh rate. By slowing it down you might be able to identify the problem.

Those are all very powerful troubleshooting tools, and the RDM capabilities put some powerful fixture monitoring tools with beautiful graphics in your hands. There is also a DIP-switch calculator, which may or may not be less useful since most fixtures have menus these days, but it certainly can’t hurt.

If you’re running the DMXcat app on an Android, then you’ll also get a bonus built-in light meter as well as a spectrum analyser. The spectrum analyser actually works whether or not you have a dongle connected to it, so that’s a nice freebee from City Theatrical. Regardless, it will come in handy when you need to do a wireless survey to get the best possible results from your wireless connections. As far as the light meter goes, I’m anxious to compare it to other light meters to find out how accurate it is, but even if it’s in the ballpark, it will come in handy.

DMXcat is a unique product that was conceived, designed, developed, programmed and manufactured by City Theatrical in Carlstadt, New Jersey. I had a pretty good idea before I ever put my hands on this device that it would be my new favourite tool, and it did not disappoint. Is there a grade that’s higher than an A+? If not, now there should be.