Chroma-Q Vista 3 Lighting Control Software

By: Rob Halliday

Vista 3 by Chroma-Q hardware and software range.

In all of the lighting consoles we've looked at in these pages over the years, one still stands out for daring to be truly different, brave enough to look at lighting control in an entirely new way. That was Jands' Vista, which abandoned the rigid textual channel display for a graphical channel layout, the command line, and numeric keypad for a pen-operated touch screen and, most spectacularly, replaced the traditional cue structure with a timeline into which you dropped, then dragged around, lighting events. The speed with which you could shape light in time, intuitively, without complex syntax—and, particularly, the way you could understand complex fades when returning to edit cues later—was remarkable.

It was unlike any other lighting control then. And surprisingly, given both how obvious some of the paradigms it introduced felt and that 15 years have passed since it appeared, it is still quite unlike any other lighting console now.

Also surprising—given its power and ease of use—is that it has never come to dominate a section of the market, like some other consoles, though it has a devoted band of users, including a strong following in the house-of-worship market. But that's perhaps the lot in life for those who dare to be radically different: They can be a bit too scary for those who grew up with a traditional way of doing things.

Plus, to be fair, the original Vista in its very early days had some issues doing relatively common things. Some of these came from its unique way of structuring cues, effectively as one long timeline with no distinct cue "states," just "halt points" at which playback would stop until you re-started it. For certain types of shows, particularly those running precisely to an audio track, this was brilliant: Just drag the lighting changes exactly where you want them. Vista could, still can, even import the audio track and show you its waveform to give you a visual guide to align things to. But it was less good where the variables of live performance got in the way: running a five-minute sunrise, then trying to trigger a cue to add a special as an actor entered during that fade, and it would jump to the end of the fade. Similarly, the concept of copying Cue 1 as Cue 3 was hard for it, because it didn't really have any notion of the "state" of Cue 1. (In fact, Cue 1 might not be a "state" at all, since one "cue" could have any number of changes for any given light; this was a whole new way of thinking about lighting.)

Over the years, patches were put in place to provide workarounds to situations like this. But, at the same time, the larger world outside Vista moved on: The console predates both iPhone and iPad, but their multi-touch screens immediately made its pen-based interface feel quaint. And, last year, Jands, the Australian company whose patronage first brought the console to life, decided not to pursue it any further.

Proof, again, of a loyal fan base came when Jands found someone interested in taking it on. Chroma-Q, already a familiar name from its LED fixtures, decided to add lighting control to its product family. So, the Jands Vista has become Vista by Chroma-Q. To mark that change, there's an entirely new generation of the software, Vista 3, and some new hardware; we're taking a look at both here.

Hardware

Vista started off as an elegant-looking, full lighting console; over the years, it grew into a family of stand-alone consoles and smaller wings to be used alongside the software running on your own computer. For now, at least, Chroma-Q is out of the stand-alone lighting console business, although there is talk of this changing. Legacy consoles are out of production and won't directly support the new software. (Older versions were Linux-based; there is an upgrade path for the L5 and L3 models, but it involves buying yourself a

copy of Windows 10 for your console and changing the hard drive to an SSD.)

This means Vista joins a number of other lighting control systems in being software that you provide a computer, either Mac or PC, to run. The new software is a free update for owners of dongles for the existing V2 software. And there is still a range of Vista wings you can add if keyboard, mouse, and perhaps even touch screen aren't quite doing it for you.

Right now, Chroma-Q has five Vista products on offer. There's the Vista software, free and entirely usable except that it won't actually output continuous data to your lights on its own. There's a USB dongle containing a Vista license to actually enable data output, available in steps from 128 DMX slots up to 8,192 slots (16 universes), with larger capacities available on special order and with Vista adding the capacities if multiple licenses are used on the same machine. After that, there's a USB-to-DMX adapter if you need real, rather than networked, data. (The network output supports Art-Net, sACN, and Pathport formats.) There's Vista MV, a five-fader playback wing, with the system allowing you to connect multiple MV wings if required. And then there's Vista EX, a programming and playback surface which can contain a license dongle or be used in conjunction with an external dongle.

An EX is what we had to play with, used in this case with a variety of Apple Macs and with a PC with a multi-touch monitor, alongside the Vista 3 software's latest release, R2 build 19525. The EX is a sturdy-feeling device, small enough to hide in a suitcase (about 50cm x 32cm x 34cm x 7cm), yet with a bit of a heft to it (just over 6kg) so it feels like you're getting something substantial for your money. Its grey top surface and black keys are enlivened by the cheery red color of the sides and bottom of the case. Around the back, it takes power in from the supplied multi-voltage (100-240V) PSU via four-pin XLR, then features a USB port for connecting to a computer via a (thoughtfully long) supplied cable, 2 five-pin XLR DMX ports, and a three-pin XLR desk light port.

On its top surface, it provides ten pageable playback faders with customizable buttons, plus another ten button-only playback sets; all of the buttons can be configured separately from the faders, so you can get to 60 playbacks per page should you need. There's a master playback with twin faders and a grandmaster. Above that are three rotary encoders that also have a push-click function, with previous/next buttons above them, and surrounding them a plethora of shift/modifier keys—the main four color-coded red, yellow, green, and blue, just like the main control buttons on the original Vista. At the very top of the console are six rotary pots that also have a push-click function, these inspired by those on the late Cobalt console and now also seen on the grandMA3. I can imagine many uses for these. For now, you can use them as group or effect masters.

What is clear is that this wing is intended to be used alongside a computer and with the computer's display in view. The wing itself has no display; lots of functions are accessed by combinations of the various softkeys that change function depending on what you're doing. Though the keys are backlit and change color or flash to provide some feedback, I think you'll always want a display to confirm you're about to do the right thing.

That said, it does become surprisingly intuitive to use this with either a mouse or trackpad (EX under one hand, trackpad the other), or particularly alongside a good touch-screen display, though there are key combinations you can't reach one-handed (blue-button plus F1, say) and so will need to bring your other hand across to help.

Software

For those familiar with previous generations of Vista (particularly the earliest versions), the most immediately noticeable change in Vista 3 is that everything has gone "dark mode" (Figure 1), probably a better choice when working in a dark venue, though there are lighter themes available. That said, much of the rest remains immediately familiar, particularly the graphical channel interface—with its animated icons—that gives a good, quick overview of a light's intensity, focus, color, and gobo (Figure 2). The interface does also

Figure 1: Vista interface.

Figure 2: Fixture icons.

contain another legacy of the past: Some of the on-screen buttons sized for selection by pen seem rather small for selection by mouse or finger, though the interface is now quite customizable, and scan be more easily adapted to personal preference.

Command line

The display might be familiar, but it also reveals the first dramatic change in Vista 3: Lurking at the bottom of the screen is a command line (Figure 3), just like all those other consoles. The original Vista was dogmatic in its insistence that you touched rather than typed. This worked well if you were designing the show yourself, less well if you were a designer trying to describe to a programmer which light to turn on.

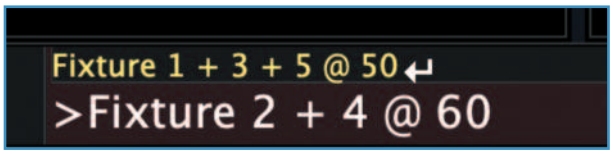

Figure 3: Command line.

And, sometimes, you want to change something without having to look away from the stage and down at the screen.

Now you can. It'll do the same things command lines on other consoles can. It's interesting that the EX wing doesn't back it up by having a numeric keypad, though you can make one float on screen—a shame it doesn't show the keyboard shortcuts for the commands it offers to help you learn the console. On the other hand, you still don't have to use it at all if you don't want; maybe it's just a lure to get you into Vista's world!

Timeline

The other big philosophical change from the original Vista can be found in its very core: the timeline. This was a concept from audio and video editing software that Vista brought to stage lighting. It felt exhilaratingly freeing . . . until you ran into one of the things it did less well than a traditional cue structure.

So, there's been a radical rethink. Vista 3 still lets you operate via a timeline, but there are now cues on the timeline (Figure 4). Events now have to exist within a cue, and a cue can only take parameters to one destination—i.e., a cue can no longer fade a light up then down again, except by making the light run a chase. In effect, each cue is its own self-contained timeline; run a second cue before the first has finished and the rules on overlapping fades from other tracking consoles apply: That slow sunrise keeps running as other cues pile on top of it. In overall conception, it's less radical, more like every other console; in the real world, it's arguably more useful for that.

Within cues, all of the graphical timeline tricks for manipulating timing that Vista pioneered are still here, and still feel intuitive and fresh. There are now default cue up and down times, if that's all you need—drag it to the right length (or right click and set the time or, if you must, type a "cue 1 time 5" command). But, want the lights to fade up one after another? Select them, then drag the corner selection handle and Vista skews the time. Want to re-arrange the order or change the relative offset? Grab the relevant event line and

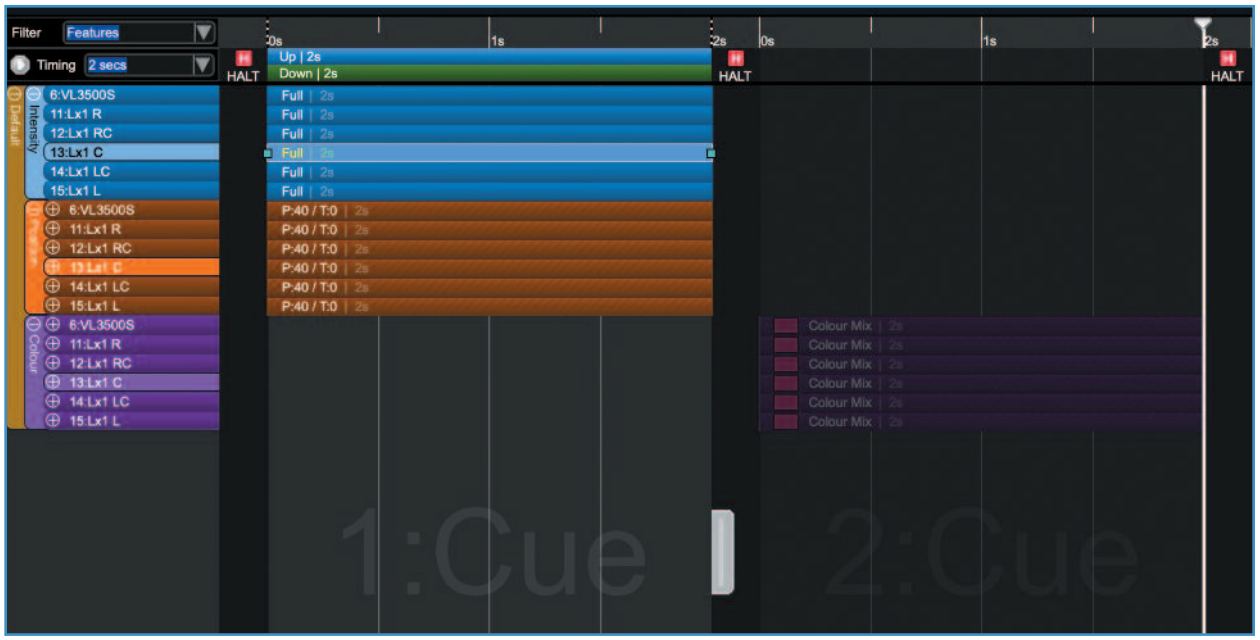

Figure 4: Timeline cues.

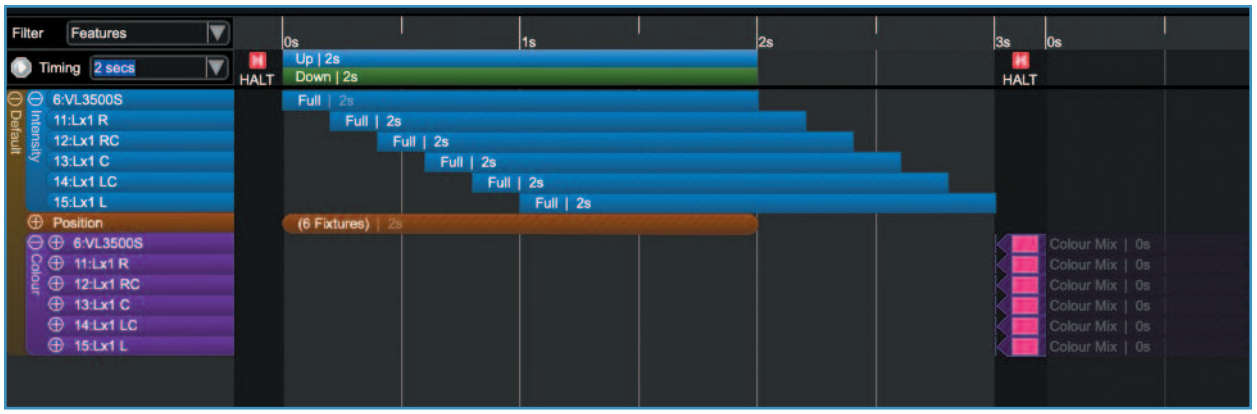

Figure 5: Skew time.

drag it relative to the others. Want the lights to fade up, then change color? Grab the color bars, shrink them down to zero time (there's a special way of displaying these "infinitely short" events), and drag them to the end of the fade up (Figure 5). Vista lets you show individual lines for everything that's changing, or to collapse down to more manageable groups, though the ability to collapse into user-definable groups that I remember admiring in the original Vista no longer seems to be here. But, it's remarkable that, 15 years after its debut and attempts from lots of other console manufacturers to embrace timeline-based editing, Vista is still the only one to really make this feel intuitive. Turns out this is a really hard thing to pull off. Plus, now if you want to see a more traditional cue list view, you can.

The rest of the software does a reasonable job of living up to the ease of use implied by Chroma-Q's new "think it, create it, do it" tag line for Vista. Patching is a matter of picking fixtures from the comprehensive (Carallon-sourced) library and dragging them onto the right addresses, and there is the ability both to customize gobo/color setups or even to roll your own fixture, should you need to. Patching also populates the graphical channel interface complete with fixture-type group buttons, though you can re-arrange this or make additional layouts if that's your preference. There's a "matrix" object you can create and then drop other fixtures into, to deal with arrays of LEDs and the like, and Vista also deals quite neatly with multi-element LED fixtures, including those that have spherical or abnormal arrays (Figure 6). For media servers, Vista can pull in thumbnail images from compatible devices using the CITP protocol.

Turning lights on and manipulating them is easy once you get the hang of switching between the Vista's principal views (patch, an on-screen version of the console hardware, the fixture layout, and the timeline or cue list). The on-screen attribute interface makes it easy to manipulate lights even without the wing—in fact, the wing slightly confuses things since the encoders don't follow the on-screen display, so moving to color doesn't automatically change the encoders to color (Figure 7). You'll want to keep the console

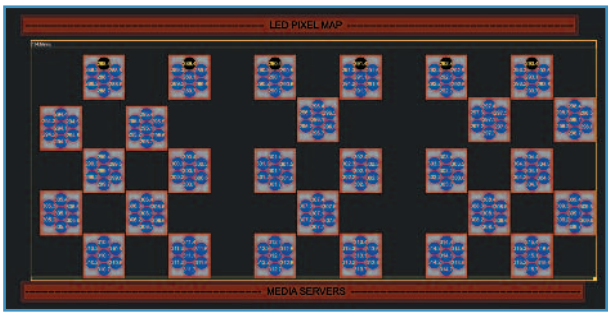

Figure 6: Arrays, multi-element fixtures.

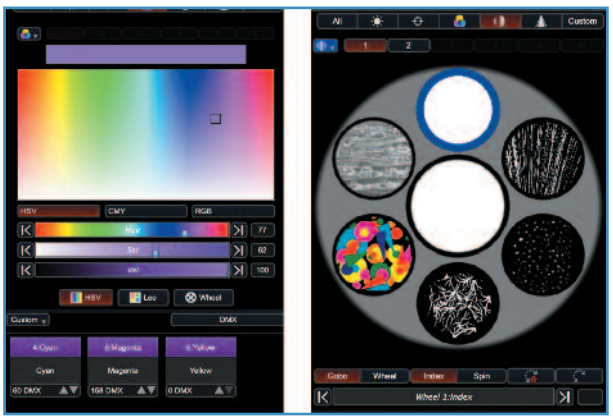

Figure 7: Attribute controls.

encoder display pop-up window open so you know what those encoders are set to control. Clicking an encoder usefully homes that parameter, and they can do more than just manipulate attributes—wonderful when you set the central encoder to shuttle mode and can just wind forwards and backwards through cues stopping to refine any moment. (If you don't have the wing, you can drag the play-head across the timeline to achieve the same thing).

Color can now handle fixtures with up to 11 colors in their mixing systems; curiously, after all these years, it still only lists Lee filters in its predefined color library.

Very nice is the ability to draw on computer skills we're

Figure 8: Selective paste.

Figure 9: Presets.

all now familiar with—for example, Command+C/Command+V to copy information between lights, either in totality or for selected parameters (Figure 8). When copying from one fixture type to another, Vista does its best—via its generic fixture model—to make the end result make sense, even if it's not a perfect match.

Storing things gets a bit more complex, particularly when deciding whether the best approach is to use the colored softkeys to toggle the functions of the F1—F12 softkeys to the right store function, or just to right-click, which is probably the quickest way of storing a preset. Presets are the only repository of referenced information of the type used to build cues; they can store any combination of parameters, though you can then choose to store or recall only certain parameters, or to only display presets containing certain parameter families (Figure 9).

A separate type, Extracts, consists of global presets that allow you to store settings that can be applied to any fix-

Figure 10: Store.

Figure 11: Matrix chases.

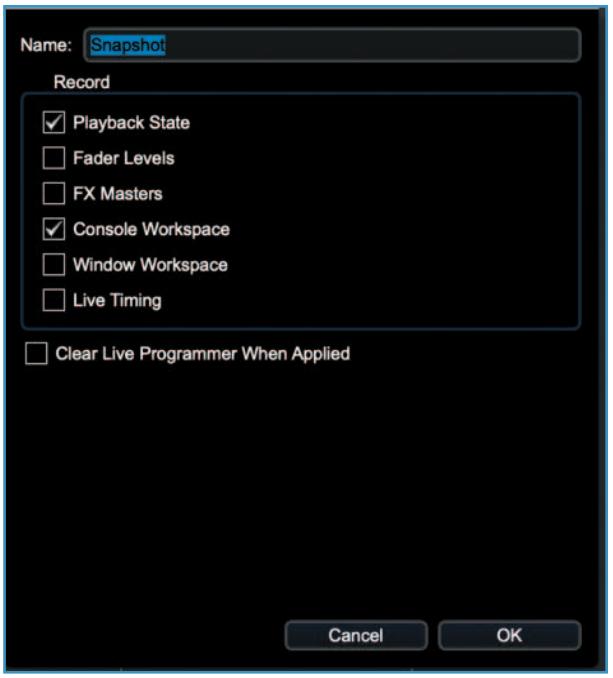

Figure 12: Snapshots.

ture, complete with times and delays.

Storing cues can be done with the store part, store all or, once a cue already exists, update functions, all of which open pop-up windows presenting a quantity of information and a number of choices that can be a bit overwhelming, particularly in that critical moment in rehearsal where you just want to record and move on (Figure 10). The Vista team says to expect improvements in this area soon.

Slightly confusing also is that you can be working in a mode where the console is effectively automatically storing changes you make into whatever cue you're in ("live editing"), and one where you're not. If you don't understand this difference, it can be easy to confuse yourself. Vista does effectively behave like every other tracking console now: Things keep going until you tell them to do something different, and you can have blocked cues and redundant instructions, and choose whether or not to see tracking values in the time line.

Interestingly, Vista does a good job of combining a graphical interface with a physical interface—assigning things by selecting and pushing a button or dragging or dropping, editing things by playing back, adjusting and updating, or right-clicking and editing. Sometimes you wonder why it doesn't just take it a little further—you can copy an event from one cue and paste it into another, for example, but can't just drag it from one to the other.

Alongside the basics are a plethora of advanced features, including complex dynamic chases, featuring a lot of support of matrices, whether you want to sketch on them, create patterns moving across them (Figure 11), or import still or moving GIF files. There's support for time code, and other new highlights in Vista 3 include snapshots for quickly switching between console display, playback, and fader states (Figure 12), and SmartFX masters for being able to easily control effects while running shows live. Also new and invaluable is the ability to selectively merge in bits from other shows (Figure 13).

There is a lot here—remember, this is not a new lighting control system but one that's been evolving and growing for more than a decade. Like anything complex, it's not quite as easy to pick up as the marketing might suggest. It's curious: nothing here is particularly hard to figure out once you find the right action, but actually discovering those actions can sometimes be hard. It really needs a manual and some video training material to drop hints. They're coming, though the older Vista 2 manual is available and generally relevant.

Choosing

It's an interesting proposition, this Vista 3. Whether you consider it just as software or as a wing plus software combination, there is a lot of competition in this part of the market now. What makes Vista compelling is the same thing that's always made it compelling: those intuitive tools for editing how things happen through time. Couple that to a more traditional cue structure and the option to type commands, and you have solution that's a bit less radical but perhaps a bit more welcoming to new users. Price-wise, it's competitive, particularly considering the prices of high channel count EX surfaces versus dongles, where the wing seems to be cheaper . . .

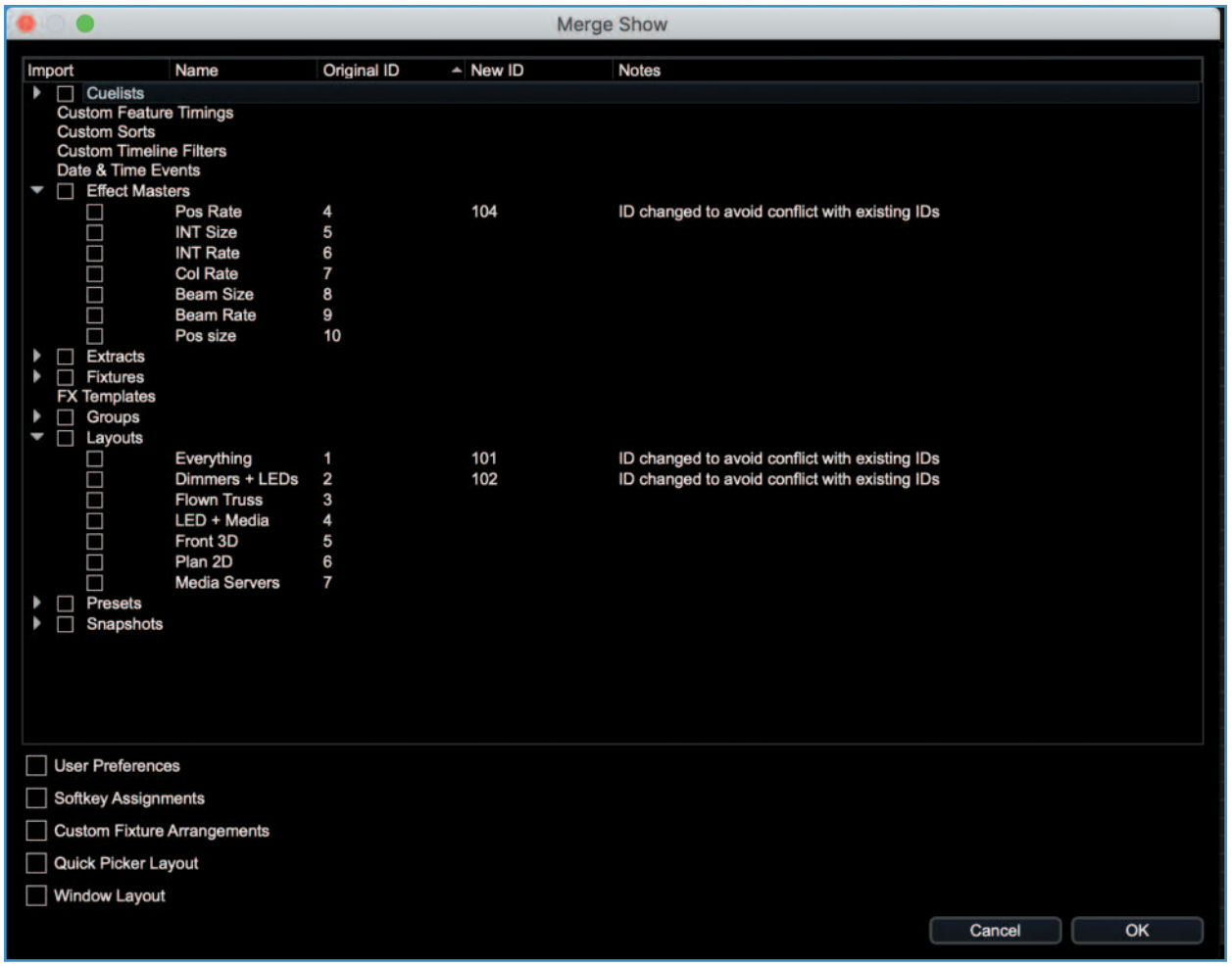

Figure 13: Show merge.

There will be some adjustments to be done to move into the Vista world, and the EX hardware, while solidly engineered, would benefit from a built-in display. I suspect investing in a good touch screen could be invaluable for serious Vista use. But, as with all of these things now, it's free to try, and try you should. You will discover a whole new way of working—one that, in many ways, still feels like the future—as it did all those years ago.