Partheus DccProg programmer kit for digital command control

Digital Command Control (DCC) decoders have now become so comprehensive in their scope that optimising performance and adjusting settings by putting numerical values into the various Configuration Variable (CV) registers can be tedious at best and confusing at worst, not least if those CVs are inter-dependent.

It would obviously be easier and quicker to make such adjustments through a computer, with the click of a mouse on screen; the graphic displays should be easier to grasp than a list of values and CVs.

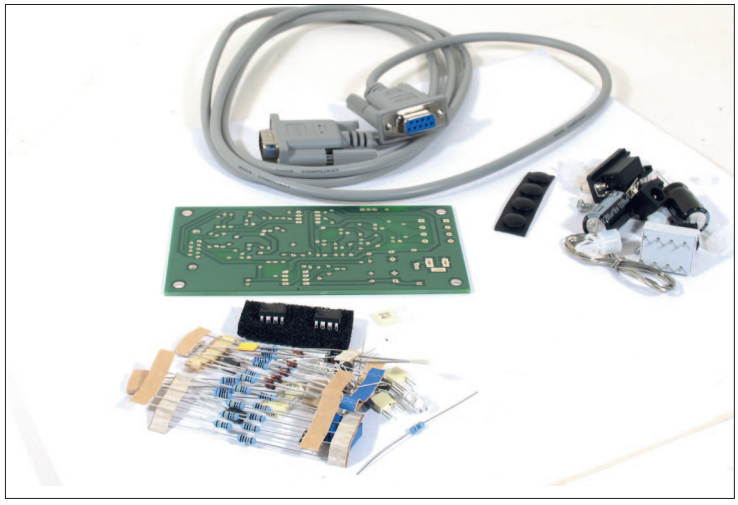
Even more importantly, a computer offers the ability to store all the settings so that they can be re-loaded into the decoder (or a replacement) should it be necessary. Further, successful settings can serve as a starting point for programming other decoders, which clearly saves time compared to starting from scratch.

Some specialist decoder manufacturers have already produced software for this purpose, usually tailored (quite naturally) to their own products.

Partheus is now offering DccProg, an independent programmer which should be suitable for use with all currently available brands and types of DCC decoder, and is intended to run on any modern PC.

The package includes both the necessary hardware to interface the PC to the layout, complete with mains power supply and a 6' long straight-through serial cable with 9-pin D connectors to link the circuit board to the PC, and the DCC decoder programming software.

It needs a PC running Windows 98SE or later, with a 800x600 resolution display, 200MB free hard disk space, and a free RS232 serial port (with a 9-pin D connector). Processor speed is not critical though it may affect performance, especially of some library operations. The software has apparently been tested successfully on computers ranging from a 650MHz machine running Windows 98SE to a 2.4GHz Intel dual-core fitted unit running Windows XP. The Partheus website includes a compatibility check program; this is also on the supplied CD and the firm offers a refund if your computer proves unsuitable, as long as the hardware kit is unbuilt.



The software allows for un-installing; it is not available for Macs.

The CD contains both the program, complete with automatic installer, and the instruction manual in pdf form.

The instructions cover both the construction of the interface module and the use of the software. They run to the equivalent of 40 pages, and are a model of clarity, with high quality colour illustrations (photos, graphics, and screen shots).

The first seven pages provide all you need to know to build the interface board – from component identification through step-by-step instructions (there is even a two-page appendix on soldering for beginners, with a link to the Antex website) to testing. This should put assembly of the unit within the capabilities of most modellers; it should apparently take about an hour. All components are provided to mount on a high quality printed circuit board – even lead-free solder is supplied.

The main part of the instructions then guides the user through the actual programming software, with helpful stage-by-stage screen shots.

The software compares very well with an industry standard offering such as the Lok Programmer from Electronic Solutions Ulm (esu). The designer has not only learned by observing what other programmers provide but also properly appreciated what operators of digital layouts want to achieve.

The menu-driven program should be intuitive and soon becomes easy to use, allowing access to all the CVs, sub-dividing them into logical groups for screen display (e.g. address, motion, speed table, function outputs, motor control, and so on).

It already includes a large library (over 600) of proprietary decoder default settings, as supplied by the device manufacturers. Further decoders can be programmed either by copying and adapting the settings supplied, or from scratch, or by downloading settings from other sources.

The program also comes with a considerable archive of images or icons (over 4,000) to identify specific locomotives (for use both on the PC screen and on the displays of appropriate DCC controllers). These can be sorted by scale or gauge as well as steam/diesel/other, etc.

The library includes images from Hornby, Bachmann Branchline, Bachmann Brassworks (O), Dapol, and Graham Farish as well as many European and American brands. They are essentially images from recent catalogues (by no means all the models ever produced), and while most are pictures of models, there are some graphics and some prototype photos.

Not all manufacturers collaborated, even those who allow individual users to download such images from their websites. DccProg includes a facility to do this and incorporate the files in the programming. It can accept files in jpg, gif, and bmp formats.

The library is divided into standard, sound, and accessory decoders; we noted that some in the standard folder actually have sound.

DccProg will not load and modify sound files in sound-equipped decoders, though it will handle the usual identification, motor control, and auxiliary functions of such devices.

The appearance of DccProg itself can be customised.

The program automatically saves everything as it goes along – there is no separate 'save' option or command.

The interface board was originally envisaged only as a kit, but we understand that Partheus is now also offering it ready-assembled.

This product scores on all levels – design, the quality of the physical components, the comprehensive capabilities of the software, the instructions, and the price.

For both construction and use, the instructions cannot be faulted, in terms of both content and presentation.

It is remarkable that this should come from a company with no track record with railways or model railways.

Frankly, we are pleasantly surprised that something this good can be produced at this price. Recommended to anyone with an interest in trying a DCC decoder programmer.

PRODUCED BY
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PRICE
RS232 kit £27.50, assembled £39.50 incl. UK postage & packing.