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Jul 1, 2011 9:00 AM, By Kevin Becka

INWARD CONNECTIONS MAGNUM PREAMP

EIGHT-SLOT, 500 SERIES MODULE RACK WITH 8-CHANNEL MIXER

Inward Connections Magnum Preamp/DI

The newly retrofitted Magnum Preamp from Inward Connections features two VF600 all-discrete amp blocks, balanced Cinemag input/output transformers and 80 dB of gain. Magnum has the usual features onboard such as DI input, polarity flip and phantom power, plus three highpass filters (70/100/200 Hz). Gain is adjusted in 5dB increments, plus a 0 to 10dB output level trim for fine tuning. All switches are solid, and the unit is built like a tank. I was lucky to have Inward's Vogad VCA compressor and Brute Optical Limiter on hand, which rocked in combination with the Magnum. The Magnum/Brute combo was my favorite overall, offering plenty of great transformer-colored gain tastefully crunched by the Brute on both vocals and guitars. The Brute is easy to operate and very musical with no pumping. Where the Brute is an "up is more" type of gain reducer, the Vogad is a full-featured compressor offering rotary controls for ratio, threshold, output gain, attack, release, HPF (250 Hz) and a 10-segment LED meter. These units are easy to love.

I used the Magnum on kick drum (Beta 52), snare (SM57) and vocal (SE Voodoo VR1) with excellent results. You can definitely hear the punch the transformers offer on drums, which were solid. The downside for me on this unit is the lack of any kind of metering. And while this is not a deal-breaker, it would be nice to see at least a signal-present indicator for peace of mind when troubleshooting. (Inward is soon releasing a version of Magnum with a VU meter.)

Besides the lack of metering, the Magnum sounds great and is a solid contender for your high-end preamp needs. At \$825, it's expensive but is justified based on the sonics and build. It sounded great across a range of applications, especially high-transient recordings like kicks, toms and snares. Personality-plus are the two words in play here. If you've got the ducats, the Magnum would be a preamp any engineer would relish.

—Kevin Becka

Grace Design m501 500 Series Preamp/DI

Grace Design's foray into creating products for the 500 Series is the **m501** preamp, a vertical version of the m101 preamp. The unit is priced at \$625, streets at \$545 and boasts super-clean transformerless design with nearly flat operation up to 72 kHz. Features include gain control in 5dB increments from 10 to 65 dB and a 0 to 10dB rotary trim pot, switchable highpass filter (75 Hz, 6dB/octave), Ribbon mode and phantom power, the last three each carrying a confidence LED. There is a two-stage LED level meter with the green threshold at -12 dBu; red kicks in at +16 dBu. There is also a hi-Z input on the front offering a quick solution for instrument recording.

I used the m501 on a range of applications with great results, including on kick (miked with a Royer R101), snare drum (SM57) and powering an AKG 414 recording a hi-hat. The Ribbon mode is brilliant. Its relay bypasses the phantom power-coupling capacitors, kills phantom power and ups the input impedance from 8.1 k-ohm to 20 k-ohm. When the ribbon light was on, I could rest assured my mic was safe.

My only gripe with the unit is the mounting system. Instead of standard 500 Series rack-screws, the m501 comes with longer hex-key screws to accommodate the thicker faceplate. While the design ethic can't be challenged (it looks fantastic), I'd rather have deeper counter-sunk holes allowing the use of standard screws. Not only does it necessitate carrying a tiny hex wrench around, the screws didn't want to sit in the standard screw slots without applying a lot of pressure. While I did have a problem using standard screws with the Radial Workhorse, Grace claims that standard screws can be used with the API Lunchbox, Purple and Atlas 500 Series racks.

That said, the Grace m501 is a solid, great-sounding and clean preamp at a fair price. How clean is it? My APx525 audio analyzer revealed an unbelievable 100dB S/N ratio. If you're looking for a lot of color, don't go here, but if you want a pristine preamp with lots of gain, this is your box.

—Kevin Becka



Mastering Cubase 4

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