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MP20



By Brian Knave

Although readers may sometimes get the impression that reviewers enjoy criticizing gear, it is in fact far more satisfying to praise than to blame. The problem is that wholly praiseworthy products seem to come along only once in a blue moon, especially among those items designed to be "affordable." The PreSonus MP20 (\$649.95) is one of those rare products. Employing Class A discrete input buffers and dual servo gain stages; it provides everything a 2-channel mic preamp should and then some.

Beauty and Brains

The MP20 is logically laid out and lovely to behold. Its 1-rackspace front panel, machined from a thick slab of cobalt-blue brushed aluminum, is divided into three sections: one each for the two channels, plus a stereo-bus master-output section. Large, silver-colored aluminum knobs and a big red-backlit power button further contribute to the unit's professional styling.

Controls for each channel include a gain knob (providing 60 dB of gain), as well as green-backlit switches for polarity reverse, 48V phantom power, 20 dB pad, and 80 Hz rumble filter. A red-backlit L/R switch assigns the signal to the master output, with stereo placement controlled by a center-detented pan knob. Each front-panel channel section also provides a 1/4-inch instrument input, a 12-step LED ladder for monitoring the output level, and a unique "IDSS" control that adjusts the drain current on the transformer. This lets you add even harmonics to the input signal to yield a warmer sound.

The MP20's master section makes the unit especially handy for live 2-track recording. It has a level control for the summed stereo signal, a 1/4-inch high-gain headphone jack, and a level control for the phones.

On the rear panel, each channel also has an XLR mic input, an XLR output (with gold-plated connectors), and an insert path with 1/4-inch send and return jacks. The mix outputs are also on gold-plated XLR jacks.

Sound and the Jury

I used the MP20 for several months in my studio, during which time I recorded loads of different instruments through a dozen different mics. I have three other outboard mic preamps, but the MP20's pristine sound quality and wide array of features quickly made it my favorite.

I also had occasion to use the instrument input for recording bass guitar. The first time, the bass player and I had just spent 20 minutes or so dialing in EQ and compression settings on a full-featured channel-strip-type processor. Although this had given us a sound we liked, on a lark we gave the MP20 a try and both immediately preferred its sound. It was cleaner, fuller, richer and better in every way, and with no EQ or compression added.

Just to confirm my high estimation of the MP20, I compared it critically against two other mic preamps, one less expensive and one more expensive than the MP20. I recorded several sources direct to tape on an ADAT XT20 using identical signal paths (Earthworks QTC1 omnidirectional mics and BLUE Kiwi quad cables). The MP20 smoked the less expensive mic preamp. Compared with the higher-price one (a well-regarded British unit), the MP20 sounded nearly identical, with an ever-so-slightly brighter top end and not quite as much warmth in the low mids. Impressively, the MP20 was also quieter than the two other mic preamps.

A feature worth mentioning is the unit's IDSS control, which is designed to simulate analog tape saturation and tube warmth. That's not exactly how I would describe the effect, though turning the IDSS knob to the right seems primarily to attenuate high frequencies. I usually opted not to use this feature, as it only took away from the wonderful clarity of the MP20's high end. However, when stereo-miking the top half of a Leslie cabinet with condenser mics, I dialed in a bit of the IDSS circuit to effectively reduce scratchiness in the signals.

A New Standard

The MP20 is the most impressive new mic preamp I've heard in its price range and it sounds as good as many units costing two or three times as much. Also, whether you're recording live or in the studio, it has all the features you need. If you require more than two channels, you can get the same sonics from the PreSonus M80 (\$1,999.95), a 2-rackspace unit that provides eight channels of preamplification and all the same features as the MP20 (sans the fancy knobs).

Overall EM Rating (1 through 5): 5

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