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Phoenix Audio

DRS-Q4M preamp

With the number of preamps available on the market today, it's really easy to get confused, so let's get some confusion out of the way. UK's Phoenix Audio does three things that give the impression that they're making Neve imitations: they note that they were initially a service company for pre-'80s Neve consoles in the UK; they explain that David Rees, their designer, previously designed gear for Neve; and they put red knobs on their equipment that are the visual signature of the most famous, and most imitated, Neve kit. But as it turns out, their preamps are completely original Class-A designs that have very little in common with Neves when you look under the hood. Once this surface confusion was out of the way, I was able to understand their product line, and I hope you will too.

The *DRS-Q4M* is a half-rack-sized preamp and 4-band EQ with a dedicated DI circuit and a pad to handle line-level signals. There are all the standard features switchable on the front, including phantom power, polarity reversal, mic/line selection, DI selection, and a unique ground lift (keeps the power supply grounded, but lifts the ground internally for possible buzz elimination). The EQ section is straightforward with four knobs and small switches next to them to select frequencies. I have to hand it to Phoenix for fitting a clearly labeled EQ into such a small space.

One of the main differences between this preamp and many other Class-A designs is that there is no input transformer. You will immediately hear that there is less color coming through the *DRS-Q4M* than other Class-A designs that use input transformers, but this preamp doesn't sound sterile or bland, either. It has a smoothness to it that rounds transients just a little bit while not killing the high end or becoming boxy at all. Those of you familiar with API 512, 312, or 212 preamps will have a sense of the sound — open, forward, and with a round bottom. By playing with the gain structure, you can tease more or less harmonic distortion out of the preamp section. There is a fairly wide range of colors in there, though it remains relatively clean compared to preamps with the ability to drive the input transformers.

The DI is its own circuit, so the main gain knob isn't used when the DI is engaged. With my high-output Les Paul, I was able to knock off enough gain to get proper levels, and with my ultra-low-output Fender Mustang bass, I could get just enough output to drive the compressor that followed the *DRS-Q4M* in the chain. Because you can't overdrive the circuit, some of my DI tricks weren't available, but the levels were solid on instruments with varying outputs. The DI is clear and punchy, and I'd feel confident using it on just about any signal that I wanted to remain mostly uncolored.

The EQ is where this unit really shines. The EQ is a gyratory circuit, which is an active design that uses a transistor to simulate the characteristics of the more bulky and more costly inductor-based circuits. The gyratory EQ circuit is a fairly common design where space and price are concerns, yet this EQ doesn't sound as if they've cut any corners at all. With 16 dB of boost/cut, I was able to crank any of the individual frequencies in either direction and still get totally usable, smooth, and pleasing sounds. Even a full boost at 6 kHz on a DI'd guitar sounded nearly reasonable. Scooping low mids out of a boxy bass track kept the required heavy foot in place. Boosting 10 kHz got great shimmer in there and remained very smooth. I was impressed with how musical and fun the EQ is; nothing surgical here — just easy, smooth tone-shaping that never hurts your ears. The EQ remains consistent with the whole sound of this unit — a smooth, open, musical sound with just a hint of color — so when switching in the EQ, things remain sonically stable.

With this great gyratory EQ and its transformerless Class-A input circuit, the *DRS-Q4M* is a rather unique piece of kit. I encourage people who are looking for a Neve-style unit to look elsewhere, and anyone who wants a very open, relatively clean and uncolored preamp that also stays very smooth and musical, to check this unit out. A pair of these in a single rackspace is a pretty powerful tool that I imagine would get used daily during mixing and tracking. (*Mono half-rack \$1600 street, stereo 1RU \$2700; www.phoenixaudio.net*)

—Allen Farnelo, www.farnelo.com

Karma Mics

K-Micro Silver Bullet mic

The Karma *K-Micro Silver Bullet* is a small-diaphragm condenser mic designed to fit into tight spaces and tight budgets. At just under 2" long, the tapered body does resemble a bullet (like a .50 caliber, but this is *Tape Op*, not *Soldier of Fortune*). With no room for an internal battery, the *K-Micro* requires 48V phantom power, and it comes with a specially-sized mic-clip. But in a pinch, many clamp-type clips will work, especially when you consider the added length provided by the XLR barrel that connects to the male end of the mic. The mic is purchasable in a matched pair (*K-Micropack*) or seven-pack (*K-SB7*). The latter includes a hard-shell carrying case.

The *K-Micro* provides a clear, fairly accurate representation of whatever you put in front of it. I find that it has a slight top-end rise, but not enough to call it harsh or sharp. It also stands up to more sound pressure level than I would have expected. However, the *Silver Bullet* is not bulletproof, and close-micing Marshall cabinets, snare drums, and kick vents can overload the mic.

In use, the first place you'll want to try the *K-Micro* is anywhere you're short an SDC. On drums, it's good for hi-hats, snare bottoms, and my favorite, spaced behind the drummer, a few inches from his or her ear. This can give you a really cool dimension beyond the standard overhead placements. It's nice on acoustic guitar, especially in an X/Y pair a few feet up and away from the sound hole. On percussion, it worked well on bongo, washboard, and shaker. I wasn't fond of its response on tambourine (and to be fair, I usually resort to a ribbon for that duty). In any event, try to position it a little farther from the source, and experiment with the angle, as the off-axis response can de-emphasize some more strident frequencies. We had the most fun using the *K-Micro* as an effect mic. Try a pair on a backing vocal track, and distort one while blending it beneath the clean take for a track that adds some spice to an arrangement. From screaming vocals, to down-the-hall drum mics, to micing the backside of a 6" amp speaker on a guitar solo, the *K-Micro* can capture sounds that are unique and creative. And isn't that something we're all trying to do with our projects?

For fun, I recorded a whole drum kit using the *K-SB7* seven-pack, an SM57 on snare, and a Beta 52 on kick, and the results were reminiscent of some New Wave drum sounds from the early '80s. Really neat. I also used a *K-Micro* at a live gig where I drummed for singer-songwriter Mark Dignam. The mic is so small that I kept it under my ride cymbal, sticking out past the lip. I was able to play two egg shakers in front of it, and the audience was looking around to see how I was making the sound.

We can always use an extra pair of small-diaphragm condenser mics, but all too often, we don't have the budget. I think \$59 MSRP for a pair of the *K-Micros* is very fair, but the current introductory price is only \$26! I can't see a reason why all *Tape Op* readers don't have a pair of these in their arsenal. They're just too useful and decent sounding not to run out and get a pair right away. (*Matched pair \$26 direct; seven-piece \$79; www.karmamics.com*) —GH