

ART DPS II

Enjoying something of a renaissance with a new look and new product range, it's inevitable that ART will continue to offer a selection of high value preamps. Its latest unit offers stacks of features and a remarkable price.

JON THORNTON



THEY'RE LIKE BUSES, these preamps. Nothing for ages and then two turn up for review in the same issue. The DPS II is a 2-channel mic/instrument preamp that features (you guessed it) a hybrid solid-state/valve gain stage. Having already run SPL's GainStation through its paces (p30), I was intrigued to see how ART's offering would stack up against it.

On paper, the features to cash ratio would seem to favour the DPS II (UK£280 + VAT). At less than half the price, it offers two channels and a digital output as standard kit. In truth, though, the DPS II is targeting a different market and set of end users.

What you get for your money on each of the two channels begins with a continuously variable input impedance control for microphone level inputs, with a range between 150ohms and 3kohms. This then feeds a solid-state preamplifier stage, which provides up to 48dB of gain. At this stage things get a little murky, and the manual, although written in a fairly breezy style, is not really very helpful at clearing things up. A switch allows an extra 20dB of gain to be added, but if I'm reading the rather strange block schematic correctly, this gain is actually added by the valve amplification stage that follows the solid-state stage.

Prior to entering this 12AX7-based valve stage, the signal is conditioned by a process that ART refers to as Variable Valve Voicing – or V3 for short. Again, technical details are a bit thin on the ground, but this appears to be a combination of EQ and some manipulation of feedback gain settings on the valve circuit. To the end user, this simply appears as a 16-position rotary switch, with each setting suggesting a recording source (such as vocals, acoustic guitar, electric guitar, etc.) in one of three 'warmth' bands – neutral, warm and 'OPL'. The last of these stands for 'Output Protection Limiter', and again seems to be handled by the valve stage.

Helping you make some sense of what is going on are two level meters. The first, a six-segment LED affair, indicates the post-gain control signal level prior to entering the valve stage, but after any equalisation that the V3 circuitry is applying. The second, an edge-reading moving coil type, shows the actual output of the preamplifier circuit, after the valve stage and anything else that the V3 settings are doing – including limiting. On the bench, and twiddling through settings, it's clear that the gain (or attenuation) of the valve stage is quite radically altered by the settings – but this defeats the true intention of

the device, which is to see how it sounds in use. Time to get it off the bench and into the studio.

Interfacing to the outside world is fairly comprehensive. Rear panel connections are available for balanced mic or line level inputs on XLR and jack sockets. These are wired in parallel, so no selection switch is provided. Additionally, the front panel houses a combination XLR/jack socket. The XLR mirrors the rear input sockets, while the 1/4-inch jack offers an instrument level input for DI purposes. Using this front panel jack overrides the other inputs, and offers a fixed, very high impedance load rather than the variable input impedance of the other inputs. Outputs are on balanced XLR or unbalanced jack, and the absolute level of these is adjusted by an output level control on the front panel.

Digital interfacing is via a coaxial SPDIF output or ADAT lightpipe. The A-D convertor can work at sample rates up to 96kHz, and can synchronise to a choice of internal clock, external TTL Word clock or incoming ADAT clock via a lightpipe input. Two controls on the front panel allow the levels of the output channels to be trimmed prior to hitting the A-D convertors, and an insert point is provided on the rear to allow additional processing to take place before the signal is converted.

Alternatively, the insert return path can be used as a direct input to the convertors, which allowed a swift check on convertor quality to be carried out. And they aren't at all bad. Not quite in the league of the conversion employed in the likes of Focusrite's ISA range – the low end is a touch closed in, and there is slight edginess to the sound – but at least the equal of the conversion on offer in may budget DAW front ends.

In use, a TLM193 was selected as a standard source, and used to record acoustic guitar, electric guitar and male vocals. It's difficult to judge the quality of the solid-state preamp by itself, as you are never sure exactly how the V3 settings are voicing the sound, but with the 'neutral' voicing for vocals, the sound was if anything a touch dull – seeming to flatten the high frequency response of the microphone slightly.

Selecting the warm voicing for the vocal added plenty of presence in the low to mid range, although again at the expense of absolute clarity. The OPL setting on vocals was certainly capable of producing an up-front sound, but the limiting action was very obvious. It's a similar story on acoustic and electric guitar – the unit is very capable of voicing these

sounds in particular ways, and sometimes these are eminently useable – but these things are always a matter of taste. A better approach is probably to ignore the labelling on the voicing control, and choose a setting that most closely matches your needs. As an example, I found the warm vocal setting a lot more useable on acoustic guitar than anything else.

ART has tried to make a 'magic box' with quick fixes for capturing source material – and for some users this may be enough. It certainly packs a lot of features for the money, and is capable of yielding good results. ■

PROS

Very flexible I-O options; good A-D conversion; offers instant gratification.

CONS

Voicing a matter of taste; metering and gain structure a little hard to follow; processing choices too restrictive for some users.

EXTRAS

UK ART distributor Sonic8 is offering *Resolution* readers a chance to win a DPS II for each of the next three issues. Readers must register to continue receiving *Resolution* magazine and by going to www.resolutionmag.com/register with their RESA number and postcode, as shown on the magazine plastic wrapper, they will be entered into each issue's draw. Do it now and you have three chances to win.

Other new ART units include the MPA Gold and the Digital MPA as further variations on the preamp theme with the latter sporting digital connectivity.



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