

Review by Craig Anderton for the September 1996 issue of EQ Magazine

Bellari ADB3 Stereo Tube Direct Box



In case you've wondered by tube gear has to be so expensive, apparently the Bellari folks wondered too, and couldn't come up with a good reason. The result is the ADB3, a bare-bones tube direct box that costs \$100 a channel. While it's not going to blow the socks off top-of-the-line models, it sounds better than you'd expect for the price.

INS/OUTS/SWITCHES

Inputs and outputs are basic: 1/4" unbalanced ins (extra credit for including paralleled jacks on the front and rear panel) and rear-panel, transformer-fed XLR balanced outs (with pin 2 hot) capable of driving 600-ohm lines. Considering that direct boxes are often used with guitar and bass, stereo may seem redundant; however, this extends the usefulness to other applications (Chapman Stick players, take note). Besides, since the 7025 has two tubes in one bottle anyway, there's little reason not to include the extra parts and make the box twice as useful.

Each channel has a ground-lift switch, pad switch (0/-20 dB), and attenuation/gain switch (-20 dB/+20 dB). The impedance is a righteous 4 M ohms so there will be no loading of guitar signals, and you can drive long cables (such as snakes) with impunity. The impedance drops to 100k with the pad switch in, but, of course, you would typically use the pad with lower-impedance sources (e.g., tape deck outputs). Unlike guitars these are not affected by feeding lower input impedances.

With the gain set to -20 dB, the response is essentially flat from 20 Hz to 20 kHz. At +20 dB gain, the response falls off a tiny bit at the frequency response extremes. Noise is very low, even with the gain switched in. All in all, the specs are fine.

USING IT

Although the lack of a continuously variable level control reduces flexibility compared to something like a mic preamp, proper use of the pad and gain switches can handle many situations. For example, to use the ADB3 with a "hot" synth to warm up the sound a bit, simply switch the pad in and set the gain to -20. If the synth output is more anemic, then punch in the gain, switch out the pad, or both.

The ADB3 is happiest when feeding something that offers gain control, such as a mixer input. Although there's enough juice for just about any $\times 10$ input, the ADB3 falls short when trying to feed a $\times 4$ input that wants to be hit hard. For example, while driving a Digidesign Audio Interface en route to a hard-disk recording, there really wasn't enough gain to let a PRS treble pickup kick the meters much above -10, even when bashing power chords. Out-of-phase pickup positions and weaker pickups barely got up to -15. When driving a DAT, the results were better; if I cranked the input control up to 10 on a DA-30, the guitar could just peak the meters. In $\times 4$ applications, remember that the ADB3 is billed as a direct box, not a preamp. (For preamp applications, Bellari offers the single-channel, tube based MP110 for \$230, and stereo rack-mount preamps, the RP220 for \$500 and the RP520 for \$600.)

WHAT ABOUT SOUND?

Being very familiar with the sound of high-impedance solid-state direct boxes, I'd say that the tube does make a difference in terms of "rounding off the edges" a bit, although the transformer outputs are probably a factor as well. Purists will object to the relatively low plate voltage (the wall wart produces 12 VAC, and feeds a voltage multiplier circuit that produces a plate voltage of around 150 V) and relatively inexpensive imported transformers. However, the simple fact of engineering life is that for \$200, compromises must be made. Fortunately, these have little bearing on the sound.

Overall, the ADB3 is an unpretentious box at a rock-bottom price that maintains reasonable sound and component quality. It does not pretend to be the "ne plus ultra" of direct boxes, but for many applications, it's all that's really needed.

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