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Bellari RP520 Studio Tube Mic Preamp



"Feeling the chill from your mixing desk's preamps? Trevor Curwen tests an alternative."

Two things that have been making their presence felt over the last couple of years are the return of valve-based equipment and the use of stand-alone mic preamps. The valves are ostensibly to warm up the sound of digital recording media and the mic pre-amps are for use as an alternative to mixing desk pre-amps which are often built to price and are not, perhaps, too highly specified.

The RP520 combines both of these things. It is one of a range of products made by the Rolls corporation of America under the Bellari brand name, all of which utilise valves in their circuitry. This model is a two-channel microphone pre-amplifier with a valve (7025 or ECC83) in the front end of each channel.

The Bellari boasts an anodised gold front panel incorporating two vintage-looking VU meters which actually measure the output level of the valve stage. The knobs on the unit are plastic and cheapish looking and the last time I saw push buttons like these was on a tacky 1970's music centre. Classy looking it is not, but if it sounds good, who cares?

Each channel is equipped with a 48V phantom power switch coupled to an LED, to show when it is active, and a 30dB pad switch which operates only on the rear panel XLR input. The other input is a 1/4 inch jack on the front for instruments which, when used, disconnects the rear XLR input.

Outputs are on balanced XLR's but are also duplicated on 1/4 inch jacks, two for each channel. Each XLR output jack has an associated 30dB pad switch and a phase reverse switch which reverses the phase of the output signal 180 degrees from the input signal. Unusually, in these days of removable IEC leads and wall warts, the power is supplied on a fixed cable.

Back on the front panel, the input gain is set by a rotary knob adjustable from +38dB to +65dB and a volume knob sets the output level of the channel.

IN USE

There are three uses for this unit identified in the users manual - as a microphone preamp, as an instrument preamp/DI box using the front panel line input, or as a device for 'warming up' a stereo mix by utilising its valve circuitry.

Recording some vocals using a condenser mic, the RP520 did its job well in getting a clean and accurate signal to tape. Compared to the sound of my desk's mic amps the Bellari's sound was clearer, especially at the top end, although when compared with the sound of a more expensive pre-amp that I use a lot, it lacked some bottom-end richness and warmth.

Plugging instruments into the front panel input allowed a good signal level to be recorded to tape and the perceived sound quality was pleasing. With guitars, both a Stratocaster's single coil pickups and a Les Paul's humbuckers worked equally well. Turning up the gain to change the guitar sound had no real benefit, the sound did change subtly but was still the sound of a clean DI'd guitar, the valves seemingly not adding any

extra distortion.

Electric bass recorded very well through the Bellari and the same part recorded through a fairly standard DI box was definitely lacking some of the sound quality on comparison. Synth lines put through the unit also benefitted in the same way.

Putting a whole DAT mix through the unit did change the mix in a subjectively pleasing way but the effect was subtle, not like using an exciter, compressor or stereo EQ, all of which could have tailored the mix in many more ways.

VERDICT

The RP520 is reasonably priced at 300 pounds. Its sound is pleasing to the ear, whether used as a pre-amp or on a finished mix, and it presents a higher quality signal path than some desks' onboard mic preamps. As a bonus it works as a fine DI box. As I said, classy looking it is not, but if it sounds good, who cares?

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