

# Grace Design Model 201

Despite their pedigree, American Grace preamps have yet to achieve international recognition. **Tim Goodyer** believes their time has come

**G**RACE IS THE NAME that American audio designer Michael Grace has bestowed on his company. It is also the quality he has imparted to both the looks and performance of his new Model 201 mic preamp.

Dressed in its sleek silver livery, the 201 successfully avoids the modern generic, retro and the garish schools of design shared by much of today's outboard. There are points of familiarity, however—the 201's knobs bear broad comparison with those of dbx' Blue units, while its buttons and scribble spots are reminiscent of Focusrite's Red series. Simplicity is the word here with the two channels of preamplification each enjoying a large stepped rotary gain control, smaller trim knob, peak LED and lit-when-active buttons for 48V phantom (red), phase reverse (green) and insertion of a 20dB pad (yellow). Power is switched from the front panel; connections are all balanced XLR with the outputs using a proprietary transformerless class-AB amplifier reckoned to outperform 'traditional transformer-like designs' and there is a ground lift toggle switch provided on the rear panel.

The peak indicator presents the only form of metering, lighting green at -14dB and going red at +16dB. The manual sets the +16dB

chassis to better screen out stray RF interference if at the cost of some lower frequency screening. But its use is the key to its appeal and Grace's own literature is quick to point out that music 'does not behave like a steady state sine wave test tone'.

Setting up is easy with the green-red LED window providing an excellent reference for both coarse and fine level adjustment. And with the signal flowing the 201 declares its worth. I wasn't able to stack it up against anything too esoteric but on the strength of its performance against a couple of respectable and respected mic amp, it belongs toward the front of the field. The sound is pleasingly open and uncoloured, giving a gentle lack of the kind of brightness that readily becomes harshness in less refined designs (attributed by Grace in part to the exclusion of electrolytic capacitors from the signal path). The 201's ability to handle harmonically rich sources such as gongs demonstrates how this refinement translates into useful audio performance.

Tracing the Model 201's heritage brings us to the Model 801—eight Grace preamps tucked into a 2U-high box—which has been available in the US for over a year now. The intended application is easy to spot: direct

point at 12dB before clipping for balanced operation and 6dB before clipping in unbalanced mode. Setting the level using the 24-position gain control gives 18dB-64dB of gain in 2dB steps, with the unstepped 10dB attenuation of the trim control available for fine tuning. With the attenuator switched in, the 201 will handle a +4dB line-level input without complaint.

If the Model 201 offered nothing unusual in terms of audio quality, this review would be almost finished. But Michael Grace's 10 years plus experience in audio design have not been wasted. The unit's spec sheet makes reassuring claims to a frequency response of 20Hz-300kHz ( $\pm 0.2$ dB), <0.0015% THD+N at 40dB gain (+20dB output), phase deviation of <2° between 50Hz and 20kHz, and some -130dB noise level at 60dB gain.

Much is also made of the use of transimpedance-or current feedback-amplifier topology at the heart of the 201. Indeed, Grace's technical description makes a good theoretical case for the 201 being something special—including the use of an aluminium

recording to a modular digital 8-track machine—although a block of eight amps of high enough quality would give good company to a less well specified console. And it is through the development of this earlier amplifier that Michael Grace elicited the elements of the new one. With the introduction of the 201 it appears that he is attempting to establish Grace among the elite of mic preamps—certainly the pricing policy seems to indicate this with the Model 201 coming in at almost \$1000 (US) per channel. I would be interested to hear just what sonic benefits the 201 offers over the 801. If there are few enough, and assuming a couple of economies of scale, the Model 801 could represent something of a steal on a cost-per-channel basis away from the MDM market.

Speculation aside, the twin-channel Model 201 is certainly a preamp worthy of note outside of its native America. Easy in operation, it's sonically very well suited to purist recording and rates highly enough to score on those 'special' jobs, such as vocals, piano and percussion, that regularly crop up in a multitrack session. ■

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## FREQUENCY RESPONSE

@ 40dB gain  $\pm 0.2$ dB 20Hz-300kHz  
@ 40dB gain  $\pm 3$ dB 4.5Hz-1.0MHz

## THD+ N

@ 40dB gain +20dBu out <.0015%

## INTERMODULATION DISTORTION

@ 40dB gain + 25dBu out <.0025%

## NOISE - REFERRED TO INPUT

@ 60dB gain 50 W source -130dB

## PHASE DEVIATION

50-20kHz <2°

## CROSSTALK

@ 40dB gain -109dB

## CMRR

@ 60dB gain, 3.5Vcm, 1 kHz 80dB

@ 60dB gain, 3.5Vcm, 10kHz 97dB

Output CMRR 60dB

## MAXIMUM OUTPUT LEVEL

Balanced +28dBu

Unbalanced +22dBu

## IMPEDANCE

input 1600 Ohms

output 150 Ohms

Minimum Load Impedance 50 Ohms

## GAIN RANGE

2dB steps 18-64dB

## POWER CONSUMPTION

@ 120VAC 15 Watts max.

## WEIGHT

6.4 lbs.

## DIMENSIONS

1 U rack mount x 10" deep

