AT A GLANCE

GRACE DESIGN FELIX PREAMP

BODY
Two-channel preamp with ¼-inch mono and TRS inputs and one XLR mic input

Up to 62 dB of gain

48-volt phantom power

12-volt bias power for internal guitar mics, routable to any input source

EQ controls including gain, shelving bass and treble, fully parametric midrange control, and high-pass filter

Dual DI outputs selectable between individual channels and mix mode

Amp, tuner, and headphone outputs

Effects insert

Boost switch with adjustable gain

Mute switch

AB channel selector switch

Three selectable input impedances per channel

AC power, 120-240 volts, 50-60 Hz

DIMENSIONS
3.2 lbs; 9.5 x 5.5 x 3 inches

PRICE
$1,095 list; $995 street

Made in the USA
gracedesign.com

No Compromise

Grace Design's flexible, feature-rich Felix preamp delivers studio-quality sound

BY DOUG YOUNG

Preamps or DIs are a key part of many performers' signal chain. These devices can range from simple, passive transformers to battery-powered stomp boxes to feature-laden preamps that act as a control center for managing your tone and routing your signal to amps, PAs, monitors, and more.

Grace Design is known for building high-end, no-compromise studio gear, and its new preamp, humorously named Felix, fits in the control-center category, with an added focus on pristine audio. With Felix, they have started with one of their classic studio preamp designs, the Grace m101, and created a two-channel stage preamp with a host of options for EQing, mixing, and routing, all wrapped up in a rugged, road-worthy package.

A LOT TO DISCOVER

Grace describes Felix as a preamp/EQ/blender, which sums up the device's core features, though there's a lot more to discover. Felix's dual-channel design offers both a ¼-inch input jack for a guitar pickup and an XLR mic input with optional 48-volt phantom power in Channel 1. Channel 2 provides a single ¼-inch unbalanced input, but using a TRS (stereo) cable routes a stereo guitar pickup system to both Channels 1 and 2. Channel 1 provides up to 62 dB of gain, enough for even low-output microphones, while Channel 2 provides up to 36 dB. Both channels offer the same set of EQ controls: gain, shelving bass and treble controls, a fully parametric midrange control, and a high-pass filter to remove unwanted low frequencies.

Felix is extremely configurable: You can alter many features using a small bank of DIP switches on the side of the unit, while other options require changing internal jumpers inside the box. For example, the high-pass filter control doubles as a feedback-fighting notch filter. The bass control can be configured for a corner frequency of 125 Hz or 250 Hz, while the parametric midrange control can be set to cover a range of 70 Hz-880 Hz to focus on lower mids, or 670 Hz-8 Khz if you need to control upper mids.

Grace's approach allows Felix to accommodate many different needs in a fairly compact package.

On the output side, Felix provides a pair of XLR DI outputs, which can be switched individually between channels or offer a mix of both channels. There are also unbalanced amp, tuner, and headphone outputs, all of which produce a blend of the two channels. A mix control determines the relative level of each channel, and a volume control affects the level of the amp, headphone, and tuner outputs (but not the DI outputs).

Guitarists who favor passive pickup systems know that a preamp's input impedance can affect their tone, and Felix offers three options per channel. Channel 1 can be set to 10 kohm, 1 mohm, or 10 mohm, while Channel 2 offers 330 kohm, 1 mohm, and 20 mohm. Passive piezo pickups generally work best with the higher impedances, while some magnetic pickups may sound better at 1 mohm, or even 330 kohm; effect pedals, electronic keyboards, and so on may work best with the lower impedance settings. But you can experiment to find which setting works best for you.

Felix can be used as a foot pedal or stand-mounted for easy access to controls. Using it on the floor provides access to three footswitches: mute, boost switch, and AB switch (to toggle between inputs). When mounted on a mic stand, Felix supports an external footswitch to control the boost and mute functions.

The product comes with a well-written and occasionally humorous manual full of tips for taking advantage of all of the controls, which is worth browsing online to learn more about how Felix would fit into your setup.

TEST DRIVE

I tested Felix with a variety of pickups, listening directly over studio monitors as well as through an amplifier and a PA system. In spite of the extended feature set, Felix is quite straightforward to use. (I got the basics working without even reading the manual.) Using a D-Tar Wavelength undersaddle pickup installed in a Martin OM, I found the sound to be clean and clear. The EQ controls, especially the sweepable midrange, are very effective for adjusting my tone.

A pair of passive pickups—a K&K Pure Western Mini soundboard transducer and a Barbera passive undersaddle pickup—provided an opportunity to explore Felix's selectable input impedances. Passive piezo pickups are notoriously finicky about impedance, but Felix makes them easy to accommodate. I also appreciate the high-pass filter control, which easily cleans up some of the low mud that soundboard pickups tend to produce.

Felix offers excellent support for dual-source pickups and works perfectly for a passive K&K Pure Western paired with an internal electret microphone. There are surprisingly few preamps on the market that accommodate this type of setup, but Felix not only provides the required power for the microphone, but can be configured to support various cable schemes. The high-pass filter was also very effective at taming the inherently boomy internal mic.

The XLR input with 48-volt phantom power also allowed me to use an external mic, the clip-on DPA 4099. Another option would be to use a stand-mounted mic for guitar or vocals. Given that Felix is based on Grace's studio designs, I also tried using it as a studio preamp. Recording with a Schoeps condenser mic, Felix easily held its own with my high-end studio preamps.

WELL WORTH THE COST

It's difficult to identify any serious shortcomings for Felix. I wish the effects insert worked on each separate channel instead of applying only to the mix, and some may be intimidated by the idea of opening up the device to change the internal jumpers. But most guitarists will use the device as-is, or set up the configuration only once, and Grace's approach allows Felix to accommodate many different needs in a fairly compact package.

Although the preamp/DI field is crowded, Felix stands out for its studio-quality sound, excellent EQ, and extreme flexibility. The device is built like a tank, more than ready to handle rough road treatment. Guitarists who use dual-source pickup systems will be very pleased with Felix's top-notch support of dual channels and both internal and external mics, and the variable impedance options ensure a good match for almost any pickup, including passive magnetic or piezos. Last, but not least, Felix's routing options easily accommodate the most complex stage setup, while still being straightforward and easy to use. Felix is clearly at or near the top of the price range for guitar stage preamps, but it has the features and the quality to more than justify the cost. AG