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BY PAUL VNUK JR.

Grace Design m501 Preamp

Clean and sweet, small and handy

Grace Design is well known in the audio industry for high-quality, boutique-level microphone preamps and monitoring solutions. For over a decade, the cornerstone of the company has been its solid-state, transformerless, trans-impedance microphone preamp. It comes in 8-channel, 2-channel and single channel versions. Certain terms and traits—uncolored, transparent, quiet, high headroom, fast transient response—describe this preamp well.

Back in the August 2002 issue *Recording* reviewed the Model 101 mic preamp, updated to the m101 version in the March 2009 issue. This month we bring you the new m501 pre, marking Grace's entry into API's popular 500 Series format.

As most of our readers know by now, the 500 Series is a modular system of enclosures—in 2- to 10-slot racks or in portable 4- or 6-slot “lunch boxes”—accommodating your choice of 5.25" x 1.5" modules such as compressors, eqs and mic preamps, from various manufacturers. While there are some modules and enclosures that stretch the rules a bit (double-wide modules, separate power supplies for larger current draw, special features found only on certain modules and/or enclosures), the majority of 500 Series devices are designed to work interchangeably, allowing a plug-and-play system where the user builds his or her own unique set of audio processors.

Meet the m501—form and function

The new m501 has the same audio characteristics as its larger siblings. While there are dozens of mic pres available in the 500 Series format, most are of the colored, vibey variety, making the m501 one of the first to be available in the “clean and pristine” camp.

Looking much like a vertical m101, the m501 features a similar raised black aluminum faceplate, silver knobs and buttons and bright jewel toned LED indicator lights. It is well constructed and equal to Grace's other rackmount pieces in build quality. While many 500 Series modules have either a faux vintage or slight DIY look to them, the m501 has a high-class modern look.

The m501 has a two-stage input, with the first and larger knob offering 10 dB to 65 dB of gain in twelve 5-dB steps. The second and smaller knob offers 10 dB of further fine-tuning. Add to that a 1/4" instrument DI, 48V phantom power, and a 75 Hz, 12 dB/octave highpass filter and you have pretty standard mic pre fare, with one unique exception: the Ribbon button.

This button serves two functions specific to ribbon mics and, as it turns out, also dynamic mics. First, it gives an impedance boost from 8.1 kilohm to 20 kilohm, which can give a microphone that wants to see a higher input impedance more perceived fullness and oomph. Second, when this button is engaged it cuts phantom power to the microphone, a very nice feature that can save older ribbon mics from accidental electrical harm.

In use

I had long been aware of Grace Design's reputation, and this was my first opportunity to try a Grace product. I am familiar with mic pres of this style, having owned and used comparable models by TRUE Systems, Millennia Media and John Hardy. Each model has its own nuances, and this Grace pre easily holds its own with all of them.

If I had to pin down the m501 amidst the others, I would say the True Systems is a touch more “stark reality”, the Millennia has a slight sparkly sheen to its top end, and the Grace is comfortably and respectably in between.

Since I do quite a bit of acoustic folk, jazz and small-ensemble classical work, as well as a fair amount of recording for sample/sound design libraries, I appreciate fast and accurate preamps like the m501. Acoustic guitars, violin, voice and percussion (both orchestral and ethnic) shine with this preamp—almost literally, as the m501 has a top end that captures bright transients with ease.

If you are a vibe junkie who writes off clean preamps as “not gritty enough for rock”, then hearing what the m501 in Ribbon mode and a Royer R-121 can do



in the grille of a vintage tube amp may just change your mind. It's not adding the vibe... it captures the vibe.

The m501 worked great with every mic I tried. From dynamic to ribbon to tube condenser, the m501 lets each mic stand on its own by staying out of its way. It's a great choice for in-studio shootouts, just to hear each microphone's inherent qualities.

It is also a more than capable DI. It won't thicken or fatten, but it will capture the tone of your chosen instrument accurately.

Conclusions

This is one of those “what you put in is what you get out” preamps; gritty sources retain their grit, smooth sources retain their smoothness, sparkly sources retain their sparkle, and—of course—dull sources will be dull, bad-sounding instruments will still sound bad... you get the point.

There really is not anything critical to say about this little preamp; its reputation precedes it and in many classical and jazz circles it is an industry standard. And it is a much needed and very welcome addition to the 500 Series format! 🎧

Price: \$625

More from: Grace Design, www.gracedesign.com.

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