

Groove Tubes Vipre

Better known for its guitar-oriented background, Groove Tubes does have a strong pro audio representation with a range of mics and outboard units. This one is a real heavyweight. GEORGE SHILLING straps on his truss.



UPON INITIAL ACQUAINTANCE with the Vipre (Variable Impedance PREamp) you find it hard to believe that this 2-stone (12kg), 3U monster is simply one mono microphone preamplifier. It is so weighty that two diagonal support brackets with rack ears are supplied to attach to the sides and an additional 1U rackspace directly above. There is no compression, EQ or other processing. It will amplify one signal, that's all. At first glance, this appears to be a sledgehammer to crack a nut (*or smash it. Ed*). After all, compare the dimensions of, say, the excellent modular API 512c.

However, before investigating the whys and wherefores, I noticed that things were rattling around inside. Removing the cover, I found two tiny nuts had worked loose from the bracket holding the sideways-mounted mainboard that housed all seven tubes — one end of this board was floating around. I screwed the nuts back on and was soon marvelling at the complex internals — twisted wires running all around between the front panel's controls, the three circuit boards, three separately mounted transformers and other enormous components. The rear of the switched knobs was an impressive sight, with multiple-level ganged switching of numerous resistors on several of them. The Vipre obviously has enormous power in reserve, and with fully balanced circuitry throughout, boasts a frequency range of 4Hz to 100kHz.

There are three inputs, each with their own dedicated circuitry. The rear panel hosts XLR mic and TRS line sockets, while the front features an instrument jack.

Large toggle switches with associated lights handle



Power, Standby, Mute and +48V Phantom. There is method to the madness of the seemingly excessive provision of the first three switches. It is recommended to set the unit to Muted and Standby before powering on. Standby turns off the plate voltage in the amplifier tubes, but leaves the filaments on. Using this mode for 30 seconds during warm up is good practice for extending the life of the tubes (*A bit like certain valve guitar amps then. Ed*). However, I confess I forgot to do this more than once, and it would surely not be difficult to design an automatically delayed power-up.

However, the Mute switch is useful for ensuring subsequent silent operation. If you exercise the gain knobs through all their positions before unmuting, this

prevents pops and clicks when the knobs are turned for the first time after power-up. And with an outboard mic preamp, it's always good to be able to lunge for the Mute toggle in certain situations!

The two equally chunky toggles on the other side handle Polarity switching and a gentle Hi Pass filter. The two largest knobs handle gain, the course knob switching in 5dB steps from 20dB to 70dB, the other operating as a trim in 1dB steps from -5dB to +5dB. These are big and clunky to adjust, so no smooth fade-outs are possible here. There are four different Impedance settings, plus 'Balanced Bridge' which bypasses the custom-designed input transformer for more 'modern' sounding operation.

These different impedance settings seemed more dramatic than those found on other units, and radically alter the tone depending on the mic used. This was especially pronounced with a Royer ribbon. A unique feature is the Rise Time setting, which alters the 'slew rate', i.e. the time it takes for a square wave's leading edge to go from zero volts to, err, some volts. Older gear tends to have slower rise time characteristics, and here you can instantly hear the softening effect of slower times. The five settings may be overkill, as this can be quite a subtle effect, and perhaps three settings would have sufficed but it can make a big difference with certain material. I usually preferred the slower settings, especially when recording vocals using a condenser mic.

Sometimes you just want to plug in and go, and the Vipre will mostly sound excellent wherever the Impedance and Rise Time knobs are set, but for incorrigible fiddlers, there are a bountiful number of combinations of settings available here. It undoubtedly sounds as good as it looks; big, fat, warm and clear.

The meter is worthy of mention, for although it is a VU, there are some unusual modes with higher reference levels for digital recording, plus an expanded mode allowing a much wider range of levels to be indicated. Additionally, there are a couple of LEDs underneath the meter to indicate the approach and onset of clipping, which can't be missed, whatever the VU is set to show. One small omission is a Pad switch, as I found out myself when recording a particularly loud close-miked guitar cab with a high output mic — it is occasionally possible to have too much gain for the ensuing console or recorder input.

Aspen Pitman is obviously a passionate sort of chap. In the manual, he espouses an interesting theory that early complaints about the harshness of digital were due to inferior mic preamps' poor sonics, revealed by the accuracy of digital recording. Whether or not this is the case, the Vipre is certainly a mic preamp of the highest calibre (UK£1701+VAT), and perhaps due to its steam locomotive style design, it handles any recording situation with aplomb. It's an inspired unit, with sonics to match its imposing physical presence. ■



PROS Unique 'Rise Time' feature; dramatic impedance switching; glorious sound quality; a joy for inveterate tweekers and gear-lust freaks!

CONS 12kg and 4U for one mic pre!

Contact

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