Millennia Media HV35 & AD-596

The gravitational pull of the lunchbox continues with this high quality adoptee. JON THORNTON checks modules for both ends of a chain.

Millennia Media has joined a growing number of established manufacturers providing 500 series modules for API and compatible modular racks. It's no surprise that there's been something of a resurgence in popularity of this approach in recent years given all the changes in workflow and recording scenarios, so it does make all sorts of sense for already established brands to seek a piece of the action. Millennia's initial 500 series offerings are the HV35 — a single channel preamplifier — and the AD-596 eight channel A-D convertor. These two mean that at one end of the spectrum Millennia seems to have no competition in this market sector — I couldn't find anything similar to the AD-596 in 500 series format. But at the other end there's no shortage of boutique preamps to fit your Lunchbox. It's not surprising then, that Millennia has sought to leverage its existing reputation and product range here, and the HV35 is effectively the same fundamental preamp design employed in the HV3C and HV3D boxes. Clearly, there are some challenges here, not least with adapting to the power supply restrictions, but let's see what we've got.

In terms of features it's really a question of win some, lose some. What you don't get is the mil-spec stepped gain control from the HV3C/D, which is replaced by a continuously variable gain control. But this also negates the need for the associated gain range switches, and the front panel real estate this frees up makes room for some new features. These include a switchable pad (-15dB), a gentle high pass filter (80Hz @ 3dB/octave), polarity reverse and a 'ribbon mic' switch. The last of these adds an additional 10dB of total gain (giving 70dB in total) and DC couples the microphone input to the gain stage. Finally, a front panel high-impedance input is provided for DI sources, with an associated instrument input switch. Metering is via two tiny LEDs for signal present (-46dB) and peak (+22dB) but existing HV3C users will be used to that.

It's curious in a way that, given the much smaller front panel, Millennia has provided an awful lot more in the way of features than the larger 19-inch rack designs although in use the layout never feels cramped or hard to operate. The overall look, feel and build seem very much in line with Millennia's values and design philosophy right down to the rainbow array of colours used in the circular illuminated pushbuttons. And in use, those traits carry on to the audio performance. It sounds… well like an HV3-C really. A/B testing of the two showed no perceptible differences to my ears — transparent, solid and capable of extracting every last bit of detail on offer are the qualities that I usually associate with the HV3-C, and the HV35 does just that.

OK, on paper the HV35 can't quite manage the same maximum output level as the HV3-C (+28dBu compared with +32dBu) possibly due to the slight compromises that have had to be made with regard to available power rails. But this isn't something that appears to have any effect whatsoever in terms of sonic quality (tested using an API 6B Lunchbox) and is unlikely to be an issue unless driving extremely long lines. All in all, and especially given the added features, the HV35 makes a lot of sense, and could even steal appeal from Millennia's standalone product range.

The AD-596 is an eight channel A-DC that draws on Millennia's experience in creating digital output options for its other products, and it has managed to cram quite a lot into the space available in a 500 series module. All I-O and controls are located on the front panel. Eight channels of balanced analogue audio input are available on a D25 connector wired to the Tascam standard, and four pairs of AES outputs on another. Toggle switches on the front panel select the sample rate for the internal clock, which can be 44.1 or 48kHz or 2x these base rates, giving a maximum sample rate of 96kHz.

Two BNC connectors provide external clock input and clock output and this can be Word clock or AES clock. Clock type and termination options need to be set by physically opening up the module and changing jumpers on the very tightly packaged circuit boards. It's a bit of a pain, perhaps mitigated by the fact that these are options that may not need changing very frequently. The clock source selection switch (internal or external) can be changed without disassembling the module, but still requires it to be removed from the chassis.

You might question whether it might have been more sensible to locate this switch on the front panel, were it not for the fact that the AD-596 employs something Millennia refers to as 'Tick-Tock-Lock'. Essentially this means that if the unit loses an external clock source it will revert near instantly to its internal clock. The idea here is that if you lose the external reference, you don't lose the recording — always assuming that you've remembered to set the internal sample rate to match the external clock of course. In practice it also means that getting to the internal/external switch is not as much of an issue and leaving it set to external and not connecting external clock should cover most situations.

Metering is basic but well considered. Eight red LEDs illuminate when the associated input channel hits the A-D clipping point (+24dBu, 0VU = -20dBFS). A toggle switch allows these peaks to be held if necessary and then cleared, ensuring that clips are indicated even if the unit is unattended.

Sonically, the conversion on offer is very good indeed. Tailed into the AES inputs of a Digidesign 192, I was able to directly compare the 192's A-D and the AD-596 running at 96k, with the 192 running from the Millennia's clock. The AD-596 seemed a little more solid in the low end, and seemed a little more 'real' for want of a better word when dealing with complex sources such as triangle and 12-string guitar. It's certainly more than comparable with any other high-end offering out there, albeit without any bells and whistles, such as soft-limiting.

In all, it's a very accomplished A-DC but I remain a little confused as to its potential market. Sure, you could get some very dense, if somewhat messy (remember the I-O is all on the front panel) A-D racks together. And even for a mix and match approach of analogue modules with associated A-D conversion it's going to be a little strange with looms running from the front to the rear.

But more perplexing is the single output format on offer — AES pairs makes sense for some users (those with digital mixing desks, DAW owners with existing interfaces), but this might be limiting for those who need direct connectivity to a DAW, perhaps running on a laptop. And the form factor suggests that this type of 'mobile' application is one that it's suited to, even designed for. Even the inclusion of a single ADAT format output would have given a little more flexibility here. Having said that, at the moment it's not really got any competition in the 500 series market, so I suppose time will tell.

Contact

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PROS HV3-C/D performance with added features (HV35); work well with 500 series power limitations (both); high quality conversion (AD-596)

CONS AES outputs only (AD-596); fiddly setting some clock options (AD-596).

EXTRAS Millennia's NSEQ-4 parametric equaliser is designed for the engineer who doesn't need the NSEQ-2's valve and solid state circuitry in the same unit.

It features the 'World's first and only' all-discrete, true differential Class-A input buffer/amplifier, selectable balanced or unbalanced input, a 'greatly improved' 3rd generation FSA-03 all-discrete EQ amplifier, an improved output stage, no muting required (as with Twin Topology), true hard-wire bypass when EQ is not selected, and an upgraded power supply.