

# Phoenix Audio DRS-2

A dual-channel microphone preamp and DI that draws on an illustrious heritage, this restrained unit also boasts an approach that many will regard as right.

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**P**HOENIX AUDIO IS a company with a history of servicing and modifying pre-1980 Neve equipment. Founder Shaun Leveque has concentrated his efforts on improving the quality of Class A circuitry which is often based on outdated 1960s technology. With the advantages of modern components, Phoenix developed a Class A discrete output stage, the TF1, for retrofitting to existing equipment. A Class A stereo DI was then developed and subsequently a Class A transformerless discrete input stage was designed and developed with the aim of bettering any transformer input for frequency response while retaining the Class A sound and qualities.

All this groundwork has culminated in the 1U DRS-2 two-channel Class A mic preamp. The box is deep and heavy and includes a large toroidal mains transformer. The rear panel features XLR inputs and outputs, along with TRS jack socket outputs. A standard IEC socket is provided, accompanied by a voltage selector. Oddly for a device of British origin, this was switched to 110V as supplied, although taped to the top of the unit was an A4 sheet with a warning in enormous lettering to check the voltage, so fortunately, I did.

The front panel features XLR inputs that double those on the rear - a very handy feature - and jack sockets are provided here for DI input. The main gain switch on each channel is a very Neve-like dark red knob with switched positions in 5dB steps from 30dB to 70dB. This is an ample range for most applications



and I found plenty of gain available in situations where on some units you're nearing the top of the range. Alongside the switched knob is a rotary fader pot for fine-tuning of the output. Each channel features an individual earth lift pushbutton and a -20dB pad, useful when recording particularly loud sources. Four larger buttons are grouped together, Neve 1081-style, on each channel with phantom power, DI selection, phase change and high pass filter. Each of these illuminates in a different colour when depressed and activated - very pretty!

In practice, gain is easily set by virtue of two LEDs on each channel. The Green one is marked 0 and the Red +8 and these are the respective output levels achieved in dB for a constant input signal. The Red LED has some hysteresis, allowing peaks to be observed, although this is difficult to discern. When gain is adjusted to make the green LED light most of the time (with the fader pot at about three-quarters up), the noise level is exceptionally low and the headroom ample, and the output level is around 0dB. For -10dB operation it is recommended simply to turn down the rotary fader for optimum noise/headroom.

Immediately noticeable was a fullness of sound. This unit brought out the best of any mic I tried, condenser or dynamic. There is a wonderful integrity to the character, and a richness of tone not heard with lesser units or indeed equally priced and more expensive ones. Acoustic guitars (variously nylon and steel strung) and mandolin all sounded fantastic and much warmer than I would normally expect. Male vocalists in particular sounded

absolutely enormous yet natural, and percussion transients seemed to benefit from the character of the DRS-2. Bongos miked with a cheap dynamic had a really powerful slap. And solo cello had a deep resonant richness not present when comparing to other units. However, it is worth noting that none of the above ever sounded exaggerated or unnatural when merged into a mix, but all sounded solid, vibrant and enjoyable.

The DI button selects the front panel jack input - the gain knob and -20dB pad become inactive, all adjustment being made with the volume fader. Again, this should be set with the green LED lighting for a 0dB output. This sounds very impressive indeed, and was beautifully warm with a Fender bass plugged straight into the DRS-1 then into a recorder via a compressor. A Les Paul sounded very fat indeed, while a Strat was tonally rich, lacking any artificial sparkle.

The phase button operates silently, while the high pass filter switch inserts a 6dB per octave roll-off below 150Hz. This is a higher frequency than is generally found on microphone switches, and is particularly useful for reducing proximity effect, especially if you want to avoid sending the signal through separate EQ on the way to the recorder. This also operates on the DI input.

Overall it is difficult to find fault with the Phoenix. The only problem I found was that both earth-lift switches were somewhat temperamental and reluctant to unlatch themselves. My preproduction model featured gold legending, production models use clearer white-on-black lettering, but is otherwise identical to the first batch of production models. The gain switch operates without audible clicks and is very easy to set using the LEDs.

All switch statuses are easily visible. I never ran out of headroom; the low frequencies extend to depths others units struggle to represent accurately, and the highs sound sweet and natural, never harsh. The frequency response of the Mic input is just 0.4dB down at 40Hz and 0.3dB down at 20kHz. In conclusion, a very impressive unit. □

**PROS** Big warm Class A sound; front panel mic inputs; easy level setting with LEDs

**CONS** Dodgy earth-lift switches; pseudo-retro styling not entirely convincing

**EXTRAS** Phoenix Audio has an interesting website at [www.phoenixaudio.net](http://www.phoenixaudio.net) that addresses some of the popular misconceptions and realities of older Neve consoles.

Aside from some superb pictures, there's a section dedicated to tips and secrets and a priceless collection of stories that pertain to the histories of some famous and some less illustrious desks.



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