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REVIEW

BY PAUL VNUK JR.

Prodigy Engineering Bella

A 500-Series mic preamp that's smarter than your drummer



Prodigy Engineering is a relatively new boutique audio company that launched a few years ago with a unique 8-channel remote-controlled microphone preamp named the Anima. The company's newest creation, the Bella, is essentially a single-channel version of the Anima designed for use in the 500 Series module system.

According to their creator Chae Ham, the goal in creating both the Anima and the Bella was to craft something sonically new, rather than yet another vintage clone. Not only does the Bella shoot for new sonic ground, it also contains a healthy selection of innovative and just plain cool features not typically found in other microphone preamps on the market.

Style and form

Right out of the box the Bella lives up to its name as a thing of beauty. Its body appears

to be a single piece of cut stainless steel that half encompasses the circuit board and gives it a very modern high-class appearance, offering the user a peek inside.

The face of the unit is dominated by a large single silver input knob, 5 recessed LED-illuminated buttons, a 3-stage input LED meter, a 7-segment numeric gain display, a mini-USB input jack, and a pair of link sockets. At almost 2 lbs. the unit is solid, sturdy, and the knobs and buttons are top shelf all the way.

Feature set

First up, while the Bella has a 100% analog signal path, it is digitally controlled. It offers from 18 to 60 dB of input gain, adjustable in stepped 1 dB increments; you hear the relay click as the gain knob is adjusted. This knob is continuously variable while the numeric display shows the level settings. The 3-stage input LED shows the input level from green, to yellow, to clipping at red.

Bella's function buttons are: 78 Hz highpass filter, +48 V phantom power, phase, 22 dB pad, and a mute button. Each button contains a bright LED light to let you know its function is engaged.

When either phantom power or the highpass are engaged, the unit quickly and temporarily pads and then mutes itself. This is a really cool feature that can save your ears and speakers from bursts of unintended audio.

Pass the remote

Like its big brother, the Bella is a remote-controllable mic pre. With the use of the included USB cable, the Bella can be set

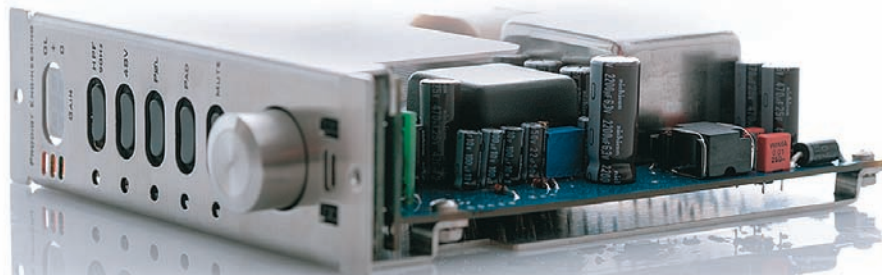
up as a generic MIDI device in your DAW on your PC or Mac (with an additional standalone application for Mac OS X). It can then be controlled from your DAW, using standard MIDI drivers, and its settings stored with each session. Unusual? Maybe, but handy if you have to reproduce the exact sound of a session at a later date. If you use a control surface with MIDI-mappable knobs, you can control the Bella that way, console style. [Prodigy Engineering tells us that in addition to this generalized MIDI control capability, the Bella is recognized by Pro Tools HD as a "DigiPRE" and can be controlled from Avid control surfaces like the ICON or from the Pro Tools UI as a plug-and-play device.—Ed.]

Multiple units can be controlled with the included "Bella Link" USB jumper; they can be controlled independently from the remote-control application, or (if you wish) linked together and adjusted accurately in stereo or even larger groups, such as, for example, pulling 8 drum mics equally down by 3 dB with one knob turn.

Of course even the most unique features in the world are rendered pointless if the unit does not sound good, so, on to the big question: how's the Bella sound?

No clones were harmed in the making of this unit

So what of the claim of the Bella's non-clone sound? Considering that almost every mic pre that has come out in the past few years is either a clone, rebuild, or inspired by something old and famous, having created something new is a bold claim.



It has a transformer presence and sound that takes it out of the ultra-clean Millennia-Grace-Hardy camp, however it is nowhere near the vibey Neve sound either. To my ears the Bella falls into the third category of classic console preamps, but with its own signature.

Before we became obsessed with words like "vibe" and "colored" and "vintage", we had standard high-quality consoles with a solid sound; they did their job and then got out of the way. The Bella definitely lives somewhere in this category.

Sonically, if you drew a line and put a Daking Mic Pre One or a Focusrite ISA One on one end and an API or Chandler TG-2 on the other side, I think the Bella would fall comfortably in between, while gently tilting toward the API/Chandler side for punch.

So the answer is: no, the Bella does not sound *exactly* like anything from the past, but it does share useful similarities.

In use

I used the test unit for about eight months (thanks, Chae!) and whether on snare, kick, percussion, acoustic guitar, or guitar amp, this thing sounded fantastic. It captures anything you throw at it with just a hint of pleasant attitude. It plays nice with mics of all makes and models, and has plenty of gain in all circumstances.

I used it with the new Royer R-101 ribbon mic (reviewed January 2011) for a vocal take and the signal was strong and clean and still had a hint of headroom. The experience was the same when it was used for a spoken-word session with a Shure SM7, another lower-output mic.

Speaking of vocals, that is where it found the most use, on sessions I was tracking for a Chicago-based indie band, as well as in conjunction with (or in lieu of) my Chandler TG-2 on guitar amps.

In many ways the Bella reminds me slightly of a less aggressive TG-2. The punch and presence are there, but just toned down, ever so nicely. Additionally tickling the red on the Bella's input added some slight lovely harmonics as well.

Conclusions

While it is easy to be skeptical and dismiss a new preamp by a largely unknown company, especially one that eschews the pedigrees and designs of the past, in the case of Prodigy Engineering's Bella you would be depriving yourself of hearing a brilliant-sounding pre.

I will admit I am very much a fan of microphone preamps like the Bella, which are not too vibey, yet not too sterile either. I cannot recommend this preamp enough, it just sounds that good! While I am already set with 16 mic pres of my own, the Bella gives me strong pause to rethink my own rig... ➤

Price: \$975

More from: Prodigy Engineering,
www.prodigy-eng.com.