

TESTING TESTING 123

Seán Laffey tests the EDB - 2 and EDM - 1 equalisers from Headway Music Audio Ltd.



Here's the problem you have to solve as a gigging trad or folk musician. You want to amplify your instrument but do not want to lose any of those sonic qualities you heard when you rehearsed your set in the kitchen.

A high quality microphone might pick up those lovely tones from your fiddle or guitar but it will also amplify clicks, bumps, knocks, and even the sound of glasses clinking at the bar. So the default solution is to use an on board pickup and send an electronic signal to an amplifier in the hopes that what you can hear acoustically will be replicated in the sound coming out of the speaker cabinet.

Talk to players and they'll tell you time and again, there is a difference between the unplugged and plugged in sound of their instrument, turn up to a pub gig where the bar has "all the gear you'll need" and wait for disappointment to hit you. Acoustic instruments need a very clean sound to come from the pick up to the amplifier and the best preamps have enough bells and whistles to ensure that what you hear from the speakers or monitors is what you are playing.

I was delighted to be able to test a couple of Headway Preamps the EDB-2 and the EDM-1 that address and answer those problems. These equalisers are British designed and Korean manufactured and are probably the only step you need between your instrument

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and the amp. I tested both bits of kit using a Yamaha Stagepass 250M (the work horse we use in community gigs back home in Cashel) and one of my oldest practice amps, figuring if they could handle the default nastiness of this well used and abused amp then they'd be able to handle anything.

I ran a long jack line from the two Headway preamps to the amps and a short patch line to the instruments, which is recommended by Headway (I assume to keep the signal to the preamp as clean as possible). I tested them with acoustic pick-ups on Crafter guitars and a mandolin, a Green Forest Octave Mandola, a Foley bouzouki, a Tanglewood uke and a cheap and cheerful guitar from Woolworths with a €20 strip piezo-pick-up that I had fitted myself.

According to the Headway website the EDB-2 offers dual channels with a 5-band EQ that can be used on channel one, channel two, or both, while further tweaking can be had with a tuneable notch filter to weed out feedback and problem frequencies. Each of the inputs has a 3-way impedance switch to optimize for passive or active pickups or a microphone. The preamp also has a Range switch to tailor the frequency response to Bass, Guitar, or Violin. Other controls include a Master output, a mute switch, Gain knobs for each channel, a phase reverse switch, and a ground

lift switch (we'd call them an earth lift switch). Phantom power is available on Channel 2's mic input as well as Channel 1's 1/4-inch input, which can be switched between Off, Ring, and Tip. The EDB-2 also has a 1/8-inch auxiliary/iPod input, which routes post EQ to the Master Volume. Its outputs are a 1/4-inch Low Impedance Line Out and a balanced XLR Line Out on the rear panel.

The little brother of the EDB-2 is the compact EDM-1 which offers a 3-Band EQ. While it sports a single channel, it shares the EDB-2's 3-way impedance switch at the input level and phantom power abilities. It's Range control is a Hi-Pass filter, which is used to cut out feedback and has settings for several instruments, including Bouzouki, Dropped D guitar, Violin and Mandolin, Tenor Guitar and more. This is controlled from a step-less knob, which means you can really fine tune the feedback killing power of this pre-amp. I found it handled everything I threw at it with ease and I was able to set up a clean sound from each of the instruments I tested. Both preamps gave good control over bass, mid and treble and this feature added a richness to the Yamaha 250M. The EDM-1 has a single 1/4-inch output, but also comes with an XLR adapter to convert the output to a balanced DI Out. Other features include a Master Volume, a Mute switch, and an earth lift switch (this cuts mains hum from the final sound).

Both equalizers are very well built, housed in sturdy metal casings, with good-sized knurled knobs for the battery compartments which have metal covers and look like they will withstand years on the road.

You can mount each preamp on a belt clip, or screw them into a mic stand and they have rubber feet if you want them on a table or desk. Each came with a 3 pin mains adapter and a set of batteries which were pre-installed. Those boxes are a joy in themselves, each is printed with a full layout of the controls of the preamps, so you know what you have in the box and what the box inside is capable of doing.

I can see the EDB-2 becoming an essential piece of kit for singer songwriters and solo ballad performers, with its two channels and a mic input, it ideal for the solo performer. The EDM-1 although it has fewer functions is much more intuitive to use. I will be using the sample model as my instrument pre-amp from now on.

When I matched both the EDM-1 and the EDB-2 with my Foley zook I found the output was sweet and clean and the best compliment I could give Headway is that it sounded like there was no electronic colour at all in the sound, which was remarkably authentic. I also found that switching between instruments was easy, with just a slight re-adjustment to the settings as I shifted from Mandolin to Guitar to Bouzouki.

The preamps range in price from £144 – £220, so they will need to earn their keep. From what I have heard I am sure they will payback their costs time and time again. Serious equipment for serious musicians, built by a company that has obviously listened to its customers and delivers equipment that is on the money. My advice take your amp along to a dealer and set it up with either of these preamps. I'm pretty sure you will be impressed at just how much fidelity they can bring out of your acoustic instruments.