

Review by Eric Hawkins for Electronic Musician Magazine, February 1995.

## RP220 Dual Tube Mic Preamp



"These vacuum tubes will soothe your digital bites."

Do you ever wish your solid-state microphone had a switch marked "tube sound"? Do you dream of using a vintage tube mic to warm up your vocal sessions? If you answered "yes" to these questions, you need to get your hands on a vacuum-tube preamp. Until recently, you also needed a major loan to finance it. Luckily, Rolls/Bellari's RP220 Dual Tube Mic Preamp is an affordable way to satisfy your sonic needs without going into debt.

The RP220 brings the smooth, warm, sound of tubes into the crispy, crunchy world of today's digital recording studio. Its two premium 7025 vacuum tubes (one per channel) lend a sweet, round sound to incoming signals due to the natural distortion and compression that occurs as a signal passes through them. This audio coloration is a perfect counterpoint to the pristine, harsh sound of digital recording.

### BASIC FEATURES

The RP220's design is simple and straightforward, making the unit very easy to use. Dressed in silver and black, with big gain and volume knobs reminiscent of an old guitar amp head, the RP220 looks vintage. Each channel has phantom power and a 5-stage, easy-to-read output LED. That's pretty much it for the RP220's controls, other than a power-indicator LED and front-panel power switch. The unit's power cord is permanently attached, which is fine with me. (ed. note: The reviewer did not mention that the RP220 has a +48 volt phantom power switch, 30 dB input pad, 30 dB output pad, and a Phase Reverse switch.)

The unit has balanced XLR inputs and both balanced XLR and unbalanced 1/4" line outputs. A 1/4" instrument input on the RP220's face, when connected, overrides the XLR on its rear. A second 1/4" output on the rear lets the unit act as an active signal splitter.

The XLR inputs and outputs are switchable between mic and line levels (via the pad switches). As you would expect, the 1/4" jacks are line-level only. The inclusion of 1/4" outputs makes the RP220 a good choice as a tube front-end for an MDM, DAT, or hard-disk recorder.

### TESTING 1,2,3

After a quick look at the 4-page owner's manual, I plugged in an AKG C414 solid-state condenser mic and started working. The C414 is sometimes criticized for its harshness - it is extremely sensitive and picks up even the slightest sibilance - so it seemed a good candidate for tube processing.

After recording a few tracks with a male singer who has a particularly edgy voice, I compared the results from the RP220 to tracks recorded with the C414 running through a solid-state preamp. The tracks recorded with the RP220 were fatter at the low mid frequencies and caused an overall warming up of the singer's voice, which effectively took the unwanted edge off his voice.

The RP220 didn't turn the C414 into a high-end, vintage tube microphone, but it effectively turned it into a pseudo-tube mic with a pleasing sound. As anticipated, the two make excellent partners.

I found plenty of other good applications for the RP220. For example, I ran a sampled grand piano through the RP220 while mixing a modern rock tune. This made the piano sound darker and more realistic. I also ran a drum machine's kick drum into it, slightly overloading the input, which created a punchier, more transient kick. I even patched a digital effects processor with a spring reverb patch through the RP220 and tuned in a more authentic spring sound.

Of course, some experiments were less successful. For example, I tried recording a Gibson hollow-body jazz guitar through the RP220, but found the resulting timbre a bit too clean for my taste. (I prefer a dirtier, more colored tube sound for guitar.) Oh well, it is a *mic* pre after all.

#### IN MY OPINION

Although the Rolls/Bellari RP220 doesn't do anything groundbreaking, its *price* is groundbreaking. The unit doesn't have a lot of bells and whistles, but for the price what do you expect? Consider its higher-priced competition, and you will really appreciate the RP220's value.

However, I did not like the sound quality of the tubes that shipped with the unit. Fortunately, the RP220 accepts virtually any 12AX7 tubes, so you can pick whatever brand you like. When I substituted a pair of Groove Tubes for the originals, the sound improved dramatically. According to Rolls, the RP220 now ships with better quality tubes. (ed note: The review was written before Rolls began shipping the RP220 with the premium 7025 tubes)

Other criticisms? Okay, the power LED is a bit close to channel 2's output peak LED, and they can easily be confused. Who cares? What matters is that given good tubes, the RP220 sounds great. With its many potential applications, it makes a valuable addition to any studio.

#### EM METERS

FEATURES: 3.5 of 5

EASE OF USE: 4.5 of 5

AUDIO QUALITY: 3.5 of 5

VALUE: 4 of 5

This article reprinted by permission of [Electronic Musician Magazine](#).

---

[BACK](#)

---