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Bellari Studio RP533



Andrew Bailey puts the RP533 Studio Tube Multi Processor from American manufacturer Bellari to the test, and finds a warmth and clarity that only valve technology can offer.

The RP533 is part of a new range of valve processors from Bellari. The Studio Tube range consists of the Mic Pre-amp, Sonic Exciter, Compressor Limiter, and the Multi Processor. The RP533 Studio Tube Multi Processor is a compressor, limiter and exciter, essentially housed within one simple-to-use unit. It's the older brother of the RP583 Compressor/Limiter from the same range, with all of its features plus the exciter section taken from the RP562.

OVERVIEW - FIRST IMPRESSIONS

The system is supplied as a 2U rack module in flamboyant brushed gold. The design and build of the Bellari conveys a feeling of hand-built quality, with the controls themselves having an authentic retro look and feel. They are constructed from a chunky plastic which looks very much like Bakelite, but feels softer and more responsive to the touch. The buttons have a similar feel, with a confident and positive action, clicking firmly into place.

Inside the unit, the circuitry has been designed around the valves from the very start. Unfortunately, very little information was available on the specification of the tubes, so it was difficult to judge exactly what to expect. Using the unit, though, was like driving a trusted old car - it was easy to use and gave a quiet and warm sound which I found pleasantly surprising, considering its price tag.

REAR PANEL

Plugging the unit in is an uncomplicated affair, with both XLR and quarter-inch jacks offered on both input and output, depending on the environment in which the unit is operating, with side chain also offered from a single balanced quarter-inch jack socket. While largely incorporating a design philosophy which encourages improvisation, Bellari have surprisingly missed a trick by placing feature buttons on the rear panel - in this case 30 dB pad and phase reverse buttons.

COMPRESSION

Immediately obvious upon first twiddle was the compressor's knee, since adjustment around this has the analogue characteristic of a sudden shift between the upright and horizontal sections of the plot line. The unit exposed itself as having a sharply rounded knee, and exploring further was easy with the large warm controls. The knee felt as if there were no hidden kinks or bumps which might surprise at just the wrong movement.

Threshold gives 20 dB, and ratio is a continuous movement, offering 2:1 through to infinity in one sweep, rather than split with another function button. The attack ranges from 0.5ms through to 100ms, although this still feels like plenty, which is, perhaps, a pleasant quirk caused by the personality of the system.

Release picks up where attack leaves off, ranging from 100ms through to 500ms. The manual kindly suggests starting the unit at zero output gain, and very little adjustment was required for mid-range frequencies within the available +10 to -infinity range. This is a unit with plenty of power when it's needed.

There were problems when adjustments were made to induce clipping and the release was turned up, where the VU meter faltered around the 3dBv mark rather than releasing smoothly. This softness may have been designed to protect the VU meter from sharp changes, or it may be a result of latency in the analogue circuitry. Either way, this wasn't reflective of the output signal itself.

The exciter sits after the compressor in the signal path, and this cannot be reconfigured apart from the bypass buttons for each section.

The exciter section consists of two further controls - 'bottom' and 'definition' knobs. The bottom control enhances the low end frequencies delightfully, giving a wonderful warmth and depth. The definition range proves to have exactly the right name, since its depth and character is not what one might be used to from solid state or digital equipment, where excitement of frequencies characteristically leads to brightness. Instead, the excitement occurs in a slightly lower range, giving definition whilst not being detrimental to the overall warmth.

CONCLUSION

One of the nicest things about the RP533 is that it is unpretentiously a valve unit. Everything is as it should be, and, used with more controlled instrumentation such as a grand piano or acoustic guitar, the unit does not overexcite unrealistic frequencies but enhances the characteristics of the instrument wonderfully. This is a unit which makes a technology available at a price and audio quality that was unthinkable just a few years ago. Bellari remind us that audio engineering should be about improvisation and having fun.

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