

SONIC FARM BERLINER TWO-CHANNEL TUBE PREAMPLIFIER

Since my first encounter with Sonic Farm nearly a decade ago, I've been amazed at the products it has introduced. I've spent extended time with the Creamer+, Creamliner and Silk Worm products during review assignments, and I've worked with bass players playing through the 2di4 Pentode Direct Box on multiple occasions. Every single thing Sonic Farm makes is sonically stunning.

Because of this, it's personally shocking when I encounter an experienced engineer who hasn't heard of Sonic Farm, though I'm sure this will change in the near future. The company continues to release new products on a regular basis and they simply don't disappoint. And after spending the last few months with the Berliner (\$2,850 direct from Sonic Farm), I'm once again blown away at what Sonic Farmers Boris Drazic and Zoran Todorovic have accomplished.

The Sonic Farm Berliner is a dual-channel hybrid microphone preamplifier that is very loosely based on the Telefunken V76. While so many of today's manufacturers simply make clones of classic gear, Sonic Farm uses classic gear to inspire its designs

but then take it to an entirely new place and, in my opinion, the result is often better than the piece of gear that inspired it.

The Berliner's input is a dual pentode variable gain stage with a regulated bias and EF86/EF806 tubes (Telefunken originally used the now-discontinued EF804). Mic and Line inputs are on separate rear-panel XLR connectors, as are the line outputs. Both inputs feature Cinemag transformers. The mic transformer has a 1:20 ratio (opposed to 1:30 for the V76) and the line transformer has a 1:1 ratio, making it perfect for insertion on the stereo bus to warm up a mix. Microphone input impedance is switchable between 900, 2.4k or 10k ohms. The front panel's instrument inputs feed directly into the first tube stage, which has a 3.9M-ohm input impedance.

The hybrid output stage is a circuit borrowed from the renowned Creamer. The omission of a step-down transformer preserves the sonic character of the first stage and the selectable output lets the user choose either a transformerless or transformer-coupled output. The transformerless



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option utilizes a standard balanced line-driver IC to generate the output whereas the transformer coupled output uses a discrete complementary transistor buffer feeding a Cinemag output transformer. I've found that I nearly always prefer the sound of the transformer output. The Berliner can be ordered with either Ni-Fe alloy core or pure steel core output transformers. My review unit was equipped with the steel core option.

While the Berliner is full of options, it is still intuitive and easy to use, as the controls are laid out logically and are well labeled. Engineers already familiar with Sonic Farm products will immediately feel a familiarity when they begin using the Berliner. Controls include phantom power activation, 10 dB pad activation (pre-transformer), polarity invert and SS/OT, which switches be-

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tween solid state and transformer outputs. The familiar Fat and Air switches that activate 6 dB/octave low and high frequency shelving boosts are also present. Preamp gain and output are adjusted with white "chicken head" knobs. Microphone gain is adjustable from 39-76 dB (29-66 dB with the pad engaged). The line and instrument gain range is 12-48 dB. Of course, the output control will let you turn the mic pre down beyond that, which is the

key to getting the Berliner to sound great; simply turn the pre up more and turn down the output, resulting in beautiful tone for days. The dual-color OL (overload) LED illuminates green when signal is present and red when the front-end stage is overloaded. The H (heater) LED illuminates to indicate the presence of the valve heater supply voltage (approximately 285 V). The three position high-pass filter switch sets the 6 dB/octave filter to off, 80 Hz or 160 Hz and the ATT (attenuate) switch attenuates the output of the valve stage (immediately before the output level control) by 0, 6 or 12 dB.

The Berliner is a versatile pre

that sounds good with any type of mic and any sound source. Over the past several months, I've used it on kick drum, snare drum, toms, overheads, electric and acoustic guitars and piano—it's never been short of fantastic. Keyboards and bass both record wonderfully through the Berliner and, once again, pushing the pre to add some character is the key to making both of these sound sources really shine. I love the added low-frequency depth I've gained by adding one of the Fat settings when recording bass. Vocals sound superb through the pre, too. I had great results recording both male and female vocals through a wide variety

of mics (ADK Z-67, AEA A440 and Sony C800G) and I always achieved exceptional results. I found that using the Air function adds life to the vocal, especially with a darker mic like a Shure SM7B or AEA A440. As with other Sonic Farm boxes, the Berliner works wonders when strapped across the stereo bus of a mix, adding depth, punch and dimension.

The beautiful-sounding Berliner can range from smooth and warm to aggressive and bold with the flip of a switch or turn of a knob, making it an outstanding choice of any producer, engineer or studio in need of expanding its mic preamp collection.