

PRODUCT TESTS

Sonic Farm Audio Creamer Plus Pentode Preamp

By Kevin Dietz



The Creamer Plus – or “C+” as it’s often referred – is a tube and transformer driven two-channel microphone preamp and line-driver (more on that feature later). Designed and manufactured in Vancouver, the C+ features selectable tube modes (triode or pentode), solid state or transformer output, as well as Fat and Air shelving EQ switches, boosting at 400 or 600 Hz, and 2.2 or 7 kHz, respectively. The unit also features a high pass filter, and low/medium/high microphone impedance selection. As you can see, this unit is feature rich, resulting in a variety of tonal options, most of which are derived from the very nature of the circuitry itself.

The C+ design philosophy states: “...we wanted a coloured preamp – something that is transparent yet warm, coloured but not fuzzy or dirty, and fat without losing definition.” To my ears, this is a perfect description of the C+ sound – undoubtedly warm and round, but without being mushy or hazy. The top end is clear, albeit smooth and somewhat rounded, but in a very musical way. The selectable options of two tube modes and solid state or transformer output modes offer additional tonal options – the triode and pentode tube modes, resulting in more even harmonics (triode) or more odd harmonics (pentode), and the transformer output, resulting in a punchier, more focused overall sound. These settings are quickly and easily auditioned on the C+, and allow one to quickly find the combination that best suits the source.

IN USE

All of the technical info is great, but how does it sound? Well, pretty much exactly as described! The Creamer’s fat, warm, thick sound is reminiscent of the classic Neve

80-Series preamp sound, which is what I used as a comparison. The preamps sound big and clear, imparting a fat tone. The Creamer Plus mic preamps excelled on any source, be it drum overheads, grand piano, bass, or vocals. The selection of the transformer output (which I gravitated toward a lot) resulted in a similar character to the classic Neve sound that we all know and love. I found that the Creamer had a similar weight and thickness to the Neve 80 series preamp, but with a more open top end. And, with all of the other tonal options available on the unit (triode/pentode tube modes, high/low boosts, solid state or transformer output), the Creamer Plus stands out with a character of its own.

An interesting feature (or perhaps lack thereof) of the C+ is the omission of a dedicated input level control for the mic preamp. Instead, a -15dB pad and +6dB input transformer gain step-up switch are employed, which also alter the microphone input impedance. A continuously variable output level knob is used to control the level going to your DAW. According to the user manual, the purpose of this design feature is to avoid high-frequency phase shift and to provide a more pure signal path. Although this is not what we’re typically used to as far as gain staging, and does take some getting used to, the resulting input levels are not hotter or quieter than what one would typically expect. The output level knob allows for precise adjustment of signal going to tape.

Another interesting feature of the Creamer Plus is its ability to accept line level signal. The purpose of this design feature is to run program material through the unit’s tube and transformer circuitry, allowing one to take advantage of its inherent sound (useful for warming up

digital signal, i.e. across the mix bus of an ITB or digital FOH mixing set-up).

My first test of the C+ was precisely that – across the mix bus, mixing five rock songs that I had recorded on a Neve 8032 console. The tracks were summed through the console’s monitor section and the Creamer Plus was inserted on the mix bus. Mixing into the C+, I found myself using less bus compression than I normally would to achieve the “glue” effect. The C+ seems to impart a nice subtle compression quality; not in a rhythmic or dynamic way like a bus compressor, but more so in the overall tonality and frequency spectrum. Selecting the output transformer noticeably tightened up the low end and added some punch and low-mid clarity to the mix. Auditioning the Fat and Air EQ functions yielded some nice overall mix EQ options. I ended up using the Air EQ for a subtle shelving boost at 7 kHz.

Applying the Creamer to ITB mixes that were already finished gave the same results, although it was apparent that it was best to mix into the Creamer from the start as opposed to simply applying it to an entire mix after the fact.

Between the Creamer’s two tube modes, two output options, and onboard shelving EQ options, a variety of tonal colours can be achieved – not to mention quickly and easily auditioned. These functions, along with the inherent musical colouration derived from its circuitry and architecture, make the Creamer Plus a great option for any recording engineer seeking a high quality, musically coloured preamp, with the added bonus of use on the mix bus. Clearly, Sonic Farm Audio has designed a unique product that finds itself very useful in the age of digital recording and mixing.

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