

Headway EDB-2 VAP

Acoustic Instrument Preamplifier



If you play multiple instruments with acoustic pickups, you'll need a preamp that not only performs well, but is also supremely versatile...

BOB THOMAS

I reviewed UK-based Headway's EDB-2 acoustic preamp back in SOS October 2014 (<https://sosm.ag/headway-edm1-edb2>), and they've since developed it to bring us the EDB-2 HE in 2020 and, more recently, the 'Equaliser Direct Blender — Valve Alchemy Professional', or the EDB-2 VAP for short. Shorter still would be to call it the VAP, which is what I'll do for the remainder of this review!

Form & Features

The VAP is a two-channel device built into a chunky metal box, with a profusion of audio-related controls on top, and inputs and outputs on its front, right and rear panels. Underneath is a removable valve cover, compartments for batteries that can replace the 18V, 1A external power supply when the valve isn't in use, and a 5/8-inch mic-stand socket. There's also a front-panel on/off/standby switch, an earth lift and a 5V, 0.5A USB-A charging socket.

The tip and ring of channel 1's jack have switchable input impedances (1.2/6.8/20 MΩ) to suit active and passive piezo and magnetic pickups,

and 5- or 10-Volt phantom power can be sent to either. Channel 2's jack has the same impedance switching, but no phantom power. Both

are TRS jacks, but will accept a TS jack too. They're joined by switchable XLR inputs (both off, both on, or channel 2 on and channel 1 off), with switchable 10- or 48-Volt phantom power. A stereo 3.5mm



The various outputs are found on the rear panel, along with USB and external power options. But there's also provision, when the valve isn't in use, for battery power.



■ The inputs are on the front panel, with the jacks and XLRs supporting different phantom power options.

mini-jack aux input feeds the master output directly (post-EQ), but also appears in mono on channel 1 when its XLR isn't active and it has no jack plugged in. Finally, there are insert loops on each channel: a separate send and return on channel 1's TS jacks, and a single TRS (tip-send, ring-return) for channel 2.

On the EDB-1, Headway's Range high-pass filter was a three-position switch, but here it's a pot, to allow continuous frequency sweeps (<40 to 300 Hz) on both channels. Helpful printed waymarks around each knob include bass, baritone guitar, cello, acoustic guitar, bouzouki, mandolin/violin, and, finally, Rock Acoustic. Each channel is also equipped with individual gain controls, output mute switches and Headway's Baxandall Interactive five-band EQs (bass shelf, low mid, high mid, presence and treble shelf), while a single sweepable (50Hz to 6kHz), fixed-gain, variable-Q notch filter can be assigned to either channel.

Exciting Enhancements

The VAP borrows the High Harmonic Enhancer from the EDB-2 HE. This delivers simultaneous boosts of up

to 2dB at 1kHz and from 2.3 to 10 dB at 10kHz, to increase the sense of HF sparkle and definition. This is joined by a new Valve Blend circuit, whose high-quality 12AX7 dual-triode valve runs at a high plate voltage, and creates even-order harmonics. Increasing the Valve Blend's gain/drive creates a growing and attractive

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sense of valve-based warmth and weight, and can help reduce the dreaded piezo 'quack' by slowing the rise of fast transients. Normally, Channels 1 and 2 drive the 12AX7's triodes separately, but in Doubler mode both triodes are driven by channel 1, to allow increased harmonic coloration, or even distortion.

Both channels' signals flow from a shared master level control, through a three-position polarity-inverter switch (off, channel 1 reversed, or both channels reversed) to a mono/stereo

unbalanced TRS line-level output jack, and to the balanced XLR DI A and B outputs. Both DI outputs can be switched pre/post EQ or split, with A post and B pre. Channel 1 is always routed to DI A, and DI B can carry either channel or both. The line out switches automatically between mono and stereo operation; for TS jack plugs, both channels are mixed onto its tip, while for a TRS jack one channel is delivered to the tip, the other to the ring.

Lasting Impressions

There's a bit of a learning curve — familiarising myself with the switched input, phantom power and output routing naturally took a bit of time. But I soon settled in, and then spent a considerable amount more time playing through the VAP with a variety of instruments. It proved every bit as comprehensive and flexible as I'd hoped it would, given my experience of preamps and blenders at this sort of price. Perhaps more importantly, though, I now find myself enamoured of the VAP's sonic performance.

With the valve switched out of the signal path, the VAP sounds just as clean, articulate and detailed as any similarly priced preamp I've heard. Switch in that 12AX7, though, and you're greeted with a beguiling sense of warmth and body, that's also intuitively controllable. The high-frequency enhancement can brighten up a dull set of strings in a way EQ just can't, and is as effective as it is addictive. And at the other frequency extreme, the Range controls make clearing out unwanted clutter simple, and the knobs' instrument 'cheat codes' really help speed things along. If you're in need of such a preamp, then, Headway's EDB-2 VAP is well worth your consideration. ■■■

summary

If you're searching for a good acoustic preamp/DI for multi-instrument stage or studio use, then Headway's EDB-2 VAP really should be somewhere near the top of your shortlist.

£ £599.95.

Discounted to £499.95 when going to press. Prices include VAT.

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■ On the left panel, you'll find insert loops for each channel, including separate send and return jacks for channel 1.

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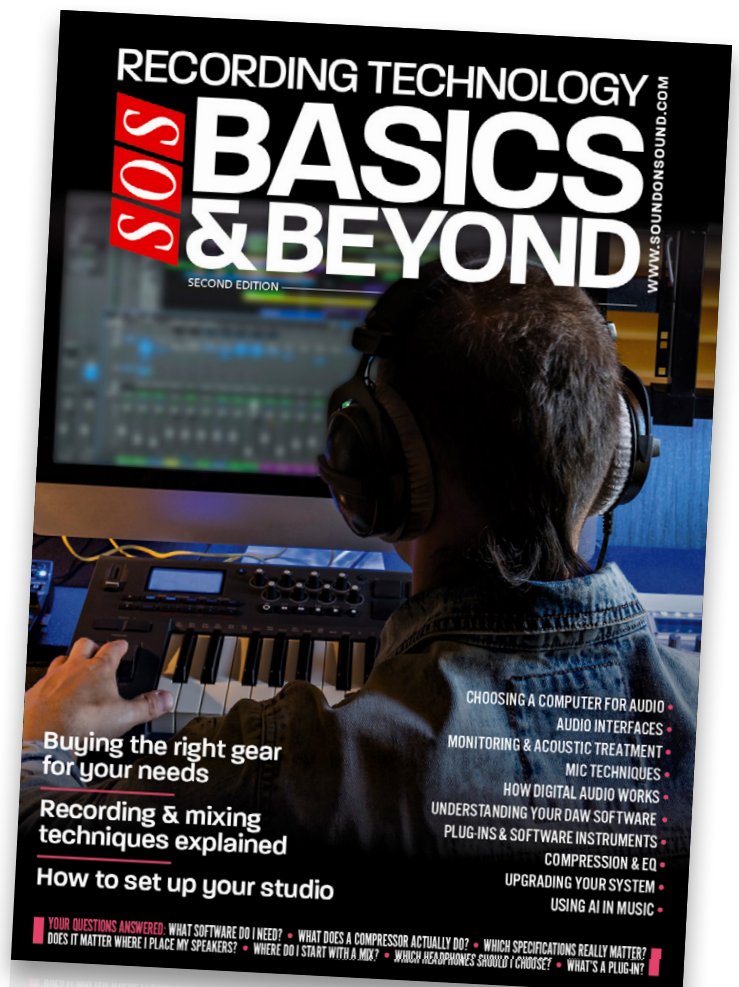
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