

Aphex Model 207

A new affordable 2-channel mic preamp with a few unusual and helpful extra bells and whistles from a manufacturer with an excellent pedigree, has to be a 'must listen'. That'll be the latest Aphex box then.

GEORGE SHILLING



THE 207 IS THE SUCCESSOR to the popular 107 which has been around since 1996. The new model is a diminutive 1U package, solidly built yet fairly light, and retains much of the 107's heart while adding some useful enhancements. The brushed finish is not as silky smooth as it might look in the photos, but at this price I'm not complaining. There is no obvious external evidence of tube circuitry other than the front panel legending – no grills, vents or glowing windows in the case.

The front is neatly designed with a row of pushbuttons and a damped rotary Gain knob for each of the two channels. Next to the Gain knob is a small Trim screw to calibrate the output level. The Power pushbutton has a tiny accompanying LED which lights yellow then goes green after the valve has warmed up; a relay unmutes the output, avoiding embarrassing thumps. All the other buttons light up with an attractive unusual green glow when depressed: these have a light feel but operate very positively, and their status can never be in doubt with the bright green light.

These operate Phantom (power), Polarity (phase reverse), Pad (-20dB), Low Cut (at 70Hz, but also inserts a small boost at 120Hz), and MicLim (see below). A jack socket is provided for an instrument input to each channel. In the centre of the front panel are a pair of vertical LED meters showing output headroom. To have output meters on a mic preamp is a useful luxury; plenty of pricier designs have no meters at all. On the rear are XLRs for Mic Input and Line Output, and handy TRS jack outputs, which may be used simultaneously with the XLR sockets – useful perhaps for sending directly to a latency-free monitoring setup while recording the other outputs.

A small sliding switch for each channel enables setting the output level for -10dB or +4dB operation, although this switches XLR and jack output levels. There are also insert TRS sockets for each channel for inclusion of outboard processing (on the mic inputs only) before the tube output stage.

An extremely detailed and well-written manual describes every feature and design ideal with clear diagrams and illustrations. The text will be understandable by anyone while managing to stay well clear of being patronising. It then describes advanced miking and wiring techniques just as lucidly as many specifically written articles and books, and recommends further reading material. It is downloadable as a PDF file from www.aphex.com – I know because I didn't get a printed one with the box!

Plugging in a condenser mic and recording vocals,

the immediate impression is one of immense clarity and depth. Some of the warmth offered by some of my favoured and more expensive designs is certainly absent, but that is not to say the 207 sounds cold. Far from it, and if not first choice for recording sung vocals, I would have no problem using this as a front end for drums and guitar recording.

Its neutral clarity is ideal for speech, perhaps in broadcast situations, especially with the remarkable MicLim circuit in place, which might avert embarrassing overload situations when the superstar DJ emits an unexpectedly loud exclamation. And probably most of all, this feature is a great bonus for the live sound engineer. MicLim is operated by the right-most button on each channel. This places a peak limiter in circuit, and an LED lights when limiting occurs. It operates just before clipping, and smoothly contains the signal rather than allowing nasty overload distortion to occur. If the front panel Trim pot is correctly adjusted and set up with a tone, one can be confident of making maximum use of the available headroom when recording digitally. A very neat and convenient feature indeed.

The mic preamp features a discrete solid-state transformerless front end, while the tube stage runs at a low voltage in a patented Aphex RPA circuit that 'voices' the preamp. It is difficult to tell exactly what the tube brings to the party, I am sceptical of circuits that don't run valves at high voltage, but as I have said, the character of the unit is extremely pleasant,

clean and neutral. Because of the low voltage, there is only a moderate amount of heat generated, so as I pointed out, no vents are provided on the case, and apart from the usual precautions the manual doesn't stipulate mounting gaps. The valve itself is a 12AT7/ECC81 labelled with the name of Californian supplier ARS (Plenty of bottom end then – Ed).

The instrument input has bags of gain for even the weediest single coil guitar pickup, but my normally unexceptional sounding Stratocaster remained unexceptional sounding – there is none of the enhancement of the more expensive UA 2-610 [see p42] for example.

So to sum up, a great value unit for live and broadcast use. And I would certainly recommend the 207 for a home studio music recording setup where the budget is limited. This is an area where it is always worth spending a good proportion of the total – a good mic preamp will be in service way beyond the life of your current computer recording setup. However, the 207 is a big step up from cheaper units and many console amps. It represents remarkable value, and is difficult to criticise at this price point. ■

Contact

APHEX, US:
Tel: +1 818 767 2929
UK: PURE DISTRIBUTION, +44 207 328 0660

PROS Clean, natural sound; bacon-saving MicLim circuit; compact size; excellent manual; thorough design – good ergonomics

CONS Unexceptional sounding compared to the highest-end units but no cons really: great at the price



EXTRAS The 207 may be the successor to the excellent 107 (pictured) but Aphex is applying itself to the converters arena with the Model 212 AD/DA.

This features the Aphex 'Drift Stabilised' analogue to digital convertor which removes the DC before conversion and offers multiple stereo outputs (AES, SPDIF, and optical) and two separate AES outputs that are mono. For unbalanced applications, optional BNC outputs can be substituted for the AES XLR outputs.

Price is US\$995.