



Universal Audio 710 Twin-Finity

Proving that solid-state and valve preamp stages can reside within the one house, UA's latest box combines the two under the control of a Blend knob. JON THORNTON enjoys the extremes and the in-betweens.

Universal Audio's new box is an example of a growing trend (or perhaps the rediscovery of an old one) towards making preamps that offer a range of tonal shaping possibilities rather than simply viewing the signal path as one that should be preserved as pristinely as possible. Recent examples of similar units include the Chandler Germanium Pre, UA's own 4110 and (going back a bit further) SPL's Gainstation.

It's the last of these units that springs to mind first when making comparisons, as, like the SPL unit, the Twin-Finity employs a solid-state and a tube-based gain stage. But whereas the Gainstation uses these stages serially, the Twin-Finity sends input signals to both simultaneously, and then sums them together at the output. The amount that each of the stages contributes to overall output is infinitely variable between the two via a front panel control — hence the name.

Externally, the Twin-Finity (UK£595 + VAT) is a sturdy looking, half rack width box. It comes complete with a rack mounting kit that allows one or two units to be racked in 2U of space. Alternatively, a separate kit is available as a cost option that creates a carrying strap at the top of the unit for more mobile applications. The back panel is straightforward — separate microphone and line level inputs in and a single balanced output, all on XLR connections. Somewhat unusually for a modern unit of this type, the Twin-Finity has its own internal auto-switching power supply, so no wall warts required here.

The front panel aesthetics show more than a passing nod to older UA designs, with a matte grey enamelled front plate, small toggle switches, mechanical VU meter and black knobs with wide, clear plastic collars. Separate gain and output level controls allow the overall gain structure to be tailored to use (or not) varying amounts of harmonic distortion by driving the twin gain stages hard or gently.

Internally, the architecture is as follows. Input

signals are first met by a solid state, trans-impedance amplifier whose gain is set by the Gain control. The output from this is then fed to two separate, phase aligned, further gain stages. One of these is also a solid-state trans-impedance design, the other is a single-ended Class A triode tube stage, based around the ubiquitous 12AX7. The outputs of both stages pass to the output stage with its own output level control via a Blend control that determines whether the output is entirely solid-state, entirely tube, or anywhere in between.

In addition to the core gain, output level and blend controls, the front panel also features switches for phantom power, a -15dB pad (only on the microphone input), mic or line input selection, polarity reverse and a high-pass filter. A front panel TRS jack also allows the connection of a high impedance input via its own J-FET buffer. Metering is provided by a mechanical VU, which shows level post the output level control and is calibrated to 0VU = +4dBm. The meter can also be switched to monitor what UA terms 'Drive', which really means how hard the initial gain stage is being driven before it passes to the downstream tube and solid-state stages. Rather than indicating this in terms of level, UA has

opted to show this as the percentage of THD at this stage. When switched to this mode 0VU represents 1.2% THD on a 1kHz sine wave and -10VU is equal to 0.4% THD. This sounds strange in theory but is actually quite a useful gauge in practice, although it's no substitute for using your ears at the end of the day (*Or at any other time. Ed*).

In use, the Twin-Finity performs completely predictably. It's quiet and clean when not driven hard and opens up the sound of pretty much any microphone you plug into it very well. What's on offer here is essentially a very progressive shift in tonality as you move between the extremes of the solid-stage and tube stages. Even at low levels of drive there's a distinct shift — the solid-state stage sounds slightly harder in the low mids but with a very open high-end and the tube stage softens the high-end response and warms up the low mids nicely. This is very noticeable on vocals. For example, when paired with a 414 (which can tend to sound a little unflattering on some voices) using just the tube stage softened things up nicely while still preserving good levels of detail. Equally, a Sony C-800, which can tend to sound a little on the dark side in the same application, sounded just that little bit tighter and harder in the low mids when using just the solid-state stage.

With vocals I found that, more often than not, I was tending to use the Blend control at its extremes but the real flexibility of the Twin-Finity is more apparent on other sources. Acoustic guitar, this time with a C451 in a close position, benefited from careful adjustment of the Blend control, giving a slight warmth to the overall tonality but not losing any of the transient bite. Of course, it's easy to overcook things by driving the initial gain stage a little too hard, although this is far more apparent with the tube stage than the solid-state stage. It almost seems as if the solid-state stage increases its THD content very consistently right up to maximum level, whereas the tube stage adds it smoothly up to a point and then dives straight into guitar-pedal overdrive mode.

If I have one reservation it's that the Twin-Finity can sound quite strained quite quickly at the extremes of its gain range, almost as if it could use a little bit more headroom than it has. In fact, the specs show a total gain range of 70dB which I have no reason to doubt — it's just that the last 10dB or so sound ever so slightly squashed and I'm not just hearing tube compression here.

Overall, the Twin-Finity is a very flexible unit. It's clean, there's clarity and openness there if you need it but so also is added character and warmth and the Blend control helps to get the exact balance of the two you need for any given application. ■

Contact

UNIVERSAL AUDIO:
Website: www.uaudio.com
UK, Source: +44 208 962 5080

PROS

Very flexible sound; compact size and range of mounting options; interesting metering options; Blend control gives a wide range of tonal possibilities.

CONS

Sounds like it could use a little more headroom at times; THD added by tube stage could work a little more progressively towards the extremes.

EXTRAS

The 1176AE anniversary edition celebrates a decade since UA's refounding by Bill Putnam Jnr and combines the best of the 'bluestripe' and E revisions while adding the lower 2:1 compression ratio found on the 176. A new 'slo' attack mode gives the 1176AE the potential for classic and individual compression effects.

