



Warm Audio WA12

Setting out to distance yourself from transparent and characterless preamps is no mean feat if you're attempting to shave off the pennies as well. **JON THORNTON** says it's in the name.

Relative newcomer Warm Audio from the US was borne out of founder Bryce Young's desire to put high-end performance into the hands of those whose budgets might not stretch to the usual high-end price tags. Having built custom designs for a smaller customer base with deeper pockets for some years, the mission was to recreate these designs at a lower price point, without

any compromise or corner cutting. To date, the company has a single product — the single channel WA12 mic preamp — although this is now available as a rack mountable unit as looked at here or as a 500 series module.

You get a clear feel for the intended design direction from the name. 'Warm Audio' speaks for itself — before you even plug it in you know that an ultra-

transparent, uncoloured sound isn't going to be on the cards. And the '12' is a nod to the electronic design being strongly inspired by API's classic 312 preamp. The discrete electronics (not a surface mount component in sight) are sandwiched by custom Cinemag transformers on both input and output, and the whole thing is packaged in a half-width, 1U box. Off-the-shelf solutions for rack mounting one or two units are available from third parties and the casework handily features additional screw taps on the underside to work with these.

The overall look and feel tends towards the utilitarian, and while the bright orange front panel may not be to everyone's taste, you certainly won't have trouble finding the WA12 in a darkened room. The whole thing is exceptionally well screwed together with no sense that any corners have been cut in this department. The rear panel provides a mic input on a combination XLR/TRS jack socket and balanced line outputs on separate XLR and TRS connectors, allowing a good deal of flexibility for a variety of situations. Power is supplied via an external 24 volt supply.

An additional high-impedance input is available on the front panel for DI purposes, together with latching pushbuttons with separate status LEDs for the various functions on offer. Three of these provide the usual staples of a -20dB pad, polarity reverse and phantom power. You also get a switch that activates the front panel high impedance input (and simultaneously de-activates the rear mic input). Slightly unusually the Hi-Z input is routed through the full signal path, including the input transformer. Finally, there's the curiously labelled 'Tone' switch. In reality, engaging this lowers the load impedance of the input from 600ohms to 150ohms. In addition to the expected 6dB increase in total gain (switching it in gives a maximum gain of +71dB as opposed to the +65dB on offer with it



switched out), the succinct but useful manual points out that this may also result in significant tonal shifts with most microphones and inputs.

Gain is a single stage affair, controlled by a suitably retro looking knob. It's not a switched control but a variable pot, but it does have multiple detents that to some extent allow reasonably precise steps to be recalled. This is the first point at which you feel that the WA12 has had to be built to a price. Still, the decisions about where money needs to be spent and where it can be saved without compromising absolute sonic performance seem to be sensible. The same decision-making process has also clearly had an effect in the metering department, as there isn't any at all — not even a simple signal present/overload indicator. Granted, most users will be able to meter with some degree of confidence at other points in the chain, but I prefer having at least minimal indication for basic logical fault-finding/patch checking purposes.

Plugged in and patched up with the usual AKG C414-XLS as a benchmark reference, and first

impressions are impressive with male vocals. The WA12 is quiet and very open sounding, yet also manages to live up to its name. With the Tone switch off, there's a definite sense of additional weight and smoothness to the low end, but nothing that overwhelms the clarity of the highs and mids that is very much in evidence. Punch in the Tone button and there's a dip in the absolute HF detail, but what seems to be a slight sharpening of the mid range. It's actually quite a nice pairing with the often hard sounding 414, especially with male vocals.

Switching to a dynamic mic (Beyer M201 close on a guitar cab) and there's plenty of gain for a mic not renowned for its high output level — things sound very clean and controlled to a certain point. Drive the output stage a little harder though and you get a progressive onset of distortion that in its early stages could be useful for certain sounds. Take things too far and things can sound nasty, but there's a definite sweet spot ripe for exploitation if harmonic distortion is your thing. The tonal effects caused by dropping the

input impedance are also more pronounced with the Beyer 201 — there's the same slight HF dip and mid-range sharpening but the effect is more noticeable.

For completeness, I also tried the front panel high impedance input as a DI for an electric bass with very impressive results. It compares very favourably (perhaps unsurprisingly) with dedicated active DIS costing nearly as much — big sound, plenty of HF transient detail and bags of weight.

The WA12 (UK£316 + VAT) is, all in all, a very appealing box. There's a flexibility to its potential application that belies its straightforward appearance and design. In many ways it does exactly what it says on the tin (although the external PSU means that it doesn't ever really run that warm!), and brings colour in more ways than one to your studio. It's also a triumph of function over form — you really do feel that money has been spent where it matters the most — and as a result it punches way above its weight. ■

PROS

Flexible, characterful sound; built like a tank; price/performance.

CONS

External PSU only; no metering.

EXTRAS

The WA12 500 Series mic pre features 71dB of gain, custom Cinemag input and output transformers, the Tone button, 48V phantom power, 20dB pad, mic level balanced input and balanced outputs plus a 2MΩ Hi-Z input on the front panel.

Contact

WARM AUDIO, US

Web: www.warmaudio.com

Distributor: Nova Distribution, Tel: +44 203 589 2530

Web: www.nova-distribution.co.uk