

Cranborne Audio Camden 500

GEORGE SHILLING enjoys this versatile first product from a new British team

We met one of the four ex-Soundcraft employees behind this dynamic new company in *Resolution* V17.4 and the Camden 500 is the first product to land. The Camden is a British-built, clean and transparent mic preamp with 'MOJO': two distinct variable characters and flavours of filtering and harmonics saturation.

The module appears to be very precisely constructed and feels expensive, with a particularly smart front panel. The legending is necessarily small to fit the 500 Series format, but the switches and controls feel smooth and precise. It was designed from the ground up to perform well with the limited power available in the 500 format. Circuitry is all discrete; there are no transformers, but the all analogue MOJO circuit aims to emulate the character of valves and transformers using filters, some of which are inductive.

About half of the circuitry is devoted to the MOJO section, and this control is at the top of the panel, with a knob to vary the effect which reassuringly clicks Off at full counter-clockwise. Underneath is a toggle for MOJO STYLE with a choice of Thump or Cream; miniature LEDs for Signal (green) and Clip (red) are located alongside.

The HPF is a 12dB per octave filter with the -3dB point at 80Hz, which is great for keeping vocals clean. It also works well in combination with the bass-boosting Thump MOJO for tightening up the bottom end. Next to this is a Polarity toggle, then a rotary Gain switch which has 12 stiffly clicked positions with up to a generous 68dB available. Another pair of toggles select 48V phantom power and a three-position Input Type for Hi-Z/Line/Mic. This doesn't select physical inputs (the front jack overrides the rear 500 rack input) but changes input impedance. In Line mode unity gain is with the gain knob fully down. At the bottom of the panel is the Jack Hi-Z input socket.



/ All-discrete circuitry with no transformers

Cranborne generously provided a pair for stereo use, so firstly I used them as mic preamps for a pair of 4038s over a kit. Turning up the gain (mainly to hear the drummer talk!) I was struck by how clean the gain was at very high gain settings. But the kit sounded especially 'big' when a bit of Thump was introduced. I was soon tempted to crank the MOJO full up for a big warm Bonham-like sound, and we were rocking.

On a cellos subgroup, the extra depth and warmth from Thump was often welcome, but sometimes a little bit of crunchy Cream was useful in context. Soloing the cello

revealed a bit of valvey mid-range distortion which made me wince slightly, but they were great within the mix!

Creamy flavour — but no tubes!

Interestingly, increasing MOJO in Cream mode seems to not only add a gently crunchy glow to the upper mids, but also scoop the lower mids, seemingly centred around 200-300Hz — great for all kinds of signal. There is no EQ going on here as such. All this is achieved by phase cancellations, with slight treble boost resulting from harmonics which are not cancelling! The designers set out to emulate the effects of valves and transformers, and what they have achieved is truly remarkable — it would be easy

to believe that Cream is a flavour of valve 'overdrive'. There are no expensive valves or transformers in the Camden 500, and with careful research, Cranborne managed to source many components from outside the usual audio industry supply chains, keeping costs low without impacting on quality.

Switching the MOJO circuit off provides incredibly clean and quiet gain for any kind of microphone, and the Camden 500 impressively out-performs more expensive preamps in this respect, with a frequency response up to 200kHz and incredibly low noise and distortion. In use with a U87Ai on vocals it seemed perhaps even more crystal clear than an API, with a completely 'un-clogged' sound.

Thumpy MOJO on a mix

The 1.5 Megohms Hi-Z input seemed to have a touch more natural openness than rival preamps, and the integrity of the signal is unquestionable. Winding in some Thump MOJO adds a fantastic ridiculously deep bass character, like a sub-bass harmonic generator. However, even with maximum Thump, the character never seems gimmicky or over-hyped, and far better than trying to EQ in non-existent character. Cream MOJO leads you richly towards zingy Peter Hook territory without sounding quite as nasty. It's great for enhancing already distorted guitars too. Flicking in the HPF works well — in combination with either mode.

A pair of these across a mix enhances the bass wonderfully with a touch of Thump, although you need to be careful in Cream mode not to make things too crunchy. But a small touch of that gels things very pleasantly, hugely improving mix coherence in my experiments.

The Cranborne team have a varied combination of skills and experience which seems to have resulted in a terrific launch product — with a remarkably competitive price: £299 including VAT. If you want a top class flexible preamp and enhancer you'd be hard-pressed to find a better alternative at any price. 📌

resolution/VERDICT

PROS Clean or harmonically enhancing mic preamp, excellent sonic performance even at high gain, beautifully built, excellent value.

CONS No 48V warning LED.

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