

SPL GainStation 1

High-end microphone preamps came in two flavours: valve and solid-state. SPL's new GainStation gives you the best of both worlds. **Huw Price** listens in...

The GainStation 1 is a fully discrete – transistor and valve – Class A microphone preamp with transformer-balanced input and output. It also doubles as an active DI box, so you can use it for synths as well as microphones, bass, electric guitars, and so on. As optional extras, SPL offers top-quality Lundahl transformers and 44.1kHz–96kHz digital converters; these add considerably to the price, but many professionals would consider them worth it.

The right connections

The GainStation has all the features you'd expect to find on a top-quality piece of gear, including mic/Hi-Z input switching, 50Hz high-pass filter, phase switch, and phantom power. Ribbon and vintage mic enthusiasts will also welcome the three-way input impedance selector switch. SPL recommends 10K for most sources (especially dynamic microphones) to ensure maximum signal transfer. Valve condensers might be better suited to the 1.2K setting, with older ribbon designs (offering low output impedances) going directly into 200Ω.

A switch selects two types of limiting: Peak and FET. The former uses diodes to convert transient peaks into a type of saturation. The effect is intended to be subtle and transparent and is recommended for drums and percussion. The FET setting interacts with the valve to create a compression effect for vocals, piano, guitar, and so on.

Around the back of the unit are balanced XLR connections for microphone input and analogue output. Two jack sockets provide Hi-Z input and a second, balanced analogue output. For unbalanced operation, simply use a mono jack plug. Another jack socket, labelled AD IN2, enables an external signal to be connected to the digital converter if that module is fitted.

Digital output comes in two forms: S/PDIF and optical. Sync input accepts an external signal to



control the SPL's sample rate. Alternatively, the four sample rates can be selected at the rear of the unit using a pair of push switches.

Action Station

Valves have a unique sound. The distortion they produce comes on gradually and the harmonics generated sound more musical. Transistor distortion is instantaneous and harsher, but well-engineered solid-state preamps can sound more transparent than valve-based equivalents. In an ideal world you would want to own both types – and with the GainStation you can.

There are three gain controls labelled Clean, Tube, and Output. Turning the Tube control fully anti-clockwise bypasses the tube, but, alternatively, you can turn it full up then fine-tune the gain using the Clean control. We made a series of recordings using Neumann CMV563 and Beyer 160 ribbon mics to compare the SPL with a 1950's Telefunken V72 and a Drawmer 1960 preamp. With the Clean and Tube controls set equally, the GainStation was noticeably clearer and cleaner than the Drawmer, and sounded very similar to the V72.

The SPL had a little more zing in the top end (without ever sounding harsh) and was a little more punchy and taut down low – though the V72's sound was smoother and

somehow more flattering. That said, the GainStation had incredible depth and dynamic range. So, if you're looking for clinical accuracy and saturated tube warmth – with all points in between – the GainStation should do the job brilliantly. **mtm**

SUMMARY

TECH SPECS

- Frequency response <1Hz–125kHz (Clean Gain 30dB, Tube Gain off, output level 0dB, +/- 0.5dB)
- THD+N 0.0005% (Clean Gain 24dB, Tube Gain off, output level +6dB, 20–22kHz, +25dBu out)
- Noise 95.4dBu (Clean Gain 10dB, Tube Gain off, output level 0dB, 20–22kHz, A-weighted)

KEY FEATURES

- Optional digital converter and limiter
- Switchable input impedance

WHY BUY

- Excellent sound quality
- Comprehensive controls and features

WALK ON BY

- Some vital connections hidden at rear
- Noise floor is higher in tube mode

VERDICT

The GainStation enables you to sculpt your sound by blending the transistor and valve circuitry together. Class 'A' in every sense.



MUSIC TECH MAGAZINE
Recommended

GAINSTATION 1

Manufacturer **SPL**

Price **£645 (without converters) £765 (with converters)**

Lundahl Transformer Option £99 (input) £99 (output)

Contact **Sonic Distribution 01525 840400**

www.soundperformancelab.com

METHOD SPOT

Best of both worlds

The SPL GainStation 1 combines discrete solid-state circuitry with a bypassable valve stage, enabling you to set the preamp up for clean, clinical accuracy or warm, harmonically enriched valve tones. So, you can flatter dodgy sound sources that need a little help or capture the good ones that don't.