

Drawmer HQ precision preamplifier/DAC

Drawmer has launched its first preamplifier and digital-to-analogue converter.

Russ Hepworth-Sawyer is first to investigate this new direction for the company

The DS201 Dual Noise Gate and the DL241 Auto-Compressor are veritable classics that remain stable workhorses in many an analogue studio across the world. In recent years, Drawmer, like so many other outboard manufacturers, has been moving into the digital domain. There are now emulations of Drawmer's analogue processors for Pro Tools and products such as the A2D2 analogue-to-digital converter in the Digital Management series.

But here's something else new: Drawmer has released a high-quality preamplifier and digital-to-analogue converter system called the HQ – and this perhaps signals a new direction for the Rotherham-based outfit.

The HQ is a beautifully made unit with a highly polished, almost mirror-like black fascia, four imposing knobs and some impressive white backlights. This unit wouldn't look out of place in a hifi purist's cabinet. However, it is at the rear of the unit where things get really interesting.

The HQ boasts some nine stereo inputs. On the analogue side there is one balanced and three unbalanced inputs, one of which can be switched to phono input to accept a turntable. On a digital tip there are two AES inputs, one on a standard XLR, and another on a BNC connection; one Toslink input plus an SPDIF input on a standard RCA connection all able to convert up to 192kHz/24 bits. In addition, a computer can be connected directly to the HQ via USB for 16-bit and up to 48kHz processing.

An input trim at the rear (one less element to clutter the fascia) allows for some rudimentary balancing of levels between different input



sources and provides the options of -10dB, 0dB or +10dB. For output attenuation, Drawmer also goes a step further to allow you to open up the HQ and move some jumper settings to achieve a maximum attenuation of -21dB, or indeed set the unit to provide a fixed output.

The HQ's output options are equally flexible, providing a standard stereo balanced output on XLR, plus a set of unbalanced phono outputs corresponding to the Speakers A & B on the front of the unit. An SPDIF Thru feature works like a MIDI Thru and provides a pre-fader, bypass path for digital signals.

There are two headphone outputs, one of which mutes the speakers. Again, Drawmer has provided some control of this through jumper switches inside the unit.

At the time of writing, the remote control was scheduled for release "before Christmas". Kieron Clough of Drawmer told *PSNE* that the HQR, as it will be called, will control up to four units via an Ethernet daisy-chain to manage either 5.1 or 7.1

operation. Though the remote's design is not set in stone, Clough advises that it will also have dim/mute/mono select, snapshot volume presets and switchable input select – everything you'd expect in a pro monitoring unit.

Correspondingly, Drawmer will be bringing out a preamp unit without the imposing knobs on the front for those wishing to use it as a monitor controller solely with the HQR remote.

Kicking in the unit, you start to notice some of the details that make the HQ slightly different. First up are the 'Safety Features' as the manual describes them. This unit has been designed to ensure that your monitors never have to experience loud, unexpected transients again. As you turn the unit on the volume fades up or if the volume is above half way the HQ will expect you to turn it all the way down to disengage the safety mute function.

Additionally, Drawmer has included a relay-based volume control to maintain equal level in both the left and the right channels. However,

the Drawmer designers did not want the chattering that relay-based controls can supply as the volume is altered or any incremental steps. To overcome this there are two signal paths in their 'SilentRelay' volume management: one is through the relays setting the volume, and the other is a VCA path you hear as the level changes. As you move the volume control there's a reassuring clunk as the relay moves the signal from the main path to the VCA to provide you with a seamless transition. As you let go of the volume control, the relay switches the path back. If it were not for one audible relay switching, you'd not know this was happening as there is no distinguishable change in level or sound quality that I could detect.

I was not anticipating the HQ to be any kind of sonic paradigm shift. However I was immediately blown away by the sound quality. Drawmer claims this quality comes down not to the digital side of things necessarily but to how they've applied years of traditional audio experience. The analogue path and how it connects to the digital conversion cuts no corners, Drawmer tells us. The sound was refreshingly clear with fantastic depth. The dynamics in the playback music suddenly leapt out of my speakers, giving a different perspective to other DACs I've heard.

Those in need of a solid preamplifier and DAC will enjoy the striking looks, detail to design and refined sound as the unit stands today. Those in need of a new monitor controller would be foolish to overlook the Drawmer HQ but will benefit from waiting until the HQR remote combination is available later in 2010. 🍷

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

- ▶ Sample rates up to 192kHz/24-bit (USB computer connection limited to 16-bit and 48kHz max)
- ▶ Frequency response: 20Hz-20kHz
- ▶ Total harmonic distortion and noise: -100dB
- ▶ Crosstalk: Less than 100dB
- ▶ Dynamic range: 113.5dB unweighted

PROS AND CONS

Pros

- ▶ Fantastic sound quality
- ▶ Flexible variety of analogue and digital inputs
- ▶ Striking looks
- ▶ Build quality
- ▶ Innovative features such as SilentRelay volume management

Cons

- ▶ No mono or dim buttons on supplied unit
- ▶ The one relay in the HQ might be a little noisy for some
- ▶ The HQR remote not yet available