Millennia HV3-R

The HV3-R is the latest in the range of Millennia Media microphone preamplifiers to use the company's highly rated HV-3 circuit. The 'R' suffix refers to the fact that this eight-channel device is the first to offer remote control — via MIDI or over Ethernet. JON THORNTON explores.

Internally, the HV3-R employs the same design philosophy and exacting construction methods as the other models in the HV-3 series — no transformers in the audio path, a matched high-speed discrete transistor octet for each channel, the highest quality audio and power wiring, and a hefty toroidal power supply. Externally, though, the HV3-R is something of a departure from the nuclear blast-proof aesthetic of the HV3-C and HV3-D. Gone are the mil-spec switches and buttons and those wonderfully weighty, tactile knobs. They're replaced by a couple of small LCD displays, a rotary encoder, and a matrix of illuminated buttons with associated status LEDs.

Powering the unit up and doing some exploratory poking around in local control mode proves that this arrangement is straightforward and self-explanatory. A channel is selected by pressing one of a row of eight select buttons — the currently selected channel button illuminates to confirm this. The rotary encoder is then used to set the gain for that channel. Gain level is indicated above the selected channel on the larger of the two LCD displays. Gain range is normally +8 to +69dB in 1dB steps, although a range of +8 to +80dB is available on request as a no-charge option.

A column of function switches to the right hand side of the rotary encoder allows phantom power, polarity reverse and a -14dB pad to be applied to the selected channel with status LEDs above each channel clearly showing these modes. A link function allows any permutation of the eight channels to be ganged together in terms of gain and mute. Altering the gain on linked channels applies upwards or downwards offsets to whatever gain level was set prior to the link being set — meaning that a group of linked channels can maintain a particular set of gain offsets, or can be locked together with identical gain settings, depending on the application.

Turning attention to the rear panel shows eight XLRs for signal input, and another eight XLRs for signal output. A number of options are available, including an expansion card that offers two more sets of buffered, balanced outputs on DB-25 connectors. Setting links on this card can also determine whether either of the two additional sets of outputs follow the main outputs in terms of polarity or pad switching (i.e. follow the front panel settings) or not.

Other options include DPA 130V powered inputs, and the ADR-96 option card, which offers eight channels of A-D conversion and was fitted to the review unit. The ADR-96 can work at sample rates of 44.1, 48, 88.2 or 96kHz and can use its own internal clock or slave to an external one (AES sync or TTL Word clock). Somewhat annoyingly, changing the sample rate and clock source can only be achieved by setting jumpers on the expansion card, which involves removing it from the main unit. Digital output consists of four channel pairs of AES3 on a DB25 connector.

As a standalone unit, the HV3-R works well enough from an ergonomic point of view. My only criticism is the rather convoluted menu system that accesses setup and utility functions via the smaller LCD display and the usual up/down/left/right cursor and Enter keys — doing anything via this really does feel like you're trying to wallpaper your hallway from outside through the letterbox. And signal level metering on the unit itself is pretty basic, with a tiny seven-segment bargraph icon displayed on the main LCD display for each of the eight channels.

But in some ways these aren't entirely fair criticisms, as the whole point of the unit is to be remotely controlled in most applications and here you have two options. The first is to control the unit over MIDI, the protocol for which it is designed to work out of the box with Pro Tools, as the HV3-R emulates a Digidesign PRE in this respect. Setup for this is straightforward and easy from the Pro Tools end and simply involves navigating the setup menu of the HV3-R to switch to MIDI Remote mode and specify a MIDI channel. Once this is done everything works as advertised.

In common with some other (non-Digidesign) remote preamplifiers that offer similar functionality, there are some caveats. For example, some of the functions on the Pro Tools GUI that relate specifically to the Digidesign PRE (impedance switching, HPF) simply aren't supported, so clicking them has no effect. And the gain range on the Pro Tools GUI starts at 0dB, whereas the minimum gain of the HV3-R is 8dB, so the first few gain steps have no effect on the unit. Multiple HV3-Rs can be addressed in this fashion, subject to appropriate MIDI interfacing capabilities, up to a maximum of nine units.

The other option is to use the supplied AE Logic software (PC only) to communicate with the HV3-R over Ethernet. With the use of standard routers/switches, this software can control up to 48 HVR-3s simultaneously. Each unit under control has its own unique IP address set using the onboard menu system, and appears in a status window on the PC when the software is running. Different colours represent different states (on-line, off-line, conflicting IP addresses, etc.) Each unit has its own control GUI offering control over all parameters, but with the added advantage of clearer metering, on-screen faders to set gain, and the ability to name channels with meaningful text. Seeing more than two units on a normal size screen gets a little cluttered, and so an overview mode is also provided of all units with less detail on offer but still eminently useable. Add to this the facility to set up named link groups and scenes, which can nearly instantly recall entire setups for multiple units, and you get an incredibly powerful front-end for remote control — although one that is probably slightly overblown for control of a single unit.

Sonically the unit is just fabulous, sounding exactly like my HV3-C. Open, quiet, transparent — what I've come to think of as an almost aggressive neutrality to its sound. Listen hard at the very extremes of the gain range and you occasionally hear a tiny 'mute' to the signal as the gain range is stepped but this is only really apparent at the extremes with no signal present, and certainly doesn't ever start to near the zipper effect that you get on some other remote preamplifiers.

As a standalone 8-channel preamplifier the HV3-R is deeply impressive enough. When you add to that the flexibility of two different types of remote control operation, the sheer scalability of the system to deliver a whopping 384 channels of operation (if your pockets are deep enough), and Millennia Media has succeeded in delivering a product that will integrate seamlessly into a variety of modern production scenarios, while remaining true to the core values of that pristine audio path. ■

PROS No compromise approach to sound quality; range of remote control options; hugely scalable.

CONS Fiddly on-board menu system; need to remove A-D card to set clock and sample rate options; on-board metering pretty basic.

EXTRAS The TD-1 Twin Direct DI box includes advanced ReAmp technology for sending recorded DI guitars to amplifiers and the HV-3 hybrid solid state microphone preamplifier.

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