

New Gear

The Consummate Pro

GENZ BENZ SHEN PRO ACOUSTIC AMPLIFIER

BY EMILE MENASCHÉ

WHISPER THE WORDS “tube amp” to an otherwise responsible adult electric guitarist, and chances are you’ll see him turn into a pile of covetous mush. Unplugged types, on the other hand, are not slaves to the tube thrill, and so acoustic guitar amp manufacturers generally opt for the lighter weight and cleaner sound of solid-state circuits.

There are, however, hybrid acoustic amps that rely both on tube and solid-state circuits, and one very fine one indeed is the Genz Benz Shen Pro, a new entry in the company’s Shenandoah line of amplifiers. This is one versatile box that allows for a range of great tones, and much of the credit goes to the tube circuit. Once I had a basic sound I liked, I was able to elicit many colors from the guitar by changing my attack, switching from fingers to pick, for example, or by varying the dynamics. With some acoustic guitar amps, such change requires you to reset the controls, but not the Benz; it responded well to every nuance of my playing.

The Shenandoah Acoustic Pro features two channels, each of which pumps 100 watts into 4 ohms (70 into 8 ohms). The closed-back cabinet houses a custom-designed, 12-inch Neodymium cast-frame loudspeaker (rated at 300 watts RMS) and a compression bullet tweeter. The tweeter can be set at full, off, or a less bright -6dB setting (my favorite), a collection of options that makes the Benz as effective with more “electric”-sounding guitars—e.g. magnetic pickup-equipped archtops (tweeter off)—as it is with standard roundhole flat-tops (tweeter on).

The Shenandoah’s crowning glory is its preamp configuration. The amp actually boasts two preamps per channel: one with a solid-state FET circuit, the other with a 12AX7 tube. Both branches of the preamp are active and available at the same time, and there is a rotary



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www.genzbenz.com

control that allows you to balance the two.

The tube side generates a tone as thick as hot fudge. Yet it boasts high headroom—it’s not there to provide crunch, as it would in an electric guitar amp, but to add warmth and the subtle compression that is the essence of tube magic.

The difference between tube and FET is not that one is “warm” while the other is “cold”; far from being sterile, the solid-state circuit sounds tight, articulate and punchy. With the bend set at about 50/50, the tone is dramatic, big and full, yet with plenty of detail, with awe-inspiring low end. But setting the sound at full tube can also be effective, especially for jazz applications, while a greater tilt towards the FET is good if you need to cut through the mix without dominating the midrange.

The front panel could not be better organized. Each channel has an identical layout that includes unbalanced 1/4-inch and balanced XLR inputs; a phase-reverse switch; gain; a mix control for the tube and FET preamps; three-band EQ; and effects send.

The EQ—low (fl15dB shelving at 85Hz); mid (fl12dB peaking at 250Hz–5kHz); and high (fl12dB shelving at 8kHz)—is easy to use and ably covers the acoustic guitar’s broad sonic territory. When the tweeter is on its higher setting, the highs can be dominant and the sound can get hissy, so it’s nice to be able to dial them back without causing the guitar to sound muffled.

The onboard 24-bit digital effects are provided by Alesis, and include that manufacturer’s usual range of reverbs, modulation effects (chorus, flanger, etc.) and delay.

Frankly, the first plate reverb was so appropriate for the acoustic guitar that I felt little need to change it. Both channels receive the same effect, and there’s no footswitch for toggling effects settings. You can also add an outboard processor through the effects loop.

The Shenandoah delivers mono sound, but you can run it as a true stereo amp by adding an extension cabinet. The

back panel boasts an impressive range of external connections. Along with the aforementioned effects loop, there are three sets of outputs (channel 1, channel 2 and a combination of both), all

with balanced XLR and unbalanced 1/4-inch connections and three speaker outs for connecting various cabinets. A set of aux inputs let you blend an external source such as a CD player. The onboard fan can be turned off when your environment demands greater quiet.

Sturdy, attractive, well-designed—all these describe the Shenandoah Pro. But the unit’s greatest quality is the tone it produces. It is simply one of the best-sounding acoustic guitar amps in its price range. ■

