EBS MicroBassII

Publicerad i: Musiker Magazinet nr 5 2004

Författare: Ulf Widlund

It is about ten years since EBS offered their first outboard bass preamp, the MicroBass. It was designed as a small preamp, meant to be clamped onto your strap and be a flexible and a high-quality alternative to onboard active electronics. With the new MicroBass II EBS are now targeting bass players who need a compact working tool, that can fit into the gigbag and can get the job done at a rehearsal, a gig and when playing at home in the kitchen.

The MicroBass II hardware is of premium EBS quality as it is fitted in a sturdy metal casing using the same type of controls and knobs featured on their amplifier heads and combos. The knobs feel just right, adding a sense of solidity.

The MicroBass II operates with three different sections: a preamp, a line box, and an A/B-box. The preamp section has two channels, which can be combined in different ways by using the A/B-box function.

Channel A is equipped with an extremely sensitive input, with approximately ten times higher impedance than a normal input. If you have an acoustic instrument with a piezo pickup fitted on the bridge this is exactly what you need to get an airy, open and natural tone. When you connect a standard instrument cable to the input, a blue indicator shows that the channel is active. The signal strength can be boosted up to 30 dB via the Boost-control. It is normally used with as much level that you can without any distortion. However, it is not designed for that and the distortion obtainable does not sound as good as the one available from Channel B.

Channel A features two adjustable and one fixed filter. The bass control knob works in the lower register and the treble relatively high, and together both affect the midrange. The fixed filter is a bright filter, activated by a switch. "Frequency wise" it's in a slightly higher range than the treble, but is a different type with a fixed boost.

The last feature of this channel is a switch called Enhanced Filter Mode. It is a smart and useful function that alters how the treble control works, so it not only governs the treble frequency but also the mids (se below).

The B channel is designed differently and has a normal impedance input with a red indicator light. The channel is similar to and utilize the same Class A emulating circuitry as in EBS' MultiDrive effect pedal on which the Drive control governs the gain/overdrive. Frequencies below 250 Hz (bass and low mids) are unaffected to achieve a warmer distortion sound but with a distinct low end. To be able to control the sound characteristics of the overdrive sound a sweepable mid filter and an Edge filter has been added. The middle frequency filter is a close copy to the one used in

the Fafner amp head while the Edge filter function is a completely new design. It controls the high mid frequencies and lower top end.

Finally, the last features are the Tube Simulator, an effects loop and a volume control, used for both channels simultaneously. The Tube Simulator is of the set kind and gives a soft limiting effect on higher signal levels. The effects loop has separate send & return jacks and a balance control (FX-mix) to control how the loop works. In maximum position, the loop function will be in series and with other settings; you mix it with the external signal, then functioning as a parallel loop. The volume control governs the signal from both the unbalanced output and the headphones out, the last is of the mini plug type.

The Linebox section features a balanced XLR output with a ground lift function and a speaker simulator. Both are activated with separate switches. The A/B switch is a sturdy footswitch (A/B), and a smaller switch (A+B) governs how the A/B section works. If the A+B is off and an instrument is connected to the A Channel, the footswitch function will toggle between Channel A and B. With the A+B switch active the channels will be combined. With one instrument connected to channel A, the A/B switch selects between channel A or channel A+B. If you use two instruments (A and B) the A/B-switch is not used and the two instrument channels will be mixed equally.

The second footswitch is a Mute function, which mutes all outputs except Link, which is an unbalanced output and identical to the signal going into input A. The function can be used for silent onstage tuning with a tuner connected.

The MicroBass II can be powered in four different ways: with a 9 volt battery, a power supply, 48 volt phantom power from a mixer consol or via EBS' own phantom power system, which is featured on most of their amplifiers, combos and active speaker cabs. One LED indicates if the 48 volt phantom power is used and another LED indicates the battery low status.

IN USE

At first, it's easy to feel confused by all the knobs and controls on MicroBass II and wonder why the two channels use different function controls. However, it is easy to learn and soon you find all the smart and useful functions. The A channel have a slightly more open sound character than the channel B, with a more natural sound as the result. The low-end filter gives warmth and the treble filter opens up the sound without any harshness. It is simple to get a good sound when playing with your fingers, and if the bright filter is activated you are awarded with a pleasant clucking/hi-tech slap sound, suggestive of a Music Man sound. The treble filter also works well if you want to tame the highs from a piezo pickup that can be very harsh sounding.

The Enhance function is a fantastic design. It affects the high end so mids are reduced when treble is added, which works well if you use a slap sound or use a pick. If, on the other hand, treble is reduced the mids are accentuated which gives a tight, focused more traditional fingerstyle sound.

The B channel also has more features than meets the eye at first. If used with a clean sound the sweepable filter works well if you want to scoop the midrange to emulate a bass/treble boost - for a slap sound. The overdrive effect sounds great and my favorite settings are from the first half of the function knob, which gives a great raunchy overdrive. The Edge-control is perfect for softening the distortion that can get a bit screechy otherwise. The sweepable mid is great for getting many different distortion character sounds. If you want a good sound for playing fingerstyle you just have to add a little boost at 250 Hz and a little of the Edge control.

The Tube Simulator function is subtle but adds both body and low-end power but without any

noticeable change in tone. The speaker simulator function is also quite subtle, but softens the top end with a small mid boost, which results in a slightly more hi-fi sound, more like a "miked amplifier".

The possibility to use both channels in many different combinations makes the MicroBassII a possible effect that can be used in many different situations, if for example you want to switch between two different sounds - one clean and one distorted. If you use two different instruments, it is handy to be able to use your tone and volume controls and you don't have to plug/unplug the instrument cable on stage: And unlike most A/B-pedals, the LED's clearly indicates the active channel. The Mute-switch is also a very practical addition when you are playing live.

The A+B function can be used if you want to play with someone else, a student or just jam with a friend. Another function is the option to connect a drum machine or a CD to the effect loop return and adjust the volume via the FX-Mix control.

An extra credit for the addition of the FX-Mix function where the loop can be used in either series or parallel mode. In serial mode, the entire signal passes through the connected effect. It works well if used with distortion, compression or similar effects affecting the complete sound. If you want to mix/add reverb, chorus, delay, octave divider or similar effects the parallel option is better since the clean signal does not have to pass through the effect keeping the presence and low end of the basic sound.

Yes, I think that EBS have included most functions - and some more - but there is a small detail missing. It would have been nice if the balanced XLR-output had been equipped with a pre/post-switch allowing you to add the filter and effects loop function in the signal. This would have been a very useful addition, especially for studio work, where you often want your own instrument a little louder in the headphone mix. If this had been implemented it would have been easy to use a cable between the headphone amp and the return and use the MicroBass II with headphones mixing the signal from the bass with the headphone mix.

IN CONCLUSION

In my opinion, the MicroBass II is a remarkable little box. It is a well-designed preamp, line box, and an A/B-box built from high quality components. The all round functionality and design of the two channels makes it very flexible and well adapted for many different situations. It is sturdy enough for live use, and the quality is good enough for studio work with good filters that can be used instead of a traditional preamp.

The two channels are capable of a wide range of sounds, from hi-tech to distortion and can be used on its own and it is quite user-friendly. Personally, I like the possibility where all filters can be used at the same time. The two footswitches and accompanying LED indicators are very practical for live use. I like that effect loops mix control and the many different functions possibilities, the addition to work as a volume control for external sound sources.

Overall: Lots of flexibility and high quality from EBS - quality in a small compact box.

Positive

- Flexible
- Sounds great
- Hi quality
- Compact

Negative

- No pre/post-switch on XLR output