Review in Studio Sound August 2001:

ELBERG MP8

Purist microphone preamplifiers from Denmark, from a company you haven't heard of? Dave Foister finds Elberg's MP8 essential EIGHT MICROPHONE PREAMPS in a box isn't news. These days there are plenty of choices – in 2U or even 1U. Most are plainly geared to the MDM market with either a dedicated analogue multiway or an 8-channel digital output, and often some kind of 'fairy dust' knob buried among the routine stuff. From that point of view, eight simple unadorned preamps in a 3U-high box with nothing but eight independent analogue XLRs on its outputs looks a bit tame; on the other hand, when its specs read more like what we expect from high-end single or dual units the interest level starts to rise again.

These are the priorities you'd expect from the small Danish company of ELT, who produce broadcast and recording electronics under the name of design engineer B. Elberg. I was provided with very few details of ELT but the literature shows what is presumably a typical product, a tidy and comprehensive rackmount broadcast mixer called the ELBERG BC15. Specifications refer to compliance with Nordic Radio spec sheets, so this is evidently the area where ELT is most active. From this background comes the MP8, a plain functional box that's either a breath of fresh air or a bit dull depending on your viewpoint. Its panel colour and choice of button style both hark back to old Neve equipment, and consequently it looks like the top bit of eight channels of vintage analogue console, a similarity I find hard to imagine is accidental.

The MP8 is purely and simply eight preamps that happen to live in the same chassis, and their facilities are therefore limited to the basics for a preamp alone. There is no attempt at EQ, enhancement or limiting, although the bare bones functions are implemented thoroughly and effectively. You could be forgiven for thinking it was a modular rack with eight individual preamp cards, but in fact the front is one big panel, hand-made to accommodate the eight sets of controls. The dangers of this were shown by the damage done to the review sample in transit, resulting in bent rack ears, scratched paint and a sticking switch; I trust the production packaging affords a little more protection.

But this is purely cosmetic, and the MP8 still managed to look the part, its appearance a nice blend of the functional and the elegant. All the push-button switches have integral leds, making it very easy to see at a distance how each channel is set up. A short but usefully-calibrated output level meter consisting of five leds lies alongside the controls and again is reassuringly visible from across the room. Each channel has an initial coarse gain control, switched in steps of 5dB, and a final output trim pot that can add up to 6dB of additional gain. There are pushbuttons for phantom power, a 20dB pad, and phase reverse – for once silent in operation. Another switches in the high-pass filter, which is unusually capable in that its turnover frequency is continuously variable from 40Hz to 270Hz. This is a nice touch on an otherwise unremarkable complement of controls; often the optimum setting lies between two switched positions and you're stuck with a choice between not dealing with a problem

properly or eating into your wanted signal too much, whereas on the MP8 you can get it exactly right.

Inside the emphasis is on quality, bandwidth and longevity. FET switching is not used anywhere because of its poor performance at high frequencies; instead the pushbuttons operate gold relays, and the rotary gain switch is also gold plated. Elberg guarantees a life of 25,000 operations for this switch, and expects that in 15–20 years it will be the first component to fail! The reason for this degree of care is the nowstandard assumption that frequencies beyond the once-normal range are necessary; the response of the MP8 preamps is within 0.5dB, 2Hz-90kHz. Inputs are balanced using custom Lundahl transformers, while the outputs are balanced electronically using a 'transformer-like' circuit, and the terminations for these are on XLRs, the only connectors on the back apart from the IEC mains input. There's no insert point, no line input (no instrument jack on the front either), no simple mixer, no digital outputs; these are straight mic amps pure and simple. But in a lot of applications this is exactly what's needed, with the main requirement being the kind of quality the MP8 aspires to. And in this respect the Elberg circuits certainly deliver, justifying the description 'High

Resolution' that appears on the front panel. The openness of the frequency response is immediately apparent, as is the virtual lack of noise, and it seems impossible to drive the things too hard. What the microphone gives is what you get – this is pretty close to being eight straight bits of wire with gain, and there can't be many consoles or workstations that wouldn't be improved by the addition of circuits like this.

What looks at first like a fairly routine product is in fact unusual in today's market because it sets out quite simply to deliver quality. ELT doesn't insist on selling to us on the basis of its circuit topology philosophy, or by adding idiosyncratic features of doubtful value; it wants us to buy the MP8 purely because it does its job properly, and we should be grateful and give it a listen.

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