

# MERIS 500 SERIES 440 MIC PREAMP & PEDAL INTERFACE

Reviewed by Geoff Stanfield

## [HERE'S THE LINK TO THE REVIEW](#)

My head is spinning these days with all of the available options for the 500-series format. As a kid, Baskin-Robbins and their 31 flavors seemed overwhelming. Generally, I stuck with what I knew was going to deliver. (Chocolate Peanut Butter, baby!) Why mess with a good thing? 500-series preamp modules are no different than all those flavors of ice cream, except that there are hundreds to choose from, and the price tag for trying a new flavor is sometimes enough to put the brakes on. Often in pro audio, there is a direct correlation between price and quality, but occasionally, a piece of gear comes along that breaks that paradigm.

The Meris 440 is a 500-series mic preamp module made in Los Angeles that is marketed as "a best in class solution for recording electric and acoustic guitar." It boasts CineMag input and output transformers for "classic American mic pre tone." (You can read that as "sounds like an API.") It also incorporates two hybrid-discrete op-amps, one at the input transformer section and one driving the output section. 60 dB of gain is available at the input stage, and the output trim goes from -27 dB to +12 dB. Small toggle switches provide standard preamp features for -20 dB pad, phantom power, and polarity reverse. The 440 also has a basic but useful EQ section: a 12 dB per octave high-pass filter that is selectable between 80 or 200 Hz; and a subtle +3 dB shelf boost at 4 or 7 kHz. These filters are not only useful for tonal shaping prior to "going to tape," but they can also be used when mixing by setting the 440's input, output, and pad for unity gain.

But what really sets the Meris 440 apart from countless other 500-series mic preamps is a send/return pair of 1/4" jacks on its front panel for use as an effects-pedal loop, post amplifier and mic. This feature is also useful for those wishing to integrate guitar pedals into mixing. I purchased the Radial Engineering EXTC guitar effects interface [Tape Op #100] for this exact purpose, and it is an awesome tool to add some creative spark to your mixing process. The effects return of the 440 also doubles as an instrument-level DI.

Since the 440 is touted as being a great preamp for recording guitar, that is where I started. I needed to create some droney loops (think Third Eye Foundation meets Boards of Canada) for a track I was working on. Typically, I would use the traditional routing of guitar to Boomerang pedal to amp and mic — and record the effected signal from the amp. Instead, I placed an Ashman Acoustics SOM50 omni mic [Tape Op #101] about a foot in front of my Vox AC30, and plugged a Telecaster straight into the amp. I connected the Boomerang to the 440's send/return jacks. What I liked in this application was the ability to use the EQ features on the 440 to sculpt the sound of the amplified performance before it was captured and looped in the Boomerang. I also liked the clarity of the tone, having the effects after the amp in the signal chain; the difference is fairly subtle, but it is absolutely appreciable.

Using an SM57 with the Meris 440 to record a Telecaster through AC30 was a great sonic treat. This mic took a bit of gain in a beautiful way, providing a nice, tight, punchy sound that reminded me of tones on an early AC/DC record — tough, but not overly distorted. As the literature suggests, the tone was classic, and in this instance, totally in your face. Cranking the input gain all the way on the module provided some pretty undesirable harsh distortion, but dialing it back a touch provided excellent results and lovely tone. For the sake of using the effects loop with another stompbox, I plugged in an MXR Carbon Copy, and it worked as advertised. The effect presented itself with slightly

more clarity. It isn't necessarily "better" having effects post amp and mic, but the difference is discernible, and I can see the option being useful. Since I had two 440 modules at my disposal, I recorded a guitar track with two SM57s on the same amp into the pair of preamps. One channel was clean, and the other had an old MXR Phase 100 through the effects loop. When I panned these hard left and right, I got a really beautiful, lush spread, and the tone was right on the money.

In order to record a vintage Fender P-Bass using the Meris 440's effects return as a DI, I had to fully crank the 440's output to get an acceptable recording level, but the tone was punchy and full spectrum, with a nicely-defined low end and clear top. The 440 paired well with the Fender, and it brought home that classic midrange "nose" of the P-Bass. There was no level issue when I recorded a bass that had active electronics and higher output. In general, what worked better for me when recording bass was to use a separate DI feeding the standard XLR input on the back of the enclosing rack. This method allowed me to take advantage of the 440's input transformer and EQ section, and I was also able to get more level out of the unit.

To work the shelving features on the 440, I recorded what I knew was going to be a mud swamp: Gibson hollow-body into an old Traynor amp powering the 2x12 speakers in a Marshall JMP "Countryman." It's a beautiful sounding setup, but it can be "dark brown" sounding — a good challenge for the 440. With the 80 Hz rolloff and 4 kHz boost engaged, the sound was way closer to "done" and had a nice midrange quality that was well balanced.

I also used the 440 paired with a Mojave Audio MA-200 condenser mic [*Tape Op* #55] to record both baritone and standard acoustic guitars, and I found the tone to be appropriately forward in the mids, with nice clarity and solid body. Meris notes that the 200 Hz HPF would be useful for recording an overly boomy acoustic guitar, and if the filter on the 440 was the only EQ you had available, it would certainly do the trick. The 80 Hz setting was good for cutting low mud, and I used it more frequently than 200 Hz. The 4 and 7 kHz boosts were in my opinion subtle (you can read that as "hard to F&%\$ up"), but they can add nice top presence, helping a guitar track be heard in a mix without increasing the track's level.

For a live stereo recording of two acoustic guitars and percussion using a pair of Schoeps CMC 6 mics with cardioid capsules, the Meris 440 also sounded solid. Using the 80 Hz HPF and 4 kHz shelf, I found the sound to be very natural and the stereo image strong. The combination of these mics and the Meris preamps provided a lovely tone that was spectrally balanced with nice dimension. The tracks came out clear without being sterile, and had warmth without being wooly.

The EQ on the 440 is far from surgical, and it doesn't claim to be, but it may save you from using additional EQ in the form of a plug-in or hardware, by applying a touch of top and helping clean up the bottom where appropriate. Keep in mind that the EQ section is located before the effects loop in the 440's signal flow, so it's not available when using the module as a DI.

As I mentioned earlier, another fun job for the Meris 440 is incorporating effects pedals during mixing. The module's usefulness is essentially doubled in this way, and turning knobs on analog devices in real-time opens up great creative opportunities for glorious sonic freak "accidents." For example, send your drum subgroup to a stereo aux fader in your DAW, and feed a pair of 440s. Plug in different fuzz pedals on each side, add a little compression, and you've got yourself dinner! I love this stuff, and the fun is endless.

The Meris 440 is marketed as a go-to guitar preamp, but I found that it also sounded great on everything else I threw at it, including vocals, drums, and keys. Its preamp is not a "new flavor," but it is its own version of API's classic rock flavor. Even at a higher asking price, the 440 would be a great addition to any 500-series rack, and it's a downright bargain considering you get an effects loop and

built-in filters on top of the solid mic preamp. I would recommend ordering a double scoop — a pair of 440s — for your rack.