

I've been doing some work with a covers startup that needs me to do about 50% of the lead vocals. But the songs require pretty close to dead-on accuracy when it comes to pitch. The reason is not only the genre, but also because everyone's using pitch correction in the studio nowadays -- even in the low-rent ones. If you're not using it, things just don't sound up to today's standards.

Rather than spring for a higher-cost unit, I figured I'd start down the Auto-Tune path by getting just my toes wet, so I chose this particular unit. I went with ART because of the positive experiences I've had in the past with their products. (Over the years I've owned and still use regularly a Tube Pre, a 31-band EQ, a phantom power box, and an SLA-2 power amplifier. All have served me well and have never given me even a hint of trouble. They just keep working and keep sounding great.)

This preamp is the same size as the Tube Pre that's been around about forever, and since it uses a tube in the signal path, it runs just as warm. Power supply is a 1 amp 9 volt AC wall wart whose body is small but heavy and whose wires are thin and fragile-looking, so don't dangle it by the cord when you're putting it away, unless you eventually want to replace it. Also, it should be obvious that pedal board supplies won't work with this unit because those supply only DC. This box needs to run off AC so it can upscale the incoming voltage to a level that can supply a reasonable plate voltage to the tube.

The front panel is highly intuitive, with outstanding LED-based visual feedback as to what's going on, but things are extremely cramped. This is not a panel where you're going to be able to make quick changes on stage unless you store presets. There are five of those, probably enough at this price point, and ART wisely chose to put them all on the right side of the panel, with the cycle button at the top right corner, just waiting for your thumb with your fingertips anchored on the top of the case. Clearly some human-factors studies were done before this decision was made.

The manual is well written and explains the differences between the gain and output controls. It also explains how the former control will affect how well the processor works. It's true -- you do need to set gain pretty accurately -- high enough to keep the "signal" LED lit, but low enough not to light the "clip" LED. As a vocalist, you'll have to do your part by not singing so softly as to prevent the processor from applying the corrections you've asked for.

There are three intensity settings: hard, soft, and pitch correct. When I'm doing lead vocals, I always use the last setting, because the two more-intense ones add too much smearing and chorusing for me when I'm singing solo. With that setting, the box works really well, adding just that tiny bit of pull up or down to the exact note I'm aiming for, with a bit of reaction time added to keep things from sounding mechanical. For harmony vocals, I can get away with the middle setting because the smearing/chorusing gets lost in the harmony mix. That effect can even turn out to be an asset when the other vocalists are weak. I've tried the "hard" setting, which I call Death By Auto-Tune, but haven't found a use for it yet because the result comes out sounding very heavily smeared and artificial. But depending on the music you're doing, you might find uses for it. That setting brings along a deep chorusing effect, which might help when you need a layered-vocal effect.

Note that Auto-Tune -- or any other pitch correction device for that matter -- can't and won't help someone who's not qualified to have a mic in front of him in the first place. Real-time pitch correction assumes at least an above-average level of vocal/pitch ability. Sing too far off, and any type of correction may choose to bend your note the "wrong" way: to a note you never intended. Remember, these things can't read minds. In a live setting, your voice is the sole trigger for pitch correction's behavior. There's nothing else to guide it. No one's sitting at a DAW manually drawing individual correction curves with a trackball. For example, if your note is G, and you're singing it just a little too sharp, don't blame this box for kicking the note up to a precise A flat and making you

look like a dope. After all, it's what your voice asked it to do; the device just did what it was "told."

A second caveat: What's going to come out of your monitors or your IEMs is the corrected version of your voice, not the uncorrected one. This can make it very difficult to stay on pitch because the mental "pitch accuracy link" between what you're hearing and what your vocal cords are actually doing (monitors to ears to brain to voice box) no longer exists in a valid form. For example, you might find yourself having gone off pitch sufficiently to have caused Auto Tune to snap you suddenly to a different/unintended note -- a total disaster. There's no warning it's about to happen, nor can there be. If this turns out to be a problem for you, then you may want to split your mic signal: Have the dry feed go to your monitors/IEMs, and have the wet/pitch-corrected feed go out to the mains and nowhere else. That way, you'll be hearing "you" and it'll be a lot easier to stay close enough on pitch to keep Auto Tune on target.

How do I get around this last problem without a signal split? First, I prefer monitors that aren't all that loud to begin with. This lets me hear my own pitch through my head versus through my outer ear canals. Second, the mics I use have flat windscreens, and these do a great job of reflecting some of the higher frequencies back to my ears. Therefore, I really don't hear all that much of the pitch-corrected signal, and so it's easier for me to keep track of how far off my voice is letting a note drift.

Two last points. The sound of the unit is very clean. I have no idea where the tube is in the signal chain -- early or late. Compared with the preamps I've sung through that are completely tube-based (no solid state at all), I hear no evidence of the presence of a tube. That's perfectly okay with me. And finally, this box is phantom-friendly. I despise global phantom power, but sometimes you run into it on a job and there's not much you can do about it. This preamp just shrugs its shoulders at it.

In summary, I love this unit. I use it on its mildest setting for leads, and on its mildest or middle setting for harmonies. It's made an audible difference in the quality of my vocals and how they mix with the rest of a band's vocals. Well worth the \$230.

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