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RADIAL SB-4 AND SB-5 STAGEBUG DIRECT BOXES

$69.99 and $99.99; www.radialeng.com

Back in our July 2013 issue we introduced the first models in a new budget line of direct boxes from Canada's Radial Engineering called the StageBugs. The SB-1 active and SB-2 passive DIs reviewed in that issue are among Radial's smallest, most portable, and most affordable direct boxes to date, and of course, being Radial boxes, they are battle-ready for both studio and stage! Now, for this issue's Gift Guide, we bring you two unique offerings in the StageBug lineup, the SB-4 and SB-5.

Both boxes are the same size and build as the rest of the line (8.25 x 5 x 1.75 inches), housed in a 16 gauge steel enclosure with a baked enamel finish. But that's pretty much where the similarity ends.

The SB-4 is a 48V phantom powered active DI made for use with acoustic instruments fitted with piezoelectric transducer/pickup systems; this might include classical guitar, violin, upright bass, mandolin...

Piezo transducers are capable of a broad sonic range and capture more of an overall natural acoustic tone than their magnetic cousins, but they have a very high impedance and said broad range can be harder to control. Through a standard DI or the instrument input on a mic preamp or DAW interface, they can actually sound the opposite of what they're capable of sounding like: cold, sterile, peaky and buzzy. The SB-4's circuitry (starting with a mindblowing 5 Megohm input impedance!) is made to balance the signal, match the impedance, and smooth out peaky transients for a fuller, warmer natural sound.

In true Radial fashion the SB-4 includes additional features such as a 150 Hz 6 dB/octave highpass filter, a 180 degree phase flip button, a recessed ground lift switch, and a buffered auxiliary output with the same 5 Megohm load for running signal to a stage amp or even a tuner.

A 150 Hz cut may sound drastic compared to the usual 80 Hz variety on most boxes, but piezo equipped instruments are notorious in live situations for feeding back from floor wedges and even the house PA. This cutoff and the phase flip help eliminate these problems; they are not just bonus features, but essential tools!

I concur that on an electric violin and a nylon-string acoustic guitar, the sound through the SB-4 was indeed richer, more controlled and less harsh in the top end than when running through a standard direct box.

And now for something completely different: the StageBug SB-5 Laptop DI. As its name implies, the SB-5 is used to get audio signals from a laptop's built-in headphone output into an audio system with the best possible sound quality.

You may be thinking that most computer musicians use an external sound card or audio interface for their audio outputs. While that's true, many musicians use laptops, MP3 players, and tablets simply for backing tracks, walk-on music and more, where a computer interface is often overkill.

Additionally those in a speaking profession, such as professors, preachers, politicians and more use computers and other portable devices to show videos and animations or to play audio cues. In these situations, an easy, good-sounding way to get audio from the existing headphone jack into a pro audio system can be a boon... and that's what the SB-5 does!

While its enclosure is similar to the rest of the StageBug line, it also has an attached 4' cable terminated into a stereo miniplug. To keep the cable tangle-free in transport, one side of the box is fitted with a winding cleat. The SB-5 also features a ground-lift switch and a –10 dB input pad.

The cable with miniplug is the unit's input, and it features two output choices. First is a pair of balanced, transformer isolated $^1/_4$" TRS outputs for stereo use. The second is a single balanced male XLR output with an auto-merge function that sums the signal to mono. This is handy, as I know of many club, conference room and church PA systems that are mono only.

The SB-5 is another one of Radial's "you didn't know you needed this until you needed it" boxes, and while I have seen one or two similar devices on the market, none of them have had this build quality, feature set, or transparent sound. The SB-5 is also handy in the studio. How many times has a client asked you to play something off their iPhone, only to have you quizzically wondering how you're going to get their device hooked up to one of your boutique preamps? Problem solved! (Which, if you think about it, could be the motto of the entire StageBug line!)—*PV*