Exotic Boxes

The Electro-Harmonix Talking Machine and Ravish Sitar

Electro Harmonix’s two newest pedals are a bit of a departure from the classic pedals they’re known for. Instead of adding color to your existing tone, the Ravish Sitar and the Stereo Talking Machine intend to transform your guitar into something else – here, a way-out Indian sitar and something that evokes the human voice. Both pedals share the same heavy-duty chassis, dual stomp switches, chassis mounted controls, and 9-volt power adapters. We tested both pedals with a G&L Legacy loaded with single coils and a Vox AC15 1x12 combo.

Unlike sitar-emulating instruments of the past, such as the Danelectro Coral Sitar electric guitar, the Ravish Sitar pedal offers a realistic digital emulation. A genuine, acoustic Indian sitar has lead strings that are picked or plucked like on a standard guitar, as well as several “sympathetic” strings within the body tuned to a specific key that resonate (i.e., without being picked), which gave you that familiar exotic drone. While the Coral Sitar has a preset that effects a very cool sound with its “buzz” bridge, the 10-string sympathetic harp had a somewhat limited use, having to be re-tuned for different keys and strummed to get the full effect.

Now, on to the pedal. The Ravish Sitar’s controls include levels for the Dry, Lead and Sympathetic strings; Lead and Sympathetic string Timbre (the amount of buzz); a Mode/Presets knob for changing presets and scrolling through the modes; a dual LED display for Preset and Mode; and stomp switches for Bypass and Presets. The modes include the key mode for changing the key of the sympathetic strings from major to exotic, as well as custom scales; decay mode for changing the decay of Lead notes; and Modulation Mode for adding modulation to sympathetic strings, which helps emulate the sound of a stringed Indian tanpura (or tambora). There’s also the hip Freeze mode for freezing or sustaining the sympathetic string indefinitely via the preset footswitch.

Even with the large array of controls and options on the Ravish Sitar pedal, we were able to dial in a realistic sound with the G&L quickly. The controls are laid out in a user-friendly manner that we were able to manipulate easily. Just pick a key, adjust the dry, lead and sympathetic levels, and dial in some timbre, and you are transformed into Ravi Shankar, or well, a reasonable facsimile. The pedal tracks very well and the timbre control emulates the “buzz” sound well. It’s not quite as touch sensitive as the Dano Coral Sitar, but is very convincing anyway.

The real magic is in the Ravish Sitar’s droning sympathetic string emulation and the ability to change keys easily and quickly. This feature really adds to the pedal’s convincing sound and it’s hard to avoid getting addicted to its eastern charms.

The Stereo Talking Machine, meanwhile, is a vocal-filter filter, similar to an envelope filter or auto-wah, but with multiple filter choices designed to emulate human voice vowel sounds. Connections on the STM include a 1/4” mono input, dual 1/4” stereo outputs, a pair of send and return effects loop jacks, as well as an expression pedal TRS jack.

The STM features nine voices (seven vowels and two wah wah), nine pre-sets, a blend control, and controls for attack, decay and sensitivity. A preset dial, as well as a footswitch, allow the user to toggle through presets that can be user modified and saved. The sensitivity control not only controls the sensitivity of the envelope filter, but also the direction the filter travels, clockwise from center for a low to high sweep (i.e. ow to ee sounds), and counterclockwise for a high to low sweep (i.e. ee to ow sounds). The preset footswitch, as well as the five control knobs, do double duty – with the preset switch held down the user has access to built-in fuzz and modulation via the five control knobs, consisting of volume, fuzz tone, fuzz gain, LFO modulation rate and LFO modulation depth/shape.

The factory presets offer a wide variety of sounds, from classic auto-wah sounds, to modulated synth sounds and classic talk-box effects. The presets proved to be a good jumping off point for creating new sounds, and the well-thought out control layout was easy to manipulate to our individual playing style. The built-in fuzz circuit is fairly tame, offering a soft fuzzy effect, while the modulation circuit offers a fairly thick swirl from smooth to choppy. Both of the fuzz and modulation effects add a lot to the pedal’s sound palate, though we do wish the controls were labeled – with the preset switch held down the pedal’s sound palate, though we do wish the controls were labeled for both their primary as well as their secondary functions. The ability for the sensitivity control to sweep forwards and backwards proved to be the “go to” control on the STM for dialing in a sound and adding a whole new dimension to classic auto-wah sounds with a reverse swell.

Both the Ravish Sitar and the Stereo Talking Machine feature Electro-‐Harmonix’s bullet-proof construction, great quality sounds, and user-friendly controls that offer lots of instant gratification. Most importantly, each pedal is a blast to use and will fuel your creativity.

— Phil Fusco