ELECTRO-HARMONIX Neo Mistress Nano & Stereo Talking Machine

One is a miniature vessel of swooshy deliciousness, the other a demoted tool of the very devil. Which will be right for you? Review by Hayden Hewitt

E l ectro-Harmonix is a brand most of us are more than familiar with. Purveyors of everything from the sublime to the ridiculous (in a musical way, of course), they pretty much produce a pedal for every niche... and if no such niche can be found, then they often carve one out. For this review we have two pedals which fully illustrate the two facets to the Electro-Harmonix train of thought, from the dependable and predictable smoothness of the Neo Mistress Flanger through to the rather bonkers Talking Machine.

Neo Mistress

Let's start with the Neo Mistress - a small pedal with an unpolished aluminium case for that made-in-the-garage vibe, two knobs, a switch and no hidden features... unless you count an LED which changes colour according to the sweep of the effect. As ever with smaller enclosures, you have to break out the screwdriver to get to the battery; this does grate a little, although you can of course power the pedal with a 9v power supply to avoid potentially embarrassing mid-gig rummaging in your bag for a Phillips. The Neo Mistress makes a good fist of getting close to the sublime Mistress Flanger. This effect is of the traditional variety - warm and cooing. At lower levels, through a fairly clean amp, you cannot resist giving it some heads. The warm washes of flange add a subtle hint of psychedelia in a way that'll be completely alien if you're used to modern-day digital flangers, with a discernible grain and organic quality that make it feel like a part of your tone rather than a simple adornment.

Increasing the depth puts you into early Van Halen territory but without a little of the bile provided by MXR Flangers. The Neo Mistress is a little more laid back than an MXR; even at the extremes, it's still a relaxed giddiness, never getting too far away from you.

Stereo Talking Machine

From the simplicity of the Neo Mistress we move to the knob-festooned Talking Machine, a 'Vocal Formant Filter' - which you can give many options to shape the sound of your lanuacy. Designed primarily to add vowel-like sounds to your notes, the Talking Machine is - at its most basic - an envelope filter giving you vowel and ADSR synth tones along with an auditory bonkers ability to make every note sound like you're saying the word 'DIE' through a fuzzbox. What more could you need?

The knobs are dual-function. The first functions control the amount of effect in your signal, give you a choice of voices ranging from Wah and Bassballs through to seven vowel tones, and on to the envelope filter settings. You also get nine programmable presets via the « preset knob. Cleverly, the Sensitivity knob has a centre detent which, if you move counter-clockwise, reverses the vowel tone. To access the secondary function of the knobs, hold the « preset switch down; this allows you to access the volume, the level and gain of the built-in fuzz, and alter the LF-0 settings.

On the practical side are stereo outputs and a side chain switch, which changes colour according to the sweep of the effect. As ever with smaller enclosures, you have to break out the screwdriver to get to the battery; this does grate a little, although you can of course power the pedal with a 9v power supply to avoid potentially embarrassing mid-gig rummaging in your bag for a Phillips. The Talking Machine has the bonkers ability to make every note sound like you're saying 'DIE' through a fuzzbox carefully-pronounced vowels to your notes although, as mentioned before, one really does seem to proclaim 'THEENDIEIE', which never ceases to amuse. Diggig a little deeper, the unit proves to be a highly accomplished envelope filter. The wah setting may not match certain dedicated auto wahs in terms of tone but the scope means it doesn't take up much real estate, and the tones are huge, warm and very pleasing. The Stereo Talking Machine is a more acquired taste. If you enjoy envelope filters, and you like the idea of having a choice of various voicings along with a great degree of control in terms of manipulation, then you'll be in seventh heaven here; it's a pedal no sonic aardvark should find themselves without.

Sounds

If the Neo Mistress sounds beautiful, the Talking Machine is absolutely striking. The presets give you varying amounts of oddness which add controls will have you in command of some groovy analogue synth sounds. Yes, many of the tones might be too dry to items to some degree, but you'd really want to shoehorn them into your tunes somewhere - even more so if you bring an expression pedal to the party.

Verdict

We have Neo very different pedals here. On the one hand we have the Neo Mistress, which would assuredly be welcome on almost any pedalboard as either your only flanger or perhaps just another flavour. The small enclosure means it doesn't take up much real estate, and the tones are huge, warm and very pleasing. The Stereo Talking Machine is a more acquired taste. If you enjoy envelope filters, and you like the idea of having a choice of various voicings along with a great degree of control in terms of manipulation, then you'll be in seventh heaven here; it's a pedal no sonic aardvark should find themselves without.