preamps, I could EQ the kit without adding harshness or distortion to the cymbal overtones, and the toms sounded full and rich in the overheads. On hi-hat, a ribbon mic into the 521 ZDT provided a fantastic, clear sound without any splatter or crushed high-end that condenser mics and preamps with electrolytic caps sometimes bring forth. While there is no pad on the 521 ZDT, the 5 dB minimum gain setting allowed the preamp to be used in many instances where other preamps would require a pad. I also found the coarse gain steps to be fine enough that the variable output never seemed necessary. Perhaps the variable output would have been useful if I were recording a string ensemble and needed to precisely match the stereo image for two channels.

Overall, the 521 ZDT preamp provides extremely natural and accurate reproduction. The preamp doesn’t color the microphone in any perceptible way, but maintains the size and imaging of the source. Recording with such transparent and uncolored preamps allows a certain amount of freedom to process or color the signal later without bringing out the limitations of the recording chain. It may take a moment to shift your ears and brain to appreciate the open sound that the preamp produces, but after working with those sounds, you will realize that the added depth and clarity ultimately benefit the instrument and production. In some cases, colored preamps may flatter the source, but sometimes the pure gain of the Earthworks 521 ZDT is just the ticket. (5999 street; www.earthworksaudio.com)

—Adam Kagan <www.TempressThePlugin.com>