



Shadow Sonic preamps with Nanoflex & NanoMAG pickups

from £119-£199

A bevy of new products from Shadow – but which one do you choose? by Dave Burrluck

PHOTOGRAPHY: JESSE WILD

SHADOW SONIC DOUBLEPLAY PREAMP

PRICE: £199 (inc both Nanoflex and NanoMAG pickups)

ORIGIN: China

TYPE: Under-soundboard preamp with under-saddle and magnetic pickups

DIMENSIONS: 76 x 49 x 27mm deep

CONTROLS: Volume, blend, tone, phase switch

CONNECTIONS: Inputs for Nanoflex and NanoMAG pickups, output

POWER: 2 x 3V lithium cell (type CR2032)

BATTERY USAGE: 1.2mA, 180 hours

JHS

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Shadow needs little introduction as one of the leading manufacturers of pickups and preamps for acoustic instruments. It has certainly been at it for longer than most, and in the past few years has added Chinese manufacturing to augment its state-of-the-art headquarters in Germany. Aside from retro-fit systems, Shadow pickups and preamps are factory fitted to numerous brands from small 'boutique' makes such as Lakewood to massive mainstream brands such as Epiphone.

At this year's Frankfurt MusikMesse, Shadow introduced four new Sonic preamps that come with the company's latest Nanoflex undersaddle pickup and/or the innovative new NanoMAG magnetic pickup. It creates a pickup/preamp system for virtually any flat-top acoustic guitar (steel or nylon). The dual pickups are used in combination with the Sonic Doubleplay preamp, individually with the Sonic Nanoflex and Sonic NanoMAG preamps, while the Sonic Basic preamp allows a fast and easy way of providing basic control

for the Nanoflex-only undersaddle pickup. Firstly, let's look at the pickups.

Nanoflex

The Nanoflex pickup, according to Shadow, "does not only take the vibrations of the strings like common undersaddle pickups. Nanoflex senses the vibrations of the strings and the body of the instrument simultaneously. This gives the equivalent of having a condenser-microphone mixed with an undersaddle pickup." The supplied NFX 2.3-A (different sizes will be available) is very flexible, under a millimetre in thickness and 2.3mm in width. It's covered in a black rubber material, and before this turns into silver flex screening there is another unique part of the design: an ultra-small preamp that, "amplifies and protects the sound signal directly on the pickup. Unlike other pickups, the Nanoflex pickup signal is not passing through even a single millimetre of the wire and therefore eliminates environmental disturbances before the connection

SONIC DOUBLEPLAY	TEST RESULTS
Build quality	★★★★★
Fitting	★★★★★
Sound	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★

■ **WE LIKED** Relatively easy to fit; an impressive sounding blend preamp

■ **WE DISLIKED** Tone control only affects bass; blend function limited by higher output of NanoMAG pickup

cable." At the end of the cable is a mini jack plug that plugs directly into the relevant Sonic preamp.

NanoMAG

Designed to stick on to the end of your fingerboard, the NanoMAG is around 57mm wide, 5.7mm thick and will add around 8.5mm to the end of your fingerboard. The top face is lightly curved and again there's a mini jack attached to the end of the cable to fit directly into the relevant sonic preamp. "The NanoMAG is a magnetic pickup with an air coil and a composition of different samarium cobalt magnets





From top left clockwise: Sonic Doubleplay, Sonic Nanoflex, Sonic Basic, Sonic NanoMAG

SONIC NANOFLEX	TEST RESULTS
Build quality	★★★★★
Fitting	★★★★★
Sound	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ WE LIKED Easy to fit; very transparent tone; dual EQ ■ WE DISLIKED Nothing, it does what you'd expect 	

SONIC NANOMAG	TEST RESULTS
Build quality	★★★★★
Fitting	★★★★★
Sound	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ WE LIKED Ditto Sonic Nanoflex ■ WE DISLIKED Ditto Sonic Nanoflex 	

SONIC BASIC	TEST RESULTS
Build quality	★★★★★
Fitting	★★★★★
Sound	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ WE LIKED Easy to fit; acceptable sound ■ WE DISLIKED Treble control very wide; slightly clouded mid-range 	

incorporating active electronics in a minimum of space," says Shadow. "The pickup is protected by an epoxy layer, and the silver-platinum shielding will provide, together with the active electronics, a low impedance hum-free output signal."

Sonic preamps

These four Sonic preamps are intended to be stuck, via three affixed adhesive pads, to the under-side of your soundboard allowing the minimal controls to be accessible through the soundhole. Each is very lightweight – helped by the coin-type batteries – and housed in a moulded black plastic case; functional in looks rather than pretty. The Doubleplay is the largest and, while all have a pretty similar 'footprint', the Basic is the thinnest in depth and least obtrusive.

Fitting an under-saddle pickup can be tricky but here it's not beyond the confident novice requiring only a small hole to be drilled, at a slight angle, through the end of the saddle slot for the cable. The saddle too must be reduced in height, but only marginally due to the thinness of the pickup. Fitting the end-pin jack is again a little tricky and needs the right tools. While the Nanoflex and output jack probably should be professionally fitted, the NanoMAG couldn't be simpler – it does just literally stick on the end of the fingerboard – and so long as the underside of your soundboard is smooth, and there are no braces in the way, attaching the preamps inside should be simple too.



We tested the preamps with the Nanoflex and NanoMAG pickups

SOUNDS: Using a Lakewood M-32 pre-fitted with the Nanoflex and NanoMAG pickups we could evaluate each of the preamps and the performance of each pickup.

With the Doubleplay installed, the Nanoflex produces a good representation of the Lakewood's modern zingy tone. It's even across the strings with plenty of – we'd say too much – high end and generous bass that can be tailored by the tone control, which on this preamp is really just a bass control as it doesn't affect the high-end. There's a pleasant amount of

body thump from the pickup too, and only minimal piezo-like nasal ping.

The NanoMAG is noticeably louder, bigger sounding and more bluesy. Whereas the Nanoflex is ideal for strumming and modern flat-picking, the NanoMAG adds body for finger-picking and lead lines. The further up the neck you go the sound gets more electric, but still with some acoustic-like sparkle. The top E sounds a little quiet compared to the fuller B string, and as you bend the B towards the G-string there's a subtle lift in volume. It's something to be aware of. As a result of →

SHADOW SONIC NANOFLEX PREAMP

As Sonic Doubleplay except...

PRICE: £169 (inc Nanoflex pickup)

TYPE: Under-soundboard preamp with active under-saddle pickup

DIMENSIONS: 71 x 46 x 26mm deep

CONTROLS: Volume, bass, treble, phase invert switch

CONNECTIONS: Input for Nanoflex pickup, output

BATTERY USAGE: 0.8mA, 250 hours

SHADOW SONIC NANOMAG PREAMP

As Sonic Doubleplay except...

PRICE: £159 (inc NanoMAG pickup)

TYPE: Under-soundboard preamp with active magnetic pickup

DIMENSIONS: 71 x 46 x 26mm deep

CONNECTIONS: Input for NanoMAG pickup, output

BATTERY USAGE: 0.8mA, 250 hours

SHADOW SONIC BASIC PREAMP

As Sonic Doubleplay except...

PRICE: £119 (inc Nanoflex pickup)

TYPE: Under-soundboard preamp with active under-saddle pickup

DIMENSIONS: 75 x 49 x 16mm deep

CONTROLS: Volume, tone

CONNECTIONS: Input for Nanoflex pickup, output

POWER: 1 x 3V lithium cell (type CR2032)

BATTERY USAGE: 0.25mA, 1,000 hours

ACOUSTIC



Coin-style batteries keep overall weight to a minimum

SHADOW NANOFLEX PICKUP

PRICE: £See preamp spec
ORIGIN: China
TYPE: Active, flexible under-saddle piezo pickup

SHADOW NANOMAG PICKUP

PRICE: £See preamp spec
ORIGIN: China
TYPE: Ultra compact fingerboard-end active magnetic pickup

The rivals

Fishman Ellipse Matrix blend	£199
LR Baggs M1 Active	£214
Fishman Neo-D Humbucker	£79

The Ellipse Matrix Blend mounts under the soundboard and includes a gooseneck mic and Acoustic Matrix under-saddle. Typically state-of-the-art from Fishman. LR Baggs' under-saddle Element Active system includes a volume control that mounts under the soundhole plus endpin preamp (£119.95). Fishman's passive Neo-D humbucker (see Quick Test on page p150) will surprise many with its low price and excellent performance. At the other end of the spectrum is LR Baggs' M1 Active soundhole pickup – a stacked humbucker running off a single 3V lithium cell with approximately 1,000 hours of playing time.

The Nanoflex creates a wide-sounding modern acoustic tone with plenty of body to the sound; the NanoMAG is fuller sounding with plenty of acoustic zing



Above: fitting the end-pin jack needs the right tools and can be tricky

→ the differing outputs the blend is less effective than it could be but, for general use, adding a little of the NanoMAG to the Nanoflex yields a very workable all-rounder tone.

Installing the Sonic Nanoflex produces a slightly more transparent sound, and with both treble and bass EQ the sound can be tailored at source producing, to our ears, a better voice. Likewise the Sonic NanoMAG – it really brings out the best in this remarkable sounding pickup: zing aplenty but with some magnetic girth – a good choice for acoustic slide too. Even the Basic has its signature sound, perhaps as you'd expect a little more low-fi; with this preamp the Nanoflex pickup sounds more clouded in the mid-range, while the tone control is a broad treble control. Yet, while the thickness in the mids could aid some styles and guitars, we prefer the Sonic Nanoflex sound.

Verdict

With so many factors at play, not least your actual guitar and amplification, it's



Above: the NanoMAG is simple to fit

Below: the Nanoflex senses string and body vibrations simultaneously



always a tough job finding the 'right' acoustic pickup system as a retro-fit. Certainly the Nanoflex and NanoMAG pickups – matched with their dedicated namesake Sonic preamps to produce the best results – sound very good. The Nanoflex creates a wide-sounding modern tone with plenty of body to the sound; the NanoMAG is fuller sounding with plenty of acoustic zing but, like many soundhole pickups, gets more electric sounding as you move up the neck. Its discreet size and ease of fitting, however, make it a serious viable choice – especially if you need more fullness to your tone, perhaps for jazzier, bluesier styles.

The Doubleplay preamp intends to offer the best of both worlds yet with only a bass EQ and limited blend it's a little compromised. It does though produce, with the right mix of the two pickups, a very rich and full acoustic-accurate tone. The Basic is, well, basic. With just a treble EQ it's a little limited, and sonically it's less transparent sounding than the others. But again,

it's a good enough sound and its tonal hallmark could well suit your instrument's deficiencies and idiosyncrasies – not to mention being easier on your pocket.

The concept of the soundhole-mounted preamp, as pioneered by Fishman's Ellipse is, we suspect, going to be popular. There's no serious modification of your guitar required and, although accessing the controls is a little fiddly on the fly, if you like to set your sound and just play, it has to be the future for the after-market acoustic pickup system. **B**

Shadow Sonic Doubleplay

Guitarist RATING ★★★★★

Shadow Sonic Nanoflex

Guitarist RATING ★★★★★

Shadow Sonic NanoMAG

Guitarist RATING ★★★★★

Shadow Sonic Basic

Guitarist RATING ★★★★★