





### What We Want To Know

#### 1 Isn't MIDI just for keyboard players and studio geeks?

MIDI (Musical Instrument Digital Interface) is an interface language that lets musical equipment talk to each other for patch switching, and on more sophisticated devices such as the GM, real-time continuous parameter control.

#### 2 And TSC, what's that?

Another abbreviation that stands for Tube Safety Control, H&K's proprietary valve auto-biasing and protection feature. It makes sure the quartet of EL84s are always working at peak performance. The amp also features the Red Box, H&K's well-known DI box, which has been available as a standalone device for many years, but it's standard equipment on the GrandMeister.

#### 3 Who's going to want this amp?

If you just use one sound and plug directly into your amp, not you. But if you need more sounds, programmability, and you want to stay mainly analogue, the GM is a great place to start.

# Hughes & Kettner GrandMeister 36

£1,129



Has Hughes & Kettner just made an amplifier that really can be all things to all players?

WORDS **Nick Guppy** PHOTOGRAPHY **Joby Sessions**

**H**ughes & Kettner's reputation as one of the world's top amp builders has never been in doubt, even if its products haven't always been as visible as the competition's. Now, it seems H&K is finding the worldwide acclaim it deserves, thanks to the Chinese-built TubeMeister range. On the back of this success, a new range-topper has just been released. Hold on to your seats...

Built into the same steel chassis as a TubeMeister 36, the GrandMeister's blue-LED lit, engraved Perspex front panel is a H&K staple, and it's the thing that polarises most people's opinions. But there's attention to detail everywhere you look (such as the chrome handles integrated into the tough plastic end caps), and the overall look hangs together very nicely to us.

Inside the chassis, the printed circuit board construction is up to the same standard we've come to expect over the years,

with high-quality components, flawless soldering and neatly routed wires. We've seen several H&K Chinese-made products and we've been unable to see any real difference from the German-made amps.

The GrandMeister is a significant upgrade to the TubeMeister 36, with an extra channel called Ultra, and because of the MIDI-controlled

preamp, each channel's gain, volume, boost on/off setting and EQ can be controlled entirely independently from the same set of knobs, which also edit the effects if you push the effects access button. On the TM models, MIDI controls most of the switching functions such as channel selection, effects loop on/off and so on, but here MIDI can control all the rotary pots,



The onboard effects are best edited via the GrandMeister's free iPad app



All the knob settings can be manipulated via MIDI and stored in preset patches

### The Rivals

Peavey's **Vypyr Tube 60** uses a pair of 6L6s and offers 24 amp models and 22 effects, with the capacity to use up to five simultaneously. For around £499, it's surprisingly good for the price. **Marshall's JVM205** head sells for around £895. It doesn't have the GM's effects or MIDI flexibility, but it's not far behind in terms of features and it has *that* name on the front panel. **Engl's Powerball II** will set you back about £1,500 at street prices and has four-channel flexibility with some great tones



The lead and ultra channels offer a titanic amount of gain for metalheads



Hook the GrandMeister up to the FSM 432 floor controller for easy live switching

too, with the exception of the global master volume. H&K calls these pots Smart Rotary Controls. 256 tiny resistors and switches make or break contact as the wiper moves and this precisely determines its position, which can be stored and recalled for each of the GrandMeister's four channels. The electronically-controlled value changes; the knob itself stays where you put it.

While the main signal path is analogue and mostly valve, the GrandMeister's other big temptation is the built-in digital effects, which include reverb and delay combined with a choice of chorus, phaser, flanger or tremolo. The reverb has a separate level control, and the other effects utilise the GrandMeister's preamp

controls in a secondary mode, with volume bass and mid corresponding to delay level, feedback and time, while treble and gain cover the modulation effects intensity and selection. The latter works in a familiar way, dividing the knob into four sections, one for each effect. As you turn the knob, the speed gets faster or slower before transitioning to the next effect. With a wide speed range in such a small distance, precise modulation settings are tricky using the front panel.

However, there's help at hand in the shape of a free iPad app, which connects via a MIDI interface and allows accurate real-time remote control, plus storage and recall. The edit/save/recall process could not be simpler. Throw in the famous

It'll turn the weediest single-coil pickup into a fire-breathing monster

Red Box DI output, with a choice of two switchable speaker emulations, a switchable series effects loop, the five-step switchable attenuator, a clever and highly effective noise gate, a line out and H&K's Tube Safety Control, which continually monitors and micro-biases the output valves, it seems that the GrandMeister has practically every feature a player could ask for.

### Sounds

The GrandMeister's oversized transformers and the clever TSC feature help to pull some

stunning sounds out of the matching 2x12 closed-back cabinet, from bouncy cleans with a sweet treble and a satisfying snap to lower strings, through classic blues and rock on the crunch channel, to modern lead and metal from the lead and ultra lead channels. The gain on tap from these last two – especially with the boost engaged – is epic. It'll turn the weediest single-coil pickup into a fire-breathing monster, while the EQ range can cover distinct Euro and USA metal tones with ease, something not every modern metal amp can do. It



The GM's MIDI control offers on-the-fly adjustment



The built-in attenuator gives you a wealth of versatility

doesn't favour any particular guitar; both a Strat and a PAF-loaded Les Paul sound equally good, with their individual characters clearly audible except at the high gain, where it's the amp rather than the guitar that you're hearing.

There's a little quantization or 'zipper' noise as you turn the programmable knobs, but it's practically inaudible live, and didn't distract us. Apart from this, the GrandMeister has superb low-noise performance, with hiss and hum down at levels that make it ideal for professional recording.

The effects are very good, especially the delay and chorus. The reverb is a warm digital spring facsimile that could be a tad darker, but will suit most tastes. The reverb tail increases

with the effect's level – typical of the attention to detail here. The versatility packed into this diminutive chassis is quite extraordinary, and with a little lift from any decent compressor, the GrandMeister is just as adept at cranking out authentic Nashville-approved chicken picking as it is lading the thickest seven-string metal filth we've heard from a non-solid state amp for some time. And, of course, you can go from one to the other in a few milliseconds with a tap on the FSM 432 foot controller, which can also run the GrandMeister in stompbox mode, letting you access channels and effects to taste.

### Verdict

We've seen some great amps over the past year, but almost

nothing comes close to the GrandMeister's blend of superlative tone, stylish looks and practically never-ending list of features – all of which work superbly well. Then there are the little details, such as the Red Box DI output changing when you switch between 18- and 36-watt output so you can get a lead boost through your PA send as well as your speakers. It all adds up to an experience that's not just gratifying, but great fun.

If H&K had stuck its neck out and given the GrandMeister a Wi-Fi or Bluetooth link to its iOS app, it would have been too good to be true (not to mention adding few hundred quid to the asking price). As it stands, you still get your money's worth, and then some. **G**

## Hughes & Kettner GrandMeister 36 head

**PRICE:** £1,129

**ORIGIN:** China

**TYPE:** All-valve preamp and power amp, with digital effects and control systems

**OUTPUT:** 36 watts RMS, switchable to 18, 5, 1 or zero

**VALVES:** 3x 12AX7, 4x EL84

**DIMENSIONS:** 446 (w) x 171 (h) x 152mm (d)

**WEIGHT (KG/LB):** 7.7/17

**CABINET:** Steel/plastic

**CHANNELS:** 4

**CONTROLS:** Global master volume, presence, resonance, channel volume, bass, mid, treble, gain, reverb, noise gate hard/soft.

Switches for channel select, boost, loop on/off, noise gate on/off, store, effects access, Red Box cabinet type, power switching

**FOOTSWITCH:** Optional FSM 432

MIDI foot controller accesses all functions in bank/patch or stompbox mode

**ADDITIONAL FEATURES:** Digital effects, noise gate, switchable boost, switchable series effects loop, line out, Red Box DI with switchable speaker emulation, TSC, MIDI in, out/thru sockets

**OPTIONS:** The FSM 432 (£169) is extra, but pretty essential for live use. Remote Control for Hughes & Kettner GrandMeister 36 iPad app (free)

**RANGE OPTIONS:** The TubeMeister range includes the TM36 head and combo (£849 and £1,089), the TM18 head and combo (£539 and £649) and the TM5 head and combo (£349 and £419). Extension cabs include the TM110 (£209), the TM112 (£349) and the TM212, as pictured, at £539

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GUITARIST RATING	★★★★★
Build quality	★★★★★
Features	★★★★★
Sound	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★

**Guitarist says:** One of the best amps H&K has ever made and totally desirable in all categories: a worthy Gold Award winner