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Markbass - CMD 121H Combo Amp

When he founded Markbass Amplification in 2001, Marco De Virgili sought to manufacture high-end sound reinforcement that would not only accurately reproduce bass frequencies but at the same time wouldn't color the natural sound of the instrument being played. Since that time, Markbass has built a reputation of combining state-of-the-art components with ultra-lightweight technology to create an innovative product line that addresses the requests and practical needs of working bassists without imposing a particular sound on the bass-playing community.

Upon first glance, the most striking aspect of the Markbass CMD 121H combo amp is its vibrant yellow and black color scheme. While this particular color combination might not suit everyone's tastes, I think it is very unique because it makes this amp instantly recognizable and distinct from combo amps manufactured by its competitors.



The cabinet that encloses the combo amp is constructed with a multi-ply poplar. Utilizing the ultra-lightweight advantages of neodymium speaker technology, the bold-looking 1x12" custom woofer was designed in conjunction with Italy's B&C Speakers. The cabinet also features a 1" compression driver with custom horn and a rear port.

The amplifier section of this combo amp contains a solid-state preamp, an analog power amp, and Markbass' proprietary digital power supply. It is virtually identical to that of the Little Mark II amplifier which is the best-selling unit of the entire Markbass product line and weighs just over 6 lbs., but the combo head of the CMD 121H delivers slightly less power with 450 watts into a 4 ohm cabinet or 280 watts into an 8 ohm cabinet.

The interface design of the CMD 121H is intuitive and easy to navigate. On the front panel, there are two different input options. There is a 1/4" input that can be used for either passive or active basses as well as a balanced XLR connection which will accommodate high-end acoustic upright pickup systems. These inputs provide upright bassists the opportunity to blend a direct signal with that from a microphone by connecting a standard instrument cable from a typical bridge-mounted pickup to the 1/4" connector of the CMD 121H while simultaneously amplifying the upright via a microphone through the balanced XLR input.

The front panel also features an on/off switch with blue LED light, master volume, gain control, and blue clip light. In addition to these controls, the CMD 121H contains an extremely flexible 4-band EQ section that permits you to add or subtract specific frequencies and supplies an enormous palette of tone-shaping options. The EQ consists of a low EQ, low mid EQ, high mid EQ,

and high EQ along with two special filters designed exclusively by Markbass, the VLE (Vintage Loudspeaker Emulator) and the VPF (Variable Preshape Filter). Each of the controls of the 4-band EQ cuts or boosts frequencies up to a generous 16 decibels at around 40 Hz, 360 Hz, 800 Hz, and 5 kHz, respectively. While all of the knobs turned very smoothly, I would prefer there to be center detents at the 12 o'clock position on most of the controls.

For me, the most exciting components of this combo amp are definitely the VLE and VPF filters. These two controls allow the user to dial in an array of classic to contemporary tones. For a mellow, retro sound such as that produced by a vintage amplifier, the VLE control can be used to filter out high frequencies. As you turn the VLE clockwise, the range of high frequencies that gets cut increases. The end result sounds similar to the tone knob on a passive bass. The VPF produces a mid-scoop by boosting lows around 35 Hz and highs at 10 kHz while at the same time cutting mids at 380 Hz. This produces a more modern sound and the classic slap bass tone. The amount of highs and lows that get boosted and mids that are cut increases as the VPF is turned clockwise.

The back panel of the combo head can be accessed through a velcro-secured, removable slot on top of the combo's housing. On the back panel, there are two speaker out connectors which allow you to connect either one or two speaker cabinets to the combo head. By default, the speaker cabinet is connected to the 1/4" speaker output. However, you could unplug the internal cabinet and drive an external cabinet through the 1/4" speaker output. You could even turn this combo amp into a small bass rig by using the internal speaker that is plugged into the 1/4" jack and connect the head to an additional speaker cabinet using the Neutrik speakon combo connector which will accept either a speakon or a 1/4" speaker cable.

Other features located on the back panel include an XLR line out that can deliver a balanced signal to a mixing board in a live performance setting or a recording console in the studio, a tuner out which can also send an unbalanced signal to another amp or recording device, an effects send and return, a ground lift switch, and a quiet, variable-speed fan that increases in velocity as the amp gets warmer. Even after hours of continued use, the CMD 121H only became moderately warm to the touch.

I tested the CMD 121H using four completely different basses, from a low-end Jazz bass to a high-end, custom-made instrument. With the tone controls set flat, I found that the CMD 121H certainly delivered what Markbass promised, a faithful replication of my instrument's natural tonal characteristics. With different EQ configurations, the CMD 121H produced everything from retro to edgier hi-fi tones, and it easily handled the low frequencies of a B-string on a 5-string bass with well-defined articulation.

The vertical-oriented construction of the CMD 121H combined with its weight of less than 40 lbs. and the top-positioned handle makes this combo amp very transportable. Considering its small footprint and weight, the CMD 121H provides an unbelievable amount of volume. It is more than enough to cover practically any performance situation you might find yourself playing. This combo amp generates so much output that I had a difficult time being able to tolerate the impressive loudness beyond the 9 o'clock position of the master volume.

Specifications:

Speaker: 1x12"

Tweeter: 1" compression driver with custom horn

Bass Reflex: Rear

Impedance: 8 ohms

Speaker Power Handling: 400W RMS (AES Standard)

Amp Output Power: (analog) 450W @ 4 ohm / 280W @ 8 ohm

Preamp: Solid state

Frequency Response: 45 Hz to 20 kHz

Crossover Frequency: 3.5 kHz

Sensitivity: 99 dB SPL

Weight: 39.5 lbs / 17.9 kg

Height: 23.6 in / 59.9 cm

Width: 15.3 in / 38.3 cm

Depth: 18.3 in / 46.4 cm

Made In Italy

Retail Price: \$1200

The Bottom Line

Regardless of whether you play a standard 4-string, an extended range bass, or acoustic upright, the CMD 121H is a versatile and compact combo amp capable of delivering a variety of world-class vintage and contemporary tones to suit any playing style or performance application. From clubs to the studio, this mid-level priced combo amp easily surpasses the flexibility of more expensive combos available from other high-end manufacturers. If you are seeking the power, performance, and portability required by today's professional bass players without spending an absurd amount of money, the CMD 121H is worth checking out.

Contact:

Markbass Amplification

Parsek SRL

Via Aterno, 44

66020 San Giovanni Teatino

Chieti Italy

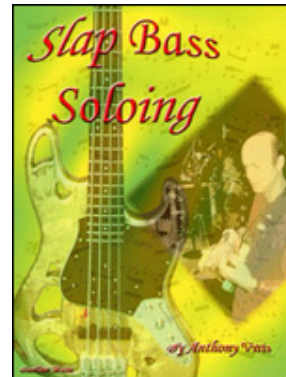
Web Site: Markbass.it

E-Mail: info@markbass.it

Reviewed By: Cliff Engel - September 18, 2006

Anthony Vitti - Slap Bass Soloing

Since establishing his own publishing company, DaaDoo Music, in 1995, Anthony Vitti has authored some of the most advanced publications for bass players covering topics such as slap bass, fingerstyle funk, and sight reading. In *Slap Bass Soloing*, Vitti presents a total of 60 slap bass examples and three songs that are geared towards those players who are already experienced with common slap bass techniques. Using a logically-structured method of musical grooves notated in eight-measure phrases, Vitti demonstrates how to construct slap bass lines and improvise solos using slap bass techniques. Within this book, there are 20 primary grooves, most of which are in the style of Marcus Miller's approach, and every groove consists of two additional variations. The first version outlines the basic theme, and each subsequent variation gets progressively more complex in rhythm, melody, and the technique required to play the groove. To guide you through the book, every group of variations contains a brief text summary by Vitti on how each example builds upon the previous one in phrasing and technical requirements. Towards the end of the book, Vitti has included three compositions of varying tempos, lengths, and keys in order to provide the opportunity to experiment with the techniques and lines outlined throughout the book. Along with the publication, you receive access to a web page where you can download MP3's of the drum grooves heard on the included CD, minus the bass track, for practicing the material. You can also download MP3's of Vitti soloing on the tunes as well as PDF files of the chord changes for each of the exercises.



The Bottom Line

Anthony Vitti is an associate professor of bass at the Berklee College of Music where he has instructed hundreds of students in contemporary playing styles. With *Slap Bass Soloing*, Vitti provides you the same content he has been developing for his students in classes and lessons since 1989. Although most of the lines in this book require a certain degree of slap bass proficiency to perform, even beginners with limited slapping experience can be inspired by these