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Heading: You Pay, You Get

Why bother with three phono preamps most of us can't afford? For the same reason the enthusiast automobile magazines cover the newest Ferraris and Lamborghinis: just *reading* about them is fun.

All three of these expensive phono preamps share certain sonic attributes not found in less costly, less ambitious units: all are free of "electronica" and glaze. Their edge definition of aural images is smoothly and naturally delineated. All three produce music on a grand, effortless scale. All, to varying degrees, are without easily identifiable sonic signatures, while reproducing harmonically and physically identifiable individual instruments into the deepest recesses of the soundstage. And each one let me easily suspend my disbelief and experience reproduced music as if it I were hearing it live.

Compare with any phono preamp costing \$1000–\$2000 and, good as such models can be, you'll immediately hear the scale of their sonic pictures diminish in all dimensions. Individual instruments will begin to smear together the farther back you listen. Dynamics will diminish at both ends of the scale, harmonic structures will start to unravel, and edges will blur. Your wide-eyed amazement at the pricier players' sound will turn to a disappointed grimace.

Using an excerpt of a sonically spectacular reissue of Donald Johanson and the Dallas Symphony's justly renowned 1967 recording of Rachmaninoff's *Symphonic Dances* (45rpm LPs, Vox Turnabout/Analogue Productions AP 54145), remastered at 24-bit/88.2kHz by David Hancock, and using Benchmark's ADC 1 A/D converter, I made recordings as played through all three phono preamps, as well as through the Boulder 2008 and a reasonably priced, well-engineered solid-state unit. I used these files for comparisons in my evaluations here, and played them for others without identifying which preamp was which. When the recording of the perfectly fine, *relatively* inexpensive solid-state phono preamp came up, their faces fell.



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While there are some genuine bargains in high-end audio, as there are in wines and automobiles, my mother's old adage still holds: "You pay, you get." With these three, you pay a lot and you get a lot.

Abbingdon Music Research PH-77 Reference Class Phono Equaliser

Beneath the gorgeous chassis of Abbingdon Music Research's tubed PH-77 Reference Class Phono Equaliser (\$11,995) is a true dual-mono phono preamplifier with unprecedented, microprocessor-controlled features. Its limitless flexibility includes 21 phono equalization curves in addition to RIAA, eight gain settings, from 30 to 72dB, and 32 loading options *each* for moving-magnet and moving-coil cartridges—all selectable at the push of a series of touch-sensitive buttons, either on the front panel or on the remote control. The generously sized fluorescent panel announces the setting choices, including cartridge brand.

Cartridge *brand*? Yes. You can choose from a long list that ranges from the well-known (Lyra, Shelter, Shure, etc.) to the exotic (Allaerts, 47 Labs, SPJ). Also aboard is a 24-bit/96kHz A/D converter, accessible via a USB port on the rear chassis.

The zero-negative-feedback circuit, which operates in pure, single-ended class-A, utilizes a hybrid first gain stage, half of which was adapted from UK designed "Advanced Gamma Tracking

Array" (AGATA) preamplifiers, with the second half comprised of NOS Mullard ECC81/12AT7 tubes, in a direct-coupled, zero-feedback configuration. 26 silver-foil coupling caps perform pure passive RC equalization (including RIAA). The second gain stage uses NOS Philips 5687WB tubes both for gain and to produce a low output impedance (<200 ohms). The PH-77 preserves absolute polarity at all gain and equalization settings.

According to an AMR press release, the PH-77's input stage is an adaptation of circuitry of extremely low noise that's used in quantum-particle research. The result is difficult to believe: a claimed level of input noise of -145dBV (0.056µV). The dual-mono power supply includes choke filtering, and tube rectification via a pair of NOS (new old stock) EZ80 tubes.

Curve Ball: The addition of various EQ curves is both useful and fraught with the potential for abuse. Most American companies adopted the RIAA curve in the mid-1950s, and by 1958 and the advent of stereo, almost all other US and European labels had followed suit. But before that, different record labels used various curves of their own.

For instance, AMR's own website claims that the original Mercury Living Presence series used Decca/London's *ffis* (stereo) and *ffir* (mono) curves. Yet the jacket of my original copy of Antal Dorati and the London Symphony performing Prokofiev's *The*

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Love for Three Oranges Suite (LP, Mercury Living Presence SR 90006, only the label's sixth stereo release) says that the record "should be played according to the RIAA standard"—as do all of the other Mercurys in my collection, both US and UK pressings. Ditto UK-pressed Deccas. AMR also claims that "original Miles Davis and Dave Brubeck" LPs on Columbia Records used Columbia's own early curve—yet Miles Davis didn't begin to record for Columbia until late October 1955 (his

first album for the label. *'Round About Midnight*, wasn't released until 1957), and by then Columbia had already switched to the RIAA curve.

How do I know? I contacted veteran Columbia mastering engineer Mark Wilder, who thought I was correct, but to be sure, he contacted some of the *really* veteran Columbia mastering engineers—those who'd been around in 1955. They confirmed, some with more certainty than others, that Columbia had made the switch to RIAA

on all their lathes by 1955.

Be my guest and use the PH-77's choices of curve as an equalizer to make your favorite records sound as you wish, but unless you have a large collection of pre-1955 monophonic LPs and/or 78s, most of the time you'll use—or should use—the RIAA setting (or the RIAA with the Neumann constant, which John Atkinson doesn't like¹; or the RIAA DMM setting, which I'd never heard of).

Four Inputs, Some Waiting: The AMR PH-77 has a single Direct input and three switchable ones. You can use either configuration, but going from Direct to switchable requires shutting the unit completely off—and you're advised to not plug simultaneously into both. While the three switchable inputs will offer great convenience for some, there was a sonic price to be paid in terms of transparency, three-dimensionality, and harmonic integrity compared to Direct. Therefore, I did all of my listening through the Direct input. You can

¹ See "Cut and Thrust," Keith Howard's treatise on RIAA equalization in the March 2009 issue, www.stereophile.com/features/cut_and_thrust_riaa_lp_equalization. —Ed.

have convenience or optimized sound quality, but you can't have both at the same time.

Whatever your desires in loading, gain, and phono EQ, they're but a button-press or two away, once you've mastered the hierarchy. You can also custom-load your cartridge with plug-in resistors, if the built-in values don't suit it. Output is either via single-ended RCA or "convenience" XLR (*ie*, the single-ended output is available on an XLR but there is not an actual balanced output).

Sweet Sound! I can't vouch for that -147dB noise spec—John Atkinson will be writing a "Measurements" follow-up" in a future issue—but I can say that the PH-77 was remarkably quiet, even through its higher gain settings. In fact, it was subjectively just about as quiet as the solid-state phono preamps reviewed here. Quiet musical passages unfolded against dead-black silence. With nothing on the turntable and my ear pressed to a tweeter, I heard only a faint, smooth hiss at my normal volume level.

The PH-77 produced the easy mu-

sical flow and harmonic richness and delicacy that only tube amplification seems to offer, ramped up a few notches with the addition of tube rectification. Those who relish tubes' sense of unimpeded musical flow will revel in the PH-77's liquidity and continuousness. While rich and full, instrumental textures were not too ripe or romanticized. Attacks were reasonably fast and properly sharp, yet supple. Cymbals sizzled nicely, and kick drums had both solid body and convincing physical definition. Acoustic and electric bass lines unfurled with their rhythmic and harmonic structures intact, though the PH-77's character in the bottom end was more suited to the acoustic instrument. Unlike some tubed phono preamps, the PH-77 completely avoided the combination of rhythmic sluggishness and loss of bottom-end definition with exaggerated image size and lack of control.

The AMR's overall tonality was subjectively linear, and free of the warm lumps on bottom or curtailed highs some listeners associate with tubes. Instrumental harmonic structures were

vividly painted with a full palette of colors. Well-recorded massed strings had a realistic golden sheen, with more than enough detail and bite to satisfy, while brass sparkled with metallic intensity instead of descending into velvety romanticism.

Were you to have heard through the PH-77 my *ffss* pressing of Falla's *Nights in the Gardens of Spain* backed with Rodrigo's *Concierto de Aranjuez*, with Ataulfo Argenta conducting the National Orchestra of Spain (LP, London CS 6046), you'd surely have blurted "I'll take it!" That's how richly and delicately drawn, in three dimensions, were the elements of the orchestra, free of electronic artifacts, on a wide, deep soundstage against a black backdrop pierced by Narciso Yepes's precisely rendered classical guitar. And I could go from those recordings, of great delicacy and beauty, to the new Experience Hendrix/Sony Legacy AAA Jimi Hendrix reissues and not feel seriously shortchanged by the PH-77's rendering of rock music.

Still, if your musical diet consists mostly of rock, and amplified music in

general, I think you'd be better off elsewhere. But for jazz and classical? Play some tracks from some choice new reissues—say, *The Nat King Cole Story* (45rpm LPs, Capitol/Analogue Productions APP-SWCL 1613), or Johnny Hartmann's *I Just Dropped By to Say Hello* (LP, Impulse!/ORG 027)—and you won't need any convincing.

The PH-77 is a sweet, tonally well-balanced, quiet performer that produced a large, authoritative sonic picture packed with honest detail. Its weakest suit was its inability to produce full macrodynamic expression. While it was good in that regard, it was noticeably less fully expressed than through the other phono preamps surveyed here, though I noticed the difference only in direct comparisons, and because my Wilson MAXX 3 speakers exude dynamic explosiveness.

The PH-77's A/D converter is a nice convenience if you are wanting to rip your LPs, and while 24/96 doesn't make much sense if you're burning 16/44.1 CD-Rs, it makes *complete* sense if you're storing full-resolution files on a music server like the Sooloos—as I found out.

I hope AMR can introduce a less expensive version of the PH-77 with only a single, direct input—I think most serious listeners won't be using the switchable inputs of this superlative-sounding phono preamp.

Boulder Amplifiers 1008 phono preamplifier

Your \$12,000 can get you the tubed AMR PH-77 or the new solid-state Boulder 1008. Though the two models are built with equal care and perform with equal refinement, they couldn't have sounded more different.

While even at \$12,000 the single-chassis dual-mono 1008 costs only about a third as much as the dual-chassis 2008 (\$34,000), its build quality, like that of all Boulder gear, is impeccable. Even people who don't like Boulder's

house sound will grant them that. The fully balanced 1008 has XLR inputs and outputs. Boulder can supply properly configured single-ended adapters if needed (I did, for the input connection) but for optimum performance, the company suggests rewiring your tonearm leads with XLR connectors.

The 1008 has two logic-controlled inputs, each with its own configurable, rear-mounted “personality card,” and two outputs, one of which can be used for recording. In addition to RIAA, the 1008 includes the Decca *ffrr*, Columbia, and EMI curves for “LP records made prior to 1954,” the press release sensibly states. The front panel boasts buttons for a 20Hz low-cut filter and a true Mono mode. How Boulder manufactures these *buttons* requires a full column!

DIP switches mounted on the “personality cards” select between MM (44dB) or MC (70dB) cartridges, but if the 100 ohm MC default resistors don't meet your needs (they were ideal for mine), setting a different load will require soldering in resistors. With the resistor removed, the MC load is 1k ohm; in MM, the setting is the standard 47k ohms.

I wish I had more space to go into greater detail about the 1008's circuitry. I'll just say that it also includes a new, potted, fully discrete 985 op-amp gain stage that provides 6dB greater gain (for a total of 26dB for each gain stage) than the 995 used in the 2008, but with no additional noise.

Massive Attack! For comparison's sake, Boulder also sent along a sample of their 2008 phono preamp (\$34,000), which I reviewed in the July 2002 *Stereophile* (Vol.25 No.7). Immediately obvious was that both the 2008 and 1008 were capable of producing massive dynamic swings well beyond the AMR PH-77's generally adequate dynamic capabilities.

Once, a manufacturer refused to give me his product to review because I'd

liked the Boulder 2008. “Clearly, you like hi-fi and not music,” he said. I was taken aback then, and now, listening again to the 2008, I still don't understand his remark. The 2008 is as honest- and musical-sounding a *solid-state* phono preamplifier as you're going to hear.

Like the 2008, the far less expensive 1008 was neither bright nor etched nor hi-fi sounding—unless the record or the associated equipment was. In fact, the 1008's basic tonal character was somewhat reserved, slightly soft, and almost on the dark side of neutral, in a stately, burnished sense. The midrange was slightly recessed, certainly in comparison with the AMR, but the top octaves were anything but dry or overetched, and the lower ones were neither overdamped nor too tightly sprung, and thus lacking in suppleness and texture. Image resolution and information retrieval were impressive, though the 2008 can extract even more.

Late one evening I played, at a realistically low level, Shostakovich's Symphony 12, “The Year 1917,” with Kiril Kondrashin conducting the Leningrad Philharmonic (LP, Melodiya/EMI ASD 2598). It's a dark, distant, but spectacular recording, and I could “see” into the darkest recesses of the stage, hearing not only each section of the orchestra, but the individual instruments in each, reproduced with clarity, body, texture, and harmonic integrity. It produced a thrill ride as vivid as watching *Avatar* in 3D IMAX.

The rock-stable, cleanly delineated soundstage produced by either Boulder spread well beyond the outer baffle edges of my speakers. Aural images were tightly compacted, finely drawn and sized, and notably solid, their physical boundaries cleanly rendered but free of etch and edge.

Still, if you savor the AMR PH-77's liquidity and flow, you might find the Boulder and most other solid-state phono preamps, if not all of them, to



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sound analytical and “electronic.” I didn’t.

Interestingly, direct comparisons revealed that the 1008 produced richer mid-range frequencies than the 2008, resulting in a tonal presentation that was more fleshy and harmonically more vivid, though it could at times sound soft and less detailed—as if Boulder’s voicing of the 1008 were in reaction to some of the criticism leveled at the 2008. The 1008 didn’t grip the bottom octaves as tightly as the 2008, but which you’ll prefer in that regard might depend on your system. The 1008’s top end was also somewhat less extended and a bit more soft, though not so much as to mute instrumental attack. If your problem with the 2008 was too much etch, the 1008 might be far more to your liking—but I wouldn’t recommend using it with a cartridge with a similarly restrained top octave, such as the My Sonic Labs Eminent EX.

The Boulder 2008’s soundstage was more concisely drawn than the 1008’s, the images on it more finely rendered, the bottom octaves somewhat better controlled, and the macrodynamics somewhat less restrained—but the 1008’s somewhat more bloomy midrange and forgiving top end might make it more appealing to many, especially for one-third the price. At \$12,000, dare I call it the more *affordable* Boulder?

Vitus Audio MP-P201 Master-piece Series Phono Preamp

This massive, two-box beauty from Denmark costs \$60,000, and I wish I could tell you it wasn’t *really* better in most ways than the already outlandishly priced and sonically superb Boulder 2008. I can’t.

No one spends this kind of money on a phono preamp unless its appearance and functionality are commensurate with its sound, and in the MP-P201 they are—even if there’s only the RIAA curve, and no Mono button. However, what will get wealthy enthusiasts to drain \$60k from their bank accounts will be the Vitus’s unmistakably astonishing sound. Plug it in, play it, and compare it with *whatever* you own, and unless you are a confirmed tubeaholic, if you’ve got the krone, prepare to shell out. Designer Hans-Ole Vitus



PHOTO: MICHAEL FREMER

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claims that this method has already sold more than a few units of his mundanely named product.

The Vitus includes switchable, independently configurable balanced and single-ended inputs and a single balanced output. Pushbuttons select and save input sensitivity (125–500 μ V for MC) and loading for each input, the name of which can be selected from a list of 10 popular cartridge brands—or, in Text mode, you can enter your own.

Vitus offers a choice of four dealer-installed modules for resistive loading, only one of which can be installed at a time. Each includes 16 different resistances. Two are MC only, and two offer both low impedance loading and 47k ohms, for those who have MC and MM cartridges. No alternate capacitive loadings are offered, but really—how many buyers will use an MM cartridge with a \$60,000 phono preamp?

Oh, no! In direct comparisons with the Boulder 2008, the Vitus MP-P201 produced more of everything that anyone would want to hear from a solid-state phono preamp—and for twice the price but with considerably less functionality, it had better well! The first late evening I spent with it had me yelling, loudly and often, to no one in particular, “Are you f---ing kidding me?”

Just when I thought the dynamic and spatial potentials of an LP had been fully expressed, just when I thought the resolution of inner detail of the other top contenders I’ve heard had revealed all that was engraved in the grooves of some overly familiar vinyl, the Vitus

proved me so wrong. Even casual listeners—such as my skeptical next-door neighbor, who visits periodically to hear the latest insanity—exclaimed profanely when he heard his requests through the Vitus.

Often, great amplifiers are described as “gripping” and “holding” the loudspeakers. The Vitus MP-P201 did that to the signal coming from the cartridge as no other phono preamp has in my experience. That effect rippled through the signal chain, improving the performance of everything it touched, and finally tightening its grip on the speakers themselves. It wasn’t at all subtle—as a visiting speaker manufacturer

heard the other day. Nor did it sound too mechanical or dry or “electronic”—though again, if you primarily value the continuousness and flow of tubes, while you’ll be respectful of what the MP-P201 achieves, you might not be as impressed as I was.

The MP-P201’s dynamic presentation at both ends of the scale was nothing short of *ridiculous*. Its bass extension, control, and weight were granitic. Its ability to tonally and spatially retrieve and resolve instruments and voices within a narrow frequency band produced a constant barrage of new information from some very familiar recordings.

Unexpected voices and instruments appeared in three-dimensional space from the most familiar recordings. These familiar recordings are almost part of my DNA, so suddenly hearing something completely new and obvious produced many “WTF” moments. Even after having sat mesmerized by that Shostakovich LP through both Boulders, hearing it now through the Vitus MP-P201 was yet another revelation of what’s possible from vinyl playback specifically, and from musical reproduction in the home in general. The Vitus drew a line in the sand of its soundstage that produced images of the fronts of orchestras *way* back in space, with an unprecedented solidity and certainty of location. Every aspect of the spatial picture was equally solid and convincing, including the front-to-back layering of orchestral sections—even though this Melodiya/EMI is a very distant recording.

Nor did such a degree of delineation sound artificial. It sounded as natural as when I hear the New York Philharmonic in Avery Fisher Hall, with imaging, soundstaging, and depth just as easily audible—not as compartmentalized musical workstations, but as part of an organic whole that some skeptics claim doesn't exist when you hear symphonic music live. It does.

The Vitus MP-P201's speed, transparency, three-dimensionality, frequency extension, rhythmic ability, musical grip, and any other parameter you could name—with the exception of what only tubes can do—took the overall sound to a new, exalted level. That Shostakovich performance sounded as convincingly “live” as I've ever heard from a recording—except through the Ypsilon VPS-100 tubed phono preamp (\$27,700), which I reviewed in my August 2009 column.

If you can look yourself in the eye and spend \$60,000 on a phono preamp, you need to hear Vitus Audio's MP-P201. You need to hear it even if you *haven't* got the \$60k—just so you know what awaits you, should you strike it rich. ■

IN HEAVY ROTATION

- 1) Joni Mitchell, *Court and Spark*, Reprise 180gm LP
- 2) Acid Mothers Temple, *Are We Experimental?*, Prophase LPs (2)
- 3) Jimi Hendrix, *Axis: Bold as Love*, Experience Hendrix/Sony/Legacy 180gm LP
- 4) Bob Thompson, *The Sound of Speed*, Bachus/Sundazed 180gm LP
- 5) Muddy Waters, *I'm Ready*, Columbia/Pure Pleasure 180gm LP
- 6) Lee Morgan, *Search for the New Land*, Blue Note/Music Matters 180gm 45rpm LPs (2)
- 7) Duke Ellington, *Meets Coleman Hawkins*, Impulse!/Analogue Productions 180gm 45rpm LPs (2)
- 8) Nirvana, *Unplugged in New York*, DGC/ORG 180gm LP
- 9) Muse, *Absolution*, Warner Bros. 180gm LPs (2)
- 10) Michael Brecker, *Pilgrimage*, Heads Up/Mobile Fidelity Sound Lab 180gm LPs (2)

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