

The **Audio Critic** is a biweekly advisory service and technical review for consumers of sophisticated audio equipment. To maintain total dedication to the consumer's point of view, **The Audio Critic** carries no advertising by commercial interests. Any conclusion, rating, recommendation, criticism or caveat published by **The Audio**

The Audio Critic

Critic represents the personal findings and judgments of the Editor and the Staff, based only on the equipment available to their scrutiny and on their knowledge of the subject, and is therefore not offered to the reader as an infallible truth nor as an irreversible opinion applying to all extant and forthcoming samples of a particular product.

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Clearing Out Our Preamplifier and Pre-preamp Backlog

Now that our publishing schedule is becoming regular and predictable, we're up against a new and different problem: the red tape and labyrinthine protocols of the post office with regard to second-class mailing.

It will take us several issues in this new format to debug our second-class sorting and posting procedures to the point where there will be no more hitches and surprises. Until then, you might have to wait a little longer than two weeks between two Bulletins and then suddenly receive a third Bulletin only a few days later, or perhaps even find two consecutive Bulletins in your mailbox on the same day. After Bulletin 4 or 5, deliveries should settle down to an almost perfectly regular biweekly rhythm; meanwhile our chief concern is the accuracy and reliability of our mailing system, not its speed. As long as you're getting all the Bulletins without fail, the gap between the publication date and the delivery date is less important, at least for the moment; we certainly don't want to postdate our mastheads in anticipation of delayed deliveries. The one thing we can't do is go back to first-class mail; it's unaffordable even at the present rates, let alone those coming in the spring. A properly tuned second-class system can be expected to be almost as fast and equally reliable.

Another unexpected problem arising from our new format is that a change in our Reference A or Reference B system may be listed one or two issues before the new reference component is actually reviewed. This simply can't be helped; we must publish the reviews we have ready and waiting if we want to maintain our biweekly schedule, and yet we can't lie to you about what we're using in our reference systems at press time. Please live with the unexplained new listing for a few weeks; it's still a lot better than not being told anything at all about it.

New preamps and step-up devices are coming in for testing almost every week, necessitating this mop-up of our late-1980 leftovers. At this point it seems that the **Robert Grodinsky Research Model Four** preamp, reviewed in Vol. 2, No. 3 (our last issue in the old magazine-like format), will be a hard act to follow. The transparency, definition, stereo imaging, transient attack and dynamic range of this \$650 unit (even further improved in the final production version, which we now have) set a new standard that some of the costliest preamplifiers fall considerably short of. The only possible exception is the insanely expensive **Mark Levinson ML-7**, which may very well end up as our Reference A preamp after the conclusion of our current investigations. We'll tell you when we're absolutely sure; meanwhile at less than one sixth the price the RGR Model Four is hanging in there, fighting.

Don't misinterpret, therefore, our reviews of the three very respectable preamps below as "unfavorable" just because we like them less than the RGR. A year or two ago we could have mustered quite a bit of enthusiasm for any of them. It's just that the RGR appears to present more information to our ears when inserted into our Reference A system. In the final analysis, that's a subjective determination, since the only way to find out exactly how much information is pressed into that vinyl groove is to play it and listen. You can't crawl inside it with surveying instruments and then check your listening tests against a map. That doesn't mean, however, that orgiastic subjectivity in reviewing, with quasi-pornographic descriptions of warmth, liquidity, brown velvet, goose bumps on the neck, etc., is just as valid as our approach. Concepts like "clarity" and "detail" still remain a little closer to the objective end of the subjective spectrum.

Preamplifier:

Carver C-4000

Carver Corporation, PO Box 664, 14304 NE 193rd Place, Woodinville, WA 98072. Model C-4000 Sonic Holography and Auto-correlation Preamplifier, \$960. Three-year warranty; manufacturer pays return freight. Tested #003707C, on loan from manufacturer.

The Carver control console needs to be reviewed in two parts: (1) as a phono preamplifier, which is what we're concerned with in this issue, and (2) as a signal processor of

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unique capabilities, which are independent of the signal source (phono, tape, tuner or anything else) and will be treated separately in a future issue devoted to suchlike matters. We can tell you right here and now, though, that Sonic Holography à la Carver isn't the way we prefer to listen to music day in and day out, no matter how intriguing it is in small doses.

Considered simply as a phono preamp, the C-4000 is still unlike all the others in that Phono 1 and Phono 2 are totally different circuits with different RIAA equalization and different sounds. Phono 1 was designed as a high-performance, low-noise FET preamp with standard equalization. Actually, the equalization error is +0.2 dB between 200 Hz and 500 Hz, followed by a gradual drop to -0.8 dB for a long flat stretch between 4.5 kHz and 17 kHz. That's a total error strip of 1 dB width, which was definitely unintended according to Bob Carver and will be corrected in future production runs. Phono 2, on the other hand, is a cheaper and somewhat noisier circuit with a "formatted" RIAA curve deliberately shaped (by ear!) to match the sound of an early Audio Research SP-6 tube preamp—again according to Bob Carver. That's a new one on us. The error strip in this case is a full 3 dB wide and the error curve looks like a roller coaster: bass boost, upper-midrange bump, mid-high trough, top-end boost. Of course, it's no error, really, but a kind of built-in, nonadjustable tone control.

The two phono circuits sound somewhat different, but neither one comes even close to the openness, definition and sheer see-through "thereness" of the RGR Model Four. Thus their dissimilarities are academic. It must be remembered, on the other hand, that the phono preamp section represents a very small fraction of the total value of the C-4000, with its myriad functions and 32 front-panel controls. As a minimal, straight-through preamp it would probably fall into a much lower price category. Furthermore, the sound is never unpleasant or fatiguing; it's always highly listenable even if vaguely wrong in balance and presence. No Carver product can be accused of sounding unmusical.

Preamplifier:

Counterpoint SA-1

Counterpoint Electronic Systems, Inc., 342 North Foothill Road, Beverly Hills, CA 90210. SA-1 Dual-Channel Tube Preamplifier, \$1595. Tested #298SK-DE9, on loan from manufacturer.

This beautifully made tube preamp tries to look exactly like a Mark Levinson solid-state unit: similarly proportioned low-profile black chassis (that takes some doing with tubes!) identical knobs, identically shaped separate power supply. We aren't sold on this me-too visual approach; on the other hand, we must admit that the Counterpoint sounds awfully good. By itself, without any A/B comparisons, it creates the impression of one of the finest preamps available—transparent, correctly focused and without dynamic strain. You could say a Beveridge-like sound (RM-1a, that is). A/B-ed against the RGR Model Four, however, it sounds a bit thick, slow and closed-in—but only by comparison. There's also a little edgy bite on top that becomes gradually apparent after the initial favorable impact. None of these negative impressions can be characterized as anything more than slight.

We measured a 5-microsecond rise time through the line amplifier, which is a bit on the slow side, especially in series with other relatively slow links in an audio chain. (Rise times add up roughly as rms sums; 5 μ s followed by 5 comes out as 7. Another 4 in series could make it a little over 8, and so on.

With electrostatic speakers or ribbon tweeters, that sort of thing can become audible in the end. A faster line amp would be desirable.)

The RIAA equalization is just about perfect at the higher frequencies, but in the "flat" position of the LF filter switch there's actually a slight bass boost: +0.6 dB at 20 Hz in the less good channel of our sample. No big deal. The 15-Hz and 25-Hz filter positions have little or no influence on the equalization above 40 Hz.

The same tube type is used in the Counterpoint as in the Beveridge (E88CC/6DJ8); substituting tubes carrying the same designation but of another brand degraded the sound quite audibly. That kind of typical unpredictability would be justifiable only if the best achievable performance with selected tubes were vastly superior to that of solid-state preamps, which is certainly not the case in 1981.

Preamplifier:

Gordon

Gordon Instruments, PO Box 794, Blacksburg, VA 24060. Gordon preamplifier, \$1600 (made to order). Tested #11, on loan from manufacturer.

The only way you can own this highly unusual and distinctive preamp is to get in touch with G. Grant Carpenter, its designer, and have one made to order. The version we tested had a high-gain, RIAA-equalized MC preamp followed by a line amplifier; it can also be ordered with a more conventional low-gain phono stage, but we don't believe there's much demand for it that way.

The design has tremendous intellectual and aesthetic appeal by virtue of its conceptual purism. Conceived as an all-FET circuit from the ground up, without any analogies to established tube or bipolar transistor configurations, the Gordon preamp sets up the simplest possible signal path with no feedback whatsoever and uses completely passive equalization for the RIAA playback characteristic. Visually and mechanically the preamp adheres to the same ideology; the chassis is a smooth, flat, black brick with aged walnut end blocks, and the only movable knob on the small front panel is the volume control. Source switching is purely electronic, without moving parts, by means of special touch-activated controls. The phono function isn't even visible; when all the other controls are out, you're in phono. That's minimalism with a vengeance.

We would dearly love to report that this relentless simplification results in the best sound we've ever heard; unfortunately the sound is merely very good—smooth, dynamic, detailed and nonfatiguing. The RGR Model Four in combination with the Cotter MK-2L transformer sounds quite a bit more transparent, however, with superior definition and a larger apparent sound stage. It might be simply the old transformer vs. head amp difference (see also Vol. 2, No. 3, p. 30)—and the Gordon does have an excellent head amp.

On the lab bench the only little anomaly we could discern was a -0.5 dB saddle at 180 Hz in the RIAA error curve in one channel. The other channel was within ± 0.15 dB, except for the -0.25 dB droop at 20 Hz characteristic of both channels. Nothing to get excited about.

After several conversations with the designer, we feel there's an outside possibility that the particular sample we tested wasn't in absolutely perfect condition. A follow-up review is therefore being considered.

Records & Recording

We're still waiting for a digital recording that successfully mimics real music to our ears in the upper registers. Should we come across one in the near future, our enthusiasm in this column will be unbounded; meanwhile it remains our feeling that the current adulation of 16-bit digital with a 50,000-per-second sampling rate is due to insufficiently high expectations by the canned-music community. So here goes another analog oldie.

Philips

Little Marches by Great Masters (marches for winds by Beethoven, C. P. E. Bach, Haydn and others). The Netherlands Wind Ensemble. Philips 6599 172 (made in 1972).

This delicious little bonbon of a record had been gathering dust on our "miscellaneous" shelf until we resurrected it for a recent listening test of new equipment and realized that we had never reviewed it. It happens to be a really clean recording of a not very large band of woodwinds, brasses and percussion in a flattering acoustical ambience, with spectacular transients, good localization of instruments, nice front-to-back depth, and undistorted climaxes. Very believable, ungimmicked sound, though multimiked of course and with the somewhat overbright but still listenable quality of properly used Neumanns (we think). It's 9 years old, to be sure, but the genre hasn't really been improved since.

The music is very lightweight Beethoven, Haydn and what have you, proving that a military *pièce d'occasion* by a "great master" isn't automatically superior to one by John Philip Sousa, but all the music on the record is unfailingly bright and bouncy, and the playing is excellent. The Netherlands Wind Ensemble was at the time one of the best groups of its kind in Europe, conducted by Edo de Waart, who is for some reason not identified on this record.

All in all, this is a very persuasive alternative to a digital recording of the Saint Stanislas Manual Trades School Band on some small audiophile label.

—Ed.

Pre-preamp:

Marcof PPA-2

Marcof Electronics, 7509 Big Bend Boulevard, Webster Groves, MO 63119. PPA-2 moving-coil pre-preamplifier, \$250. Two-year warranty. Tested #020140, on loan from manufacturer.

The PPA-2 looks exactly like the PPA-1 (see reviews in Vol. 2, No. 1 and No. 2) but contains more circuit components in a more sophisticated configuration, permitting gain and impedance selection. It's still battery-operated, but the turn-on thump of the PPA-1 has been eliminated.

The sound is considerably improved over that of the PPA-1. The bass is more solid, the focus and imaging are better, the dynamic range appears to be wider, and there's lower noise. In fact, the PPA-2 is in all these respects the best step-up device for the money we've tested so far and is now in our Reference B system. That goes, however, only for its 27-dB gain position; when set for 34 dB gain it seems to have inadequate dynamic headroom (at least with our reference cartridge), acquiring an unpleasant edge and hardness on top. We don't find the impedance setting of 7.5 or 30 ohms critical.

Lest anyone should think we've found a transformer beater, let's hasten to add that both the Cotter and RWR transformers are still considerably superior. But also a lot more expensive.

Pre-preamp:

PS Audio

PS Audio, 3130 Skyway Drive, #301, Santa Maria, CA 93454. PS moving-coil amplifier, \$180. Tested final production version, on loan from manufacturer.

Now that we've looked at the final production version of the PS pre-preamp reviewed in Vol. 2, No. 3, we can report that it's somewhat different from the prototype, with more circuitry in it, but sounds just as good. Smoothness and transparency are its chief attributes, but the new Marcof PPA-2 has wider dynamics, better transient attack, deeper bass and lower noise. On the other hand, the PS is AC-powered from the wall and costs \$70 less, which isn't a negligible amount in this price range.

If you don't mind paying the difference and occasionally changing batteries, we recommend the Marcof, but the PS is also very good and will probably keep you happy.

Reference Systems

Reference A (the best we've tested so far)

Quad electrostatic loudspeaker with **Janis W-1** subwoofer; optional **Pyramid T-1** ribbon tweeter; **Octave Research** power amp with **Janis Interphase 1A** bass amplifier/crossover; **Robert Grodinsky Research Model Four** preamp; **Fidelity Research MC-201** moving-coil cartridge with **Cotter MK-2L** transformer; **Win Laboratories SDC-10** turntable with **SDA-10** tonearm.

Alternative substitution at a huge saving: **Fourier 1** full-range speaker, also driven by Octave Research or **The Leach Superamp** (more dynamic headroom but a little less definition and transparency than with Octave Research).

Reference B (best sound per dollar)

Fourier 1 full-range speaker; **Amber Series 70** power amp; **Robert Grodinsky Research Model Four** preamp; **Marcof PPA-2** pre-preamp; **Fidelity Research MC-201** moving-coil cartridge; **Kenwood KD-650** turntable/tonearm; optional **Platter Matter** turntable mat and **Cotter B-2** isolation platform.

Low-priced substitution at some sacrifice in sound quality: **DCM QED** speaker.

* * *

Note: The Fourier 1 speaker will be available sometime in March, according to the best present estimate.

Box 392

Letters to the Editor

Please note that a technically argumentative letter is of editorial value only if the argument sheds some new light on the subject or else reflects a widespread misconception. One man's individual techno-hang-ups, mathematical errors or learning problems are better dealt with in private than in this column. Unfortunately, we receive a lot of such letters but don't always have the time for private correspondence. Letters published here may or may not be excerpted, at the discretion of the Editor. Ellipsis (. . .) indicates omission. Address all editorial correspondence to The Editor, The Audio Critic, Box 392, Bronxville, New York 10708.

The Audio Critic:

If you folks truly believe that digital is our present enemy in commercial recording, then I wish you'd get off your kick of high-priced audiophile test-record reviews and make a few supportive statements concerning the better commercial analog efforts still in production.

To be sweepingly general, I find recordings on the large labels (Philips, Argo,

DGG, EMI, etc.) to be more musical and less flawed in performance than "audiophile" efforts that can't afford top-notch musicianship. Reviews of specialty albums are fine but need to be tempered by some of the better big-label LP's.

Sincerely,
Richard A. Duplisa
Fort Collins, CO

We wholeheartedly agree with the basic thrust of your sentiments but need to point out certain specifics:

1. *Digital recording is the "enemy" only in its present underdeveloped format and implementation. If the industry were able to convert to 18-bit digital with 120,000 samples per second, we'd be deliriously happy. Analog techniques would be dead and gone.*

2. *We do give credit to the big labels where credit is due. Out of the 25 recordings we've reviewed so far, at least 6 or 7 could be classified as big-label. (See the Philips review in this Bulletin.)*

3. *The big labels definitely have the best artists and the musically most expert producers, but they're inclined to drag their feet when it comes to acquiring the best microphones (such as the B & K 4133) and cleaning up the signal paths in their tape*

decks and multichannel consoles. Not to mention getting rid of the consoles altogether. Absolute professionalism tends to be an uneasy combination of superior know-how and resistance to finesse.

—Ed.

The Audio Critic:

If records were cut with pivoted arms (rather than straight-line), servo controlled for optimized groove spacing, properly set up (overhang and offset) for correct null points, then would not those records be a cinch to track with a properly set up tone arm, with no tracking error?

Dick Kritzer
Effingham, IL

You're quite right; as a matter of fact, Andy Rappaport suggested the same idea to us a number of years ago.

Such a cutter mechanism would be nightmarishly difficult to design, however (just think of the sidethrust correction, among other things); what's more, the new standard would be 100% compatible only with playback arms of a given effective length and result in slight errors with all others.

We'd much rather dream about straight-line tracking arms that don't cost too much and really work. Maybe in 1984 . . .

—Ed.

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