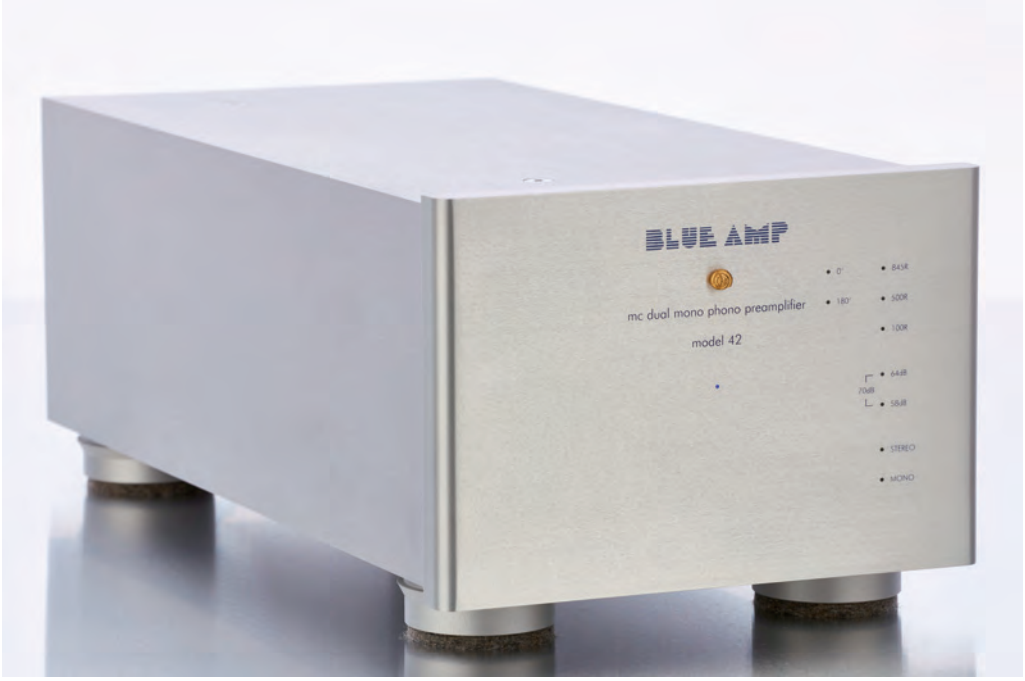
HIFI STATEMENT
NETMAGAZINE



TEST.

Blue Amp Model 42 MK III

29.02.2016 // DIRK SOMMER

It wouldn't be very much surprising if you, albeit being a proven aficionado of analogue playback techniques, haven't yet come across a company named Blue Amp – although they have been offering very well-reputed phono preamps for about 20 years now. On the one hand, this fine piece of electronics is a rare product of luxury, on the other hand, Blue Amp does without any kind of marketing.

Blue Amp mirrors Rolf Becker's passion for music and its ways of analogue playback. As a certified radio and TV technician, besides being an engineer for bio-medical technology as well, he, of course, designs his phono amps all by himself, and he doesn't outsource the manufacturing for reasons of quality either. The enclosures obviously are purchased from third parties, but Rolf Becker equips and solders the circuit boards himself by hand. Such a close proximity to one's own product is extremely rare to find in times normally tied to high volumes and sales figures, especially because the highly professional manufacturing of the Blue Amps is effected in addition to a demanding full-time job in a different field, and thus practically files under leasure enjoyment. Anyone who has ever spoken to Rolf Becker about his products or even about analogue music reproduction is going to be – like me – firmly convinced, that engaging himself in these matters really is a matter of heart to him. However, notwithstanding the fun side of things there are a few issues that Rolf Becker is not even willing to discuss: his phono preamps are exclusively designed to work with moving-coil cartridges and feature balanced inputs only. This philosophy already applies to the Model Blue MK II, the entry-level model priced at 2.400 euros. The Model Surzur, which on the website is recommended as the intermediate model, builds the bridge to Blue Amp's best-choice model which has been available since the beginning of the year in the MKIII version, also equipped with balanced connections on the output section.

The simple, elegant exterior of Model 42 does not carve out all the efforts it has been built with

Let us briefly recall the symmetry aspect: When we first met, Rolf Becker not only brought along a 42 – at time an MK II version – but also a single moving coil cartridge and a complete Thorens turntable escorted by lots of long cables, which he used to vividly and convincingly demonstrate to me the advantages of a balanced signal processing. And with his little, educationally valuable spectacle, he really would have made me convinced of the immense advantages of the balanced amplification of sensitive signals - if I hadn't been it for decades! Hum problems, radio interferences in the audio system and short clicks when operating power switches of, for example, lamps near the turntable are things of the past within my audio system, since I chose the balanced

All settings are subtly displayed on the front panel. This allows the Blue Amp to be operated safely and comfortably even without looking at the labeling of the switches

version of Einstein's The Turntable's Choice to take over the amplification. Moreover, an MC cartridge is one of the few genuine balanced source components. However, in contrast to an un-balanced circuitry, a balanced one requires double the number of components and a considerably higher grade of selection – for only when both circuit branches are largely identical, an effective common-mode rejection and thus electrical noise suppression can be achieved. Opposed to this, of course, there are the aforementioned sonic advantages. To be honest, Rolf Becker's commitment to balanced signal processing charged an open door with me.

His proposal, to delay the test of the 42 until one of the first models of the updated MK III series would be available, I also immediately agreed to. In the autumn of last year, I spent a few days in Alsace and at the neighbouring Kaiserstuhl, and took the opportunity for a stop-over at Rolf Becker: the small workshop turned out to be a real manufactory. The production of larger series would not be possible here, but that is not intended either. However, what is really remarkable is his fleet of measuring instruments. Rolf Becker is one of the designers who both listen and measure: the workshop and the listening room are only separated by a door. And after listening to only one or two songs, it becomes clear that the lover of panel speakers, despite putting a different emphasis on particular hifi criteria than me, made his audio chain deliver a very transparent sound, capable of meticulously showing even very small changes in the system. In addition, I could also give a brief listen to the prototype of an interesting new development, of which I am only allowed to say that it doesn't belong to the world of phono pre-amplifiers.

Are you familiar with The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy, the first of five parts of Douglas Adams' four-volume trilogy? In this amusing science-fiction parody, the computer "Deep Thought" calculated the number 42 as result to the question for "Life, the Universe and Everything". Does Rolf Becker therefore consider his phono preamp as the answer to the question for the best way to amplify phono signals, to obtain the maximum level of euphony, and everything else? If yes, then happily with a twinkle in his eye, as the chosen product name reveals: Douglas Adams made the computer do its calculation so mushrooming long that no one could remember the exact wording of the question to the answer 42...

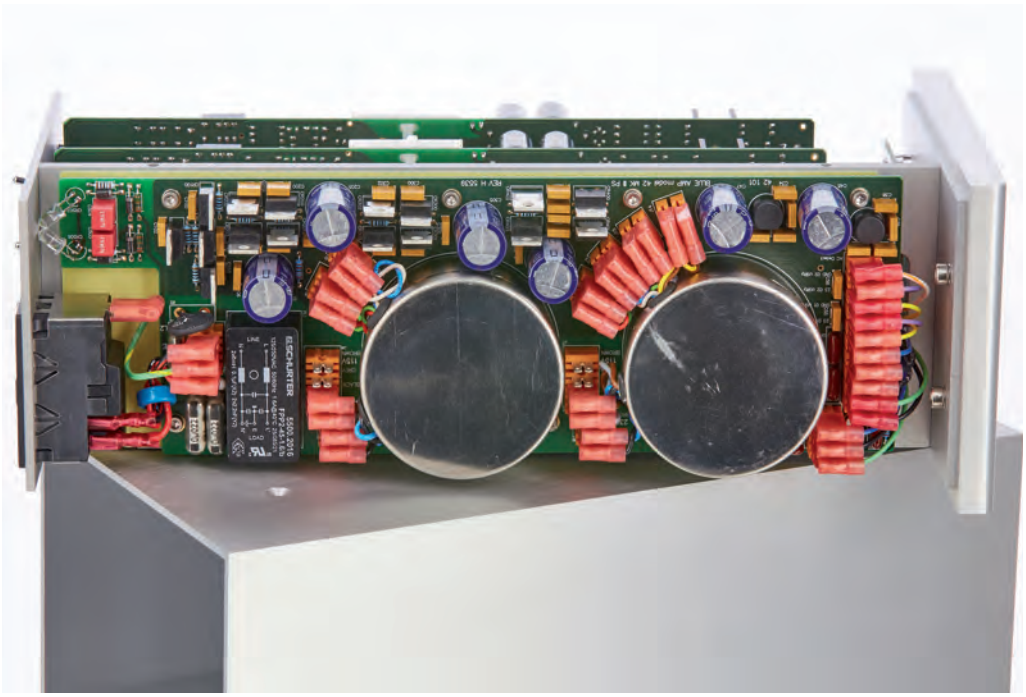
When we talk about symmetry, then clearly without letting the eyes twinkle around. In the end that leads to the fact, that all Blue Amp models have to get along without a ground terminal. Well, the static charging of records

Balanced inputs are also available with the smallest Blue Amp phono stage. However, the model 42 uses balanced outputs as well

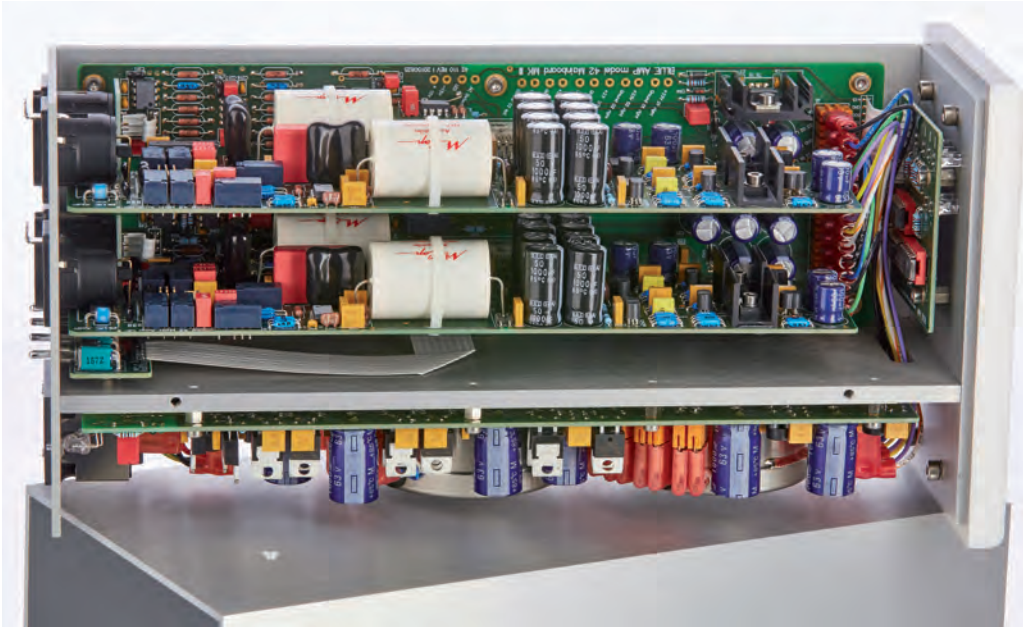
and turntables can also be carried off via a respective terminal at the preamplifier, if available. Upon request, Rolf Becker also manufactures his own cables to connect tonearm and phono preamp – by avoiding any shielding, which in his opinion would lead to an increase of the capacitance in the signal conductors and thus to an albeit slight impairment of the cartridge's already vulnerable output signal. In order to go through my own experience – and perhaps to show that even without all the usual noble cabling my audio chain is capable of playing very good music – he supplied a self-made cable with his 42, though equipped with a five-pole SME respectively DIN connector. But both my Thales Simplicity II and my Acoustical Systems Aquilar, that I already had set up for a review, have got an end-to-end wiring. And the Black Beauty on the Kronos Pro provides its signals via RCA plugs. So, there is no choice rather than pointing this out as an alternative to the extremely high-priced cables offered by the respective manufacturers, and perhaps writing a little supplement later on, in case when the SME V takes operation over again, the 42 will still be with me.

As animated discussions with Rolf Becker can get – and not just about music and hi-fi – as reserved he comports himself when it comes to reveal constructive details of his amplifiers. It is not even a matter of priority that he wants to protect his know-how against imitators. Upon my first query I got the slangy response: "The amplifiers should not be judged by their technology, they should allow you listening to nice La-La." Translated into marketing compatible words, this reads as follows: "My amplifiers should not catch attention for their own sake, but solely and exclusively offer musical enjoyment." In the end it was my Westphalian insistence, to avoid the term "stubbornness" here, that made me succeed in obtaining a ten-year old product information, in which Rolf Becker attested his 42 a high channel separation through the implementation of a double mono concept, and revealed that four reference voltage sources provide highest temperature stability, while the auxiliary functions are fed by an independent power supply, the relay contacts run a self-cleaning sequence each time the power is switched on, the outputs feature a time delay after switch-on and the input section of the amplifier is protected against static charge.

In the case of the capacity-compensated output stage, the designer becomes quite a bit more talkative. With his measuring station, he is able to demonstrate that a square-wave signal remains a perfect square-wave signal, if capacitors are connected in parallel up to a capacity of 40 nanofarads. And that means that even a high-capacitance cable connected to the output doesn't have a negative effect either on the signal behaviour or the sound. His amplifiers therefore don't need any special cables to show their advantages.



The power supply board of Model 42 with mains filter and two encapsulated power transformers

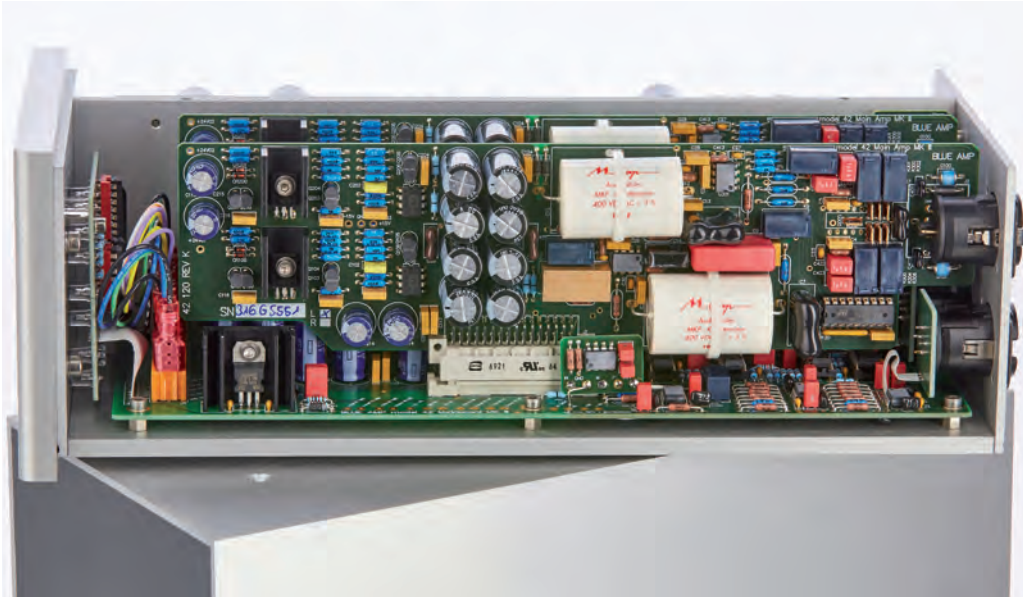


The power supply circuit board is separated by a thick aluminum plate from the two boards for signal processing and those carrying the controller section

Rolf Becker attaches great importance to the channel balance of the input impedances. It is, as he points out, irrelevant whether the absolute value is exactly 500 or 504 ohms. Instead, it's more important for him that the values of the two channels differ a maximum in the parts-per-thousand range. To achieve this, he selects even the highly praised Vishay resistors meticulously using a very high-quality Hewlett-Packard measuring bridge. This requires, according to the designer, a lot of time, good nerves and a few grading boxes with many compartments. But also in regards of the further processing of the selected components, a manually assembled Blue Amp clearly differs from a mass fabricated product. On the one hand, instead of SMD components wired ones are used, as these are exposed to a significantly less thermal stress during soldering. On the other hand, Rolf Becker bends the connecting wires of the components manually on a bending gauge. The thereof resulting larger radius reduces the mechanical load on the wires at the contact caps of the component body. This necessarily doesn't lead to better sound, but significantly increases the life expectancy of the Blue Amp phono stages. Now one starts realizing where the price of a Model 42 comes from.

When I exchanged Einstein's The Turntable's Choice against the brand-new Blue Amp in my system, I was satisfied with the results, but by no means euphoric: it performed at least on the same level as the Einstein, which by the way is about to be replaced by a newer model later this year, but did not show any noticeable improvements. Of course, the 42 remained active to accumulate hours of operation, as it also did when I first approached the monumental Kronos Pro turntable with its two counter-rotating platters. And day-by-day it increasingly impressed me with its enormously open, extremely dynamic and generous spatial performance. But, unnoticeably, I had almost forgotten which part the Blue Amp had been playing within this ultimate sonic enjoyment. I only got aware of it when I switched back to LaGrange, Thales Simplicity II and Einstein's The Pickup, realizing that the gradually burning-in Model 42 had significantly been enriching my analogue pleasures of the past weeks.

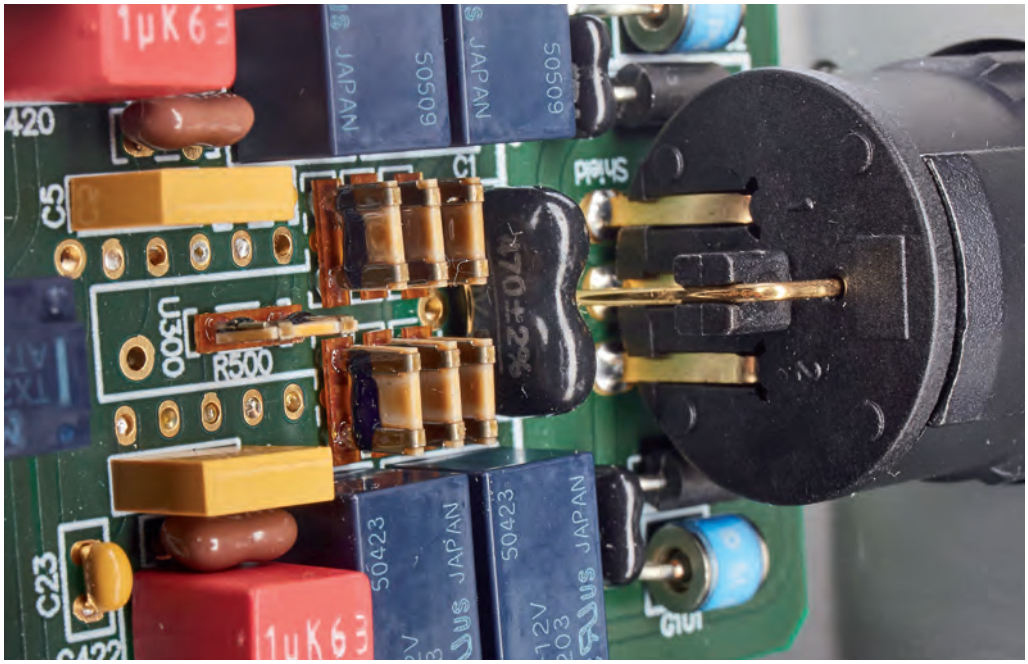
Therefore, the 42 well asserted its place in my system by the time when Dietrich Brakemeier mounted the Acoustical Systems Aquilar on the more distant of the LaGrange's two tonearm bases. Then, on two consecutive evenings, my wife and I listened to LaGrange, Aquilla and Lyra Etna while playing some familiar records such as Eddie Gomez and Jeremy Steig's Music For Flute & Double Bass or Egberto Gismonti's Sanfona. My wife particularly got impressed with the resolution skills of this combination: some of the musical details she never had heard in this clarity before. As far as I'm concerned, I was especially fascinated by the stirring dynamics of this trio, which, despite peak performing in the aforementioned disciplines, played immensely coherent and like a unified whole. A more detailed analysis of the 42's tremendous abilities however, can only be conducted



The signal processing circuit board – here to be seen the one of the left channel - is equipped with components of highest quality from i.e. Vishay and Mundorf

by a more systematic approach, enriched with one or the other comparison. Up to this point two or more unknown factors had been in the game, and I also had missed to optimize the playback quality by matching the impedances: The above mentioned set-ups allowed to discover so much new even with well-known records, that I – at least within the framework of a relaxed listening – lost the tought about further improvements.

Well, I admit that after its set-up, I would have wanted the Aquilar with a little more pressure in the lower frequency range, but this could have also resulted from the fact that the Etna hadn't been able to collect more than a few hours of operation so far. But that's not the real reason. However, a little more impact in the lows is only the click of a switch away: with 100 instead of 500 ohms of load the Etna acts a good deal more son-



The "naked" Vishay Z-Foil resistors rank among the best the component market has to offer. For Model 42 they are selected by hand

orous, tonally more colourful and also more voluminous. Awesome! Actually, I could have come earlier to that conclusion, as with Einstein's The Turntable's Choice the Lyras feel most comfortable loaded at 85 ohms. The Einstein rounds up and fills the upper mids sightly more than the 42, plays dynamically with a lot more pressure, but lacks a bit of fine detail and lets the musicians play on a minimally smaller stage – all that without taking away the irresistible drive from Jack DeJohnette's Special Edition's title track on Tin Can Alley. Emotionally both phono preamps are one hundred percent convincing, but if you take mere hi-fi criteria as a reference, then the Blue Amp takes the lead: It combines the musical enthusiasm so characteristic for this piece of music with a touch more fine detail and airiness. In the case of "Maracatu" from Egberto Gismonti's Sanfona, it's rather a question of definition: on this track the 42 brightly shines with its enormous resolution abilities and the openly breathing spatial imaging. That's why I again tried the 500 ohms loading, which offers a shade better performance regarding the aforementioned criteria, but also entails a slightly cooler sound. For me 500 ohms seem to be the ideal choice for the Etna. Einstein's The Pickup, which was developed in cooperation with Ortofon, also works splendidly well with the 42: this combo captivates you with its filigree style of playing and its broad spatial imaging. Even more of that you get at 845 ohms, where The Pickup in fact loses a bit of pressure in the lows as well, but that it can handle with more ease than, for example, the Etna, since Einstein's cartridges offer a more powerful low/mid frequency band and richer tonal colours. At this point it has become really difficult to opt for one of these two load impedances.

Wondering how Rolf Becker came across 845 ohms? It is exactly 845 ohms that Jan Allaerts demands for his cartridges. For a long time I was thrilled by his MC 2 Finish, but then I was increasingly disturbed by its extremely low output voltage, which certainly doesn't correspond to the value listed in the respective product information, and which also drives most phono amps to the limits of their performance. But before I swap one of the carefully adjusted cartridges for the MC 2 Finish, and then reassemble everything back again, I prefer to luxuriate in the widths of the sonic stage where the London Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Jean Martinon, performs Schostakowitsch's The Golden Age (Reissue of LSC 2322): it is simply magnificient, how wide and deep the spatial image is, that Etna, Aquilar and Blue Amp are able to draw into the listening room. What an abundance of detail, what a lack of coolness or harshness – but, this really can be enjoyed only under very exceptional circumstances. Virtually unique!

STATEMENT

We should be glad that they are still around: components that are conceived and built by a single person, or, more precisely, a person of conviction, who entirely identifies himself with his product. Even more impressive is, that this first-class product has been designed for longevity and excels through best craftmanship. But the most impressive thing is: how much emotion paired with finest detail – even involving the recording room - the Model 42 is able to elaborate out of vulnerable phono signals. Luxury has its price.

LISTENED WITH

Turntable	Brinkmann LaGrange with tube power supply, Kronos Pro
Tonearms	Thales Simplicity II, Acoustical Systems Aquilar, Kronos Black Beauty
Cartridges	Lyra Etna, Einstein The Pickup
Phono preamp	Einstein The Turntable's Choice (balanced)
Preamp	Einstein The Preamp
Power amp	Ayon Epsilon with KT150 tubes
Loudspeakers	LumenWhite DiamondLight Monitors
Cables	HMS Gran Finale Jubilee, Audioplan Powercord S, Goebel High End Lacorde Statement, Audioquest Wild, Swiss Cables Reference Plus
Accessories	PS Power Plant, Sun Leiste, Audioplan Powerstar, HMS wall sockets, Acapella bases, Acoustic System feet and resonators, Artesania Audio Esoteryc, Harmonix Real Focus, b-fly bases and feet

MANUFACTURER'S SPECIFICATIONS

Blue Amp Model 42 MKIII

Input	1x balanced (XLR)
Output	1x balanced (XLR)
Output impedance	20 ohms (cable capacitance compensated)
Gain	58, 64 or 78 dB
Input impedance	100, 500 or 845 ohms
Special features	Mono switch, phase reversal switch, mains phase detecting indicator light
Dimensions (W/H/D)	155/120/320 mm
Weight	5 kg
Price	13.600 Euros

MANUFACTURER

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