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Michael Fremer

More Great New Phono Preamps!

The Rocky Mountain Audio Festival, held last October in Denver, was a great show, and I wish I had space here to tell you about it. [See Jason Victor Serinus' report at <http://blog.stereophile.com/rmaf2006>.—Ed.] But there's too much new analog gear to cover.

Chord Symphonic Balanced MC phono preamplifier

Conservative-looking by Chord standards, the Symphonic (\$4700) is a compact (13" W by 5.5" H by 2.25" D), 13.5-lb, moving-coil-only phono preamplifier built with high-tech surface-mount circuit boards, relay control, and all discrete components. It's housed in a single, superbly milled aluminum chassis that incorporates a walled-off "inner room" that contains the power supply. (Note: Chord's importer, Bluebird Music, advertises on my website, www.musicangle.com.)

From the front, the Symphonic looks like no one's home. But from the top and rear, there's plenty going on. Two domes of magnifying glass up top let you peer into the works and monitor your loading and gain settings via a series of bright red LEDs. The rear-panel facilities include balanced XLR and single-ended RCA inputs and outputs, as well as tiny black circular pushbuttons: spring-loaded switches for gain, resistive and capacitive loading, rumble filter, and single-ended or balanced operation. The gain choices are 58, 68, 74, and 85dBV. The choices for resistive loading are 33, 100, 270, 4700, and 47k ohms (or any additive combination thereof). Another switch toggles between capacitive loadings of 50pF and 150pF.

Judged solely as a piece of engineering, the Symphonic is impressive. It incorporates a great deal of functionality (and gain!) into a compact, smoothly functioning package. Ergonomically, it's another story. Unless you devote a top shelf to the Symphonic, it's almost impossible to monitor the LEDs. And I had to hold up an illustration of the rear panel I found in the instruction manual and use the Braille method to figure out which of those tiny, rear-mounted buttons I was pressing. Some of those buttons, once pressed,

were then recessed too deep in the chassis to be pressed again to unlock them—I had to use a paper clip or small Allen key. Chord says the idea was to make it difficult to accidentally change settings. Mission accomplished.

The instructions are confusing. I've reviewed dozens of phono preamps

rumble filter, but I don't think many buyers of "\$4k7" (\$4700) phono preamps will be using it with a rumbly turntable.) In fact, I inserted the Symphonic into my system after a few weeks with ASR's Basis Exclusive Revised that I write about last month, and the Chord's bottom-end weight and control



Chord Symphonic's relay rich innards. Note isolated power supply on left.

over the years, and have *never* seen 4700 ohms written as 4k7 ohms. I thought it was a typo until I saw it twice in the manual and once on the circuit board itself. [It's European engineering usage, Mikey, because of the ease of overlooking the decimal point in 4.7k, thus confusing it with 47k.—JA.] Also, what to make of this, from a paragraph titled "Selecting Input Impedance": "Without any additional impedance the Symphonic features 50pF input impedance." Anyway, the manual needs a rewrite (Chord tells me that it's being revised). It would also be nice if it mentioned that the Symphonic accepts only MC cartridges

But these are minor inconveniences—once the Symphonic is configured, you're unlikely to be playing with the settings. And when I *heard* it, all those little problems dissolved. While Chord told me that the Symphonic would sound better if used in balanced mode (no can do), it sounded plenty good unbalanced. Preconceived notions of "mechanical, etchy, and bright" were immediately allayed by the Symphonic's warm, smooth overall demeanor, impressive dynamic presentation, and especially its taut, deep, well-textured bass response. (The Symphonic has a

bettered the ASR's without losing anything in the way of texture and harmonic completeness—and the ASR was already plenty good in that regard.

Perhaps in part because of its superior bass performance, the Symphonic also offered an impressively three-dimensional picture, with richly physical, harmonically complete images on a deep soundstage. The Symphonic's portrayals of an outstanding vinyl reissue of the Heifetz-Piatigorsky-Wallenstein recording of Brahms' Double Concerto (RCA Soria/Cisco LDS-2513), and a *stupendous* reissue of Sir Malcolm Sargent and the London Symphony's performance of Shostakovich's Symphony 9 and Prokofiev's *Lieutenant Kijé Suite*, from an Everest 35mm recording (Everest/Classic CHDD 2018), were rich, warm, full-bodied, and admirably detailed.

If the Symphonic erred in any direction, it was toward *too much* warmth and richness. I found myself running every cartridge I tried "wide open" at 47k ohms to get the requisite sparkle and air I'd grown accustomed to with the ASR Basis and the Manley Steelhead. At 47k ohms, the Chord produced in my system a tonal balance that was nearly ideal for all musical genres.

ANALOG CORNER

The only other criticism I have is of something I *felt* rather than heard: an overall presentation that was less than smooth and continuous overall, as if there were an undercurrent of an impediment to the musical flow. I can't explain this further—it's one of those sonic characteristics that flies under the radar of known audiophile descriptors. When I switched back to the ASR Basis, this effect went away and the sense of "musical soaring" was restored. But then, switching back to the Chord Symphonic demonstrated its slightly superior bottom-end punch and authority and rich overall demeanor. Like the ASR, above the bottom few octaves the Symphonic came close to obliterating the distinction between tube and solid-state phono preamps.

Small size, big sound: With its outstanding background quietness, enormous gain, overall richness, harmonic coherence, and supple yet slam-bang bass performance, the Chord Symphonic is easy to recommend—especially if it sounds even better when run fully balanced. And its compactness and bullet-proof build quality should mean that a dealer will be willing to let

you try it at home before you commit your cash to this gem.

Blue Amp Model 42 Comfort phono preamplifier

Stereophile's more forgiving review criteria for columns allow me to review interesting products like this compact, sonically noteworthy, fully balanced MC phono preamp, built in Germany and, like some others I've looked at, not widely distributed here. It's also relatively pricey: \$9980.

While the Blue Amp's configurability is limited, it's done smartly, offering 58dB or 64dB of gain, IEC and RIAA equalization, and resistive loadings of 100, 500, and 1k ohms. There's also a switch that reverses one channel's phase by 180° because the designer, Rolf

Becker, says he's been told by some "pros" that LPs often have one channel out of phase relative to the other. However, I can't think of a single LP that has this problem. Reverse polarity is sometimes a problem on simply miked recordings, wherein the speaker pushes out when the microphone diaphragms are pushed inward. Reversing polarity of *both* chan-



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Blue Amp Model 42 packs a lot into a relatively small space. There is more stuff on the other side.



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nels often subtly improves imaging and staging. Future revisions of the Blue Amp 42 may include inverted polarity (both channels reversed) as well as individual channel phase reversal, Becker told me. The rear panel contains balanced inputs and outputs as well as the configuring toggle switches, all of which are monitored via LEDs on the front panel.

“For the homo fabers beneath you”: That’s the headline under which, in the English version of his website (www.blueamp.com), the designer points out some of the circuitry highlights. I felt it only fair to share. The fully balanced, dual-mono Model 42 has eight independent, low-noise DC power supplies whose $\pm 15V$ outputs are said to be virtually immune from voltage or temperature changes, and custom 0.05%-tolerance resistors and 0.1% mica capacitors in critical parts of the circuit. An auto-mute circuit operates both at turn-on and in case a cable is accidentally disconnected during play. During the turn-on mute, a “cleaning sequence” ensures that the solenoids used to actuate the configuration choices exhibit minimum resistance. In other words, despite its relatively small

size and understated appearance, there’s a lot going on under the Model 42’s hood.

Because I don’t have a balanced system, I had to use RCA-to-XLR adapters in and XLR-to-RCA adapters out, as I did with the Boulder 2008 phono preamp I reviewed in July 2002, and I couldn’t take advantage of the noise-canceling advantages of balanced operation. I like the approach offered by Einstein in their Turntable’s Choice preamp (reviewed in July 2006): You can order one unit for single-ended use, and add a second at a lower price for balanced operation. In any case, don’t skimp on the quality of the adapters. Rolf Becker says to make sure the RCA jack’s ground is insulated from the XLR adapter’s metal body or the sound will suffer.

The Blue Amp Model 42 is in the top tier of the phono preamps I’ve heard. It produced “black” backgrounds out of which music exploded with a ferocity I’ve heard from only the finest performers. Just as some listeners don’t cotton to the Boulder 2008, those who prefer a soft, mellow sound will not warm to the Model 42—but in the right setting, and especially with

the right cartridge, the Blue Amp provided an intense musical experience that was ultradynamic, tonally vivid, and rhythmically supple.

The Model 42 hung laser-tight images on a wide-open soundstage that, while not the last words in depth, spaciousness, and transparency, more than made up for these in image solidity and three-dimensionality. Nothing about the Model 42’s overall sound was mechanical, edgy, bright, or electronic. In most ways, it was more like the iron-fisted Boulder 2008 than like the more supple and subtle Einstein.

I tried a variety of cartridges, including the Air Tight PC-1, Lyra Skala, Titan I (mono and stereo), and Clearaudio Goldfinger. All proved good matches because all are capable of producing great detail and drive, and none delivers hard edges.

If you can afford it and the rest of your analog system is worthy of such an accomplished performer, and if you can audition it before buying, the Blue Amp Model 42 is well worth checking out, whatever your musical tastes. A less expensive, non-Comfort version is also available.

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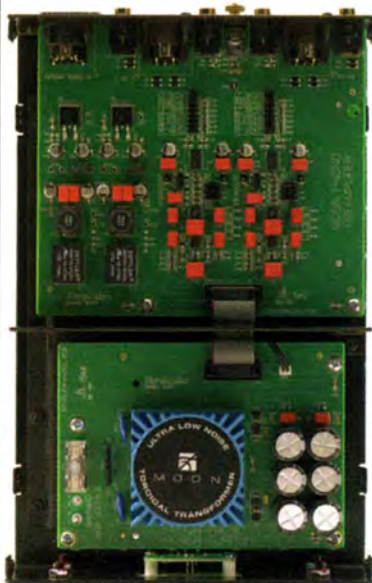


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Simaudio's Moon LP 5.3 MM/MC phono preamplifier is silly good!

Simaudio's Moon LP 5.3 moving-magnet/coil phono preamplifier (\$1400) has single-ended RCA inputs and both single-ended and true balanced-differential outputs. It also offers a wide range of adjustments for gain (54, 60, and 66dB), resistive loading (10, 100, 470, 1k, and 47k ohms), and capacitive loading (0, 100, and 470pF), all accomplished via a series of internally mounted jumper banks. You can even choose RIAA or IEC equalization. Removing the top plate to get to the adjustments reveals boards filled with high-quality parts for the well-isolated power-supply and signal-handling circuits.

Out of the box, the LP 5.3 proved quiet and sweet-sounding, with bass that was well-controlled, tuneful, and rhythmically solid, a harmonically rich mid-



Moon LP 5.3 sounds as well organized as it looks.

band, and a somewhat closed-in top end. The LP 5.3's macrodynamics lacked the exuberance of the finest phono stages I've heard, but thanks to its impressively low noise, the 5.3's nuanced microdynamic shadings—the kind that contribute to “believability”—helped create a consistently engaging sonic picture. Over time, the top opened up nicely; though I wouldn't say it ever became particularly airy or fast, I'd take the 5.3's top-end performance over the aggressive, etchy, and wiry variety every time. I don't mean to imply that the 5.3 sounded dull or sluggish—anything but.

Most important, the Moon LP 5.3's overall tonal picture was exceedingly sweet, well-balanced, and inviting. Image solidity and three-dimensionality were noteworthy regardless of price. The LP 5.3 cedes performance to far more expensive phono preamps only at the margins, and does so evenhandedly. Given its sturdy build quality, flexible configurability, balanced outputs, black backdrops even when run single-ended, and its tight, deep bass, the LP 5.3 is silly good and easy to recommend. And at \$1400, it's a steal, a bargain, a best buy, and a no-brainer.

Sutherland Ph3D dual-mono phono preamplifier

Even in his most expensive designs, Ron Sutherland has sometimes been willing

to give up a low noise floor to get liquid and supple sound, and his battery-powered Ph3D dual-mono phono preamplifier (\$1000) is no exception. Turn the volume up with no signal applied and you'll hear some hiss. But when listening to music, even during the quietest passages, you won't. Confound it, if you *don't* turn it up without a signal applied, you'll think the Ph3D dead silent, because behind the music, it *does* sound drop-dead black. That's because the Ph3D uses 16 D-cell batteries (not included) instead of a mains-driven power supply: no outside noise is injected, nor are there ever any issues of ground-induced hum or loops.

Sutherland claims that the batteries should last about 1200 hours. High-value storage capacitors help maintain low power-supply impedance as the batteries age, ensuring consistent sonic performance throughout the life of a set of batteries. A Low Power indicator light lets you know when the batteries are shot.

Like the Simaudio Moon LP 5.3, the Ph3D uses gold-plated, high-pressure, large-contact jumpers for setting gain (40, 45, 50, 55, or 60dB) and loading (100, 200, 1k, 10k, or 47k ohms).



Sutherland Ph3D powered by 16 Walgreen's "D" alkaline batteries. Sound was "medicinal." Energizers sounded "faster." NOT!!!!

Despite its relatively low price, the Ph3D uses Wima polypropylene-film capacitors and Dale/Vishay metal-film resistors, among other premium parts, all housed in a chassis of cold-rolled steel with a baked-on epoxy powder coating.

The Ph3D's overall tonality resembled the Grado cartridge “house sound,” with a slightly soft top end and an overall pleasing, addictive liquidity throughout the audible bandwidth. The bass was reasonably deep, and while it lacked the Moon LP 5.3's iron-fisted bottom-end control, its personality perfectly matched that of the rest of the audioband, which was what made the Ph3D so enjoyable to listen to: the sound hung together, from top to bottom. There wasn't a hard edge to be heard anywhere.

If you listen to a lot of hard rock or other kinds of bombast, the Ph3D shouldn't be your first choice. It rendered Neil Young's *Living With War* (LP,

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