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POWER

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VACUUM TUBE PREAMPLIFIER



CD

SE

32

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# Audio Research Reference 3

*The Reference 2 was one of the best preamps ever built. But now there's a new Reference in town...*

**PRICE:** £9,250 **CONTACT:** Absolute Sounds, 58 Durham Road, London SW20 0DE ☎ 020 8971 3909 🌐 www.absolutesounds.com

There are few companies that produce a product that really is deserving of the word 'Reference', but Audio Research is indubitably one. Its Reference class preamp, phono stage and power amplifiers really are Reference models in all senses of the word. They represent the acme of Audio Research sound, and are used in a wealth of other high-end manufacturers' labs as a benchmark and an accurate reference point to design their components around.

Traditionally, the Reference class preamp had a striking similarity to other Audio Research preamps, albeit on a larger scale. But with the Reference 3, that's all changed... sort of. The row of rotary knobs and toggle switches are gone, replaced by just two knobs (one for volume, one for input selection) and four black plastic square push buttons, first seen on the LS16 and CD3. These feel slightly tacky compared to the positive feel toggles of old, but we soon grew to love them in their own right.

Between all of these is the largest green LCD read-out this side of Piccadilly Circus. It takes up the middle third of the front panel real estate (it's a big preamp, more the sort of size you'd expect for a power amp) and tells you what source is used and what volume level is being played. And this volume level can (almost) be read from space... the numbers are nearly three centimetres high! Strangely, you soon get used to this, although most visitors will ask if you need your eyes testing. You can turn this off or dim it and the display is exceptionally user-friendly and manageable. It's just huge!

It also hides a secret on the remote control. Press 'Hours' and the amplifier will tell you just how many operating hours the tubes have been in service. Short of having a little chime that tells you it's time for servicing, this is the best way to keep a valve preamp in long-term service without tears or sonic degradation. It uses five tubes in the circuit: a single 6H30 and 6L6GC on one circuit block and four 6H30s along the second circuit board. Both boards are vertical daughter cards operating on a horizontal power supply motherboard in a manner akin to a PC design. The front PCB is the input switching, source selector and gain control (along with logic circuits and the rest), while the back board is the balanced and single-ended output stage.

All six inputs, tape and processor throughputs and main amp output have balanced and single-ended options. The manual warns you not to wire both kinds

of connections simultaneously to the same input, but many dealers have done just that in demonstrations with no ill effects. Generally, the change to single-ended entails a slight drop in volume and sound quality, although the former can be rectified and learned by the preamp. Switching from one source to another, even from balanced XLR to single-ended phono, is whisper quiet and entirely refined, as befits the product's Reference status.

The only thing not Referential is the remote control. It's a black plastic affair that's not dissimilar to those found with cheap TV sets. It could be argued that the Reference 3 is likely to be used with the likes of Crestron multiroom handsets (there are a pair of 12-volt triggers on the back panel), but something a bit more upmarket as standard would be fitting. Still, it does the job and button layout is clear, so it's streets ahead of those design-led, functionally-stupid designs that look beautiful, but only raise the volume if you hold down six identical buttons at once.

## SOUND QUALITY

There is a distinct evolution in Audio Research sound. The sound of old – typified by classic products like the SP11 preamp – was warm, yet detailed. The Reference 2 preamp was perhaps the ultimate expression of that old Audio Research sound. In contrast, the Reference 3 is the Audio Research preamp

neutral preamps in history, now sounds a bit 'obvious'. This is the start of 'phase one' of listening to the Reference 3; you begin to realise that this preamplifier is more neutral than any other preamplifier you have ever heard. Whichever preamp you compare it to has more of its own character than the Reference 3, which has the most natural soundstage, the most accurate tonality, the finest detail you'll ever hear. There's nothing more neutral on the market today.

But then, 'phase two' begins to kick in. It has a sense of tonal beauty that draws you into the music like no other. This is a true masterwork, because this character is so vital yet so subtle that you could almost miss just how richly harmonic this preamp is, because you are basking in the sheer detail and imagery. The whole inner structure of the music becomes clearer than ever before.

Everything else wears its colours like an LA gangbanger by comparison. The character this preamp has – rich, sophisticated, open – is so naturally benign and so deftly handled.

It's pointless to try and pin down the performance of the preamp with reference (no pun) to specific CDs. The Reference 3 basically does everything you could ever want from a preamplifier and sounds utterly fine with every kind of music you could wish to play through it. To be a true all-rounder takes real talent – and this one's better than Botham.

**“The Reference 3 has the most natural soundstage, the most accurate tonality and the finest detail you'll ever hear.”**

for the 21st Century. It's extremely clean sounding – in fact, it's just possibly the most revealing preamp yet designed.

This is a cerebral upgrade – it works on the head first, the heart later. This is very much at odds with the Reference 2, which was an immediate hit. In contrast, the Reference 3 is a grower. The first time you listen to the Reference 3, you get the absolute fidelity to the sound, the instant connection to the recording studio and the excitement of the music. However, that 'magical' element of the Reference 2's sound is not so prevalent. Strangely, this is a good thing.

You see, the Reference 3 does have all the magic of the Reference 2 but it doesn't present it in an overt way. This really is a revelation: the Reference 2, one of the most

Of course, this virtually perfect performance from a preamplifier does mean everything else in the signal chain has to be of the absolute first water. In particular, the Reference 3 does so well with balanced inputs and outputs, it would seem a shame to lose that last fraction of performance by dropping down to single-ended operation. It's exceptionally good at switching noiselessly from one mode to the other, but if you can go balanced, do so.

As the hi-fi industry stands today, it's impossible to think of a product that is either better than the Reference 3 or will show up its limitations. That's because it effectively has no limitations. If you *really* want to know what your discs sound like, make sure this preamp is in your system. **HFC**

*Alan Sircom*