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Audio Research

LS27 & PH8

A taste of Audio Research's Reference kit at a much more affordable price

Audio Research's LS27 is one of our favourite high-end preamps. While hardly inexpensive, it's nonetheless not too stratospherically priced, offering real high-end performance that invites comparison with preamps costing much more. It's a solidly built stable unit that's free from gimmicks – a product that inspires confidence.

Despite an input marked Phono, the LS27 is a line-level unit. If you want to use a turntable, you'll need an outboard phono stage like the Audio Research PH8 – more on this later. ARC warns that a burn-in time of around 600 hours may be necessary before things sound at their best. During this time, they ask for your patience.

But what exactly does the LS27 offer over 'lesser' ARC preamps, such as the LS17/SP17? The answer is balanced operation. The LS27 has six balanced/unbalanced inputs, a processor input (unity gain), a monitor loop, and two balanced/unbalanced variable outputs, plus one set of fixed balanced/unbalanced outputs.

There are individual high/medium/low gain settings for each input and you can configure each to work balanced or unbalanced according to requirements. Controls include left/right stereo balance, phase invert, stereo/mono and the ability to compare balanced with unbalanced working.

The latter is very useful. Suppose you've splashed out on expensive balanced cables with XLRs and want to be sure you've spent wisely – just A/B compare balanced with single ended. The difference will almost certainly convince you the expenditure was worthwhile.

We really appreciate the other features offered – especially phase invert and stereo/mono. For example, when playing old mono LPs you'll find switching the PH8 (or LS27) to 'mono' delivers a dramatic reduction in surface noise and pressing rumble.

Similarly, the facility to alter absolute phase can bring recordings that subjectively sound diffuse or backward into sharper focus again. Moreover, with these controls duplicated on the remote handset, you can make changes from the comfort of your listening chair.

The LS27 is a pure Class-A tube/transistor (JFET) hybrid design with zero negative feedback. Its massive power supply is fully regulated, with gain provided by twin 6H30 triodes. Many circuit changes and other refinements have resulted in greatly improved performance over the previous LS26 model.

"Like its big brother," ARC says, "the LS27 combines great resolving power with a tonal richness, purity and naturalness that is immediately involving. The grain structure is superfine and electronic artefacts have been banished. Bass impact and control are also superb". This strikes us as a fair assessment of the LS27's strengths.

The volume control is an electronic type with 104 fixed steps and a digital readout. This enables you to set volume levels precisely and repeatably – useful when you're comparing equipment and need to make sure that volume levels are kept to constant values.

The LS27 has no built-in phono stage, so you'll need to add an outboard type like ARC's PH8 to play LPs. The PH8 is one

of ARC's newer products, and interestingly, it seems able to accept virtually any cartridge – from a low-output moving-coil, to a high-output fixed-coil – with no need for gain adjustment.

To ensure comparable volume levels to your other audio components, simply set the gain of the LS27 accordingly. Impedance values can be set to suit the cartridge being used. The impedances offered – from 47k, 1k, 500, 200 and 100 ohms – will fine-tune the sound of your pickup.

Technically, the PH8 benefits from circuit and parts improvements derived from ARC's expensive REF Phono 2. However, rather than using four 6922 tubes, the PH8 uses two

"Solidly built, free from gimmicks and inspiring complete confidence"

6H30 tubes along with special low-noise FETs. Vacuum tube power regulation incorporates a 6550 and a 6H30, as featured in the REF Phono 2 and REF5.

Capacitors are identical to those featured in the REF Phono 2, including the same coupling caps. Teflon caps are used in both the RIAA stage and for bypass purposes. There is also a new R-core transformer. Circuit board material is the same as in ARC Reference products.

SOUND QUALITY

Fortunately, our LS27 and PH8 had seen some action before we received them and both sounded impressive from the off. The sound is clear, solid and stable, with an attractive clarity and openness. And it stays that way.

Again, the aim is to offer users a real taste of ARC 'Reference' performance at a vastly more affordable price. Certainly, the PH8 did not disappoint. Used with an EAR Forte-S, Ikeda arm, and Koetsu Urushi Sky Blue, we obtained a gorgeously vivid, yet smooth and open, sound from our LPs.

The PH8 is very quiet, with vanishingly low hum/hiss levels. Being tube, the casework gets mildly warm – as does the LS27's – but not excessively so. But most importantly, music sounds focussed and clear, with outstanding fine detail and wide dynamic contrasts.

Jimmy **Hughes**

