Getting music to pounce from your speakers instead of music that literally recoils:

Why you should check out the polarity invert switch if your preamp has one

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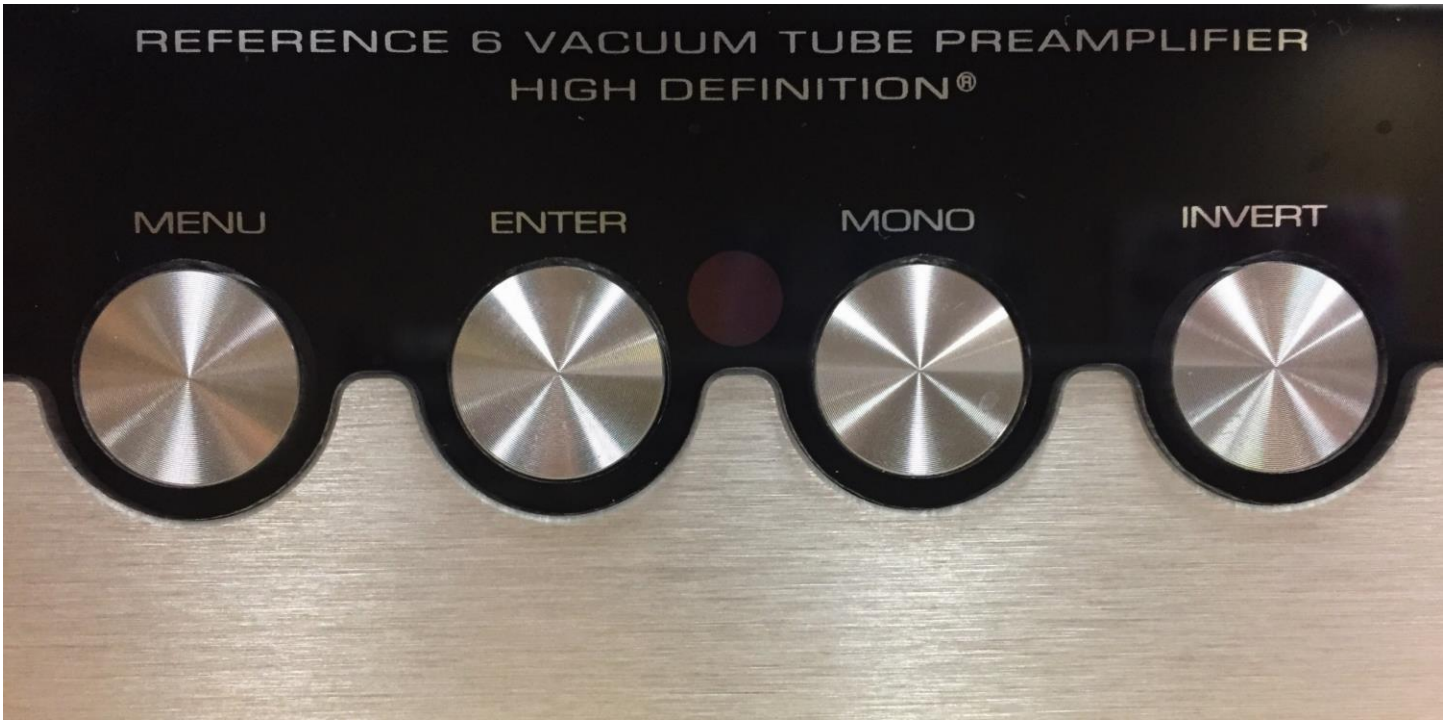

The invert switch on a preamp is mainly there to correct for polarity-inverted music software lurking in your music collection. And there will be some. On such music, the initial attack of each note moves the drivers of your speaker BACKWARD into the speaker instead of forward toward you into the room as it should. Lately, music I've sampled from various labels is mostly the correct (positive, non-inverting) polarity. In my experience, about 10% or fewer current recordings need correction. As you go back to the 80's and 90's (and earlier) catalogs of major and small labels, this is more of a problem, and tends to be label-specific but not entirely predictable.

So, what does an inverted music signal sound like vs. the correct polarity?

First, transient information such as in vocal sibilants, cymbals or trumpets for example, sound a bit slow, dark, diffuse and blunted, as you might expect from an inverted, backward signal. With polarity-correct music, the transients are purer, tighter in focus, with greater micro dynamic subtlety, attack and speed breathing out into the room toward you. Granted, it is easier to assess the correct listening polarity of a given recording if it is simply mic'd or a live recording as opposed to a pop disc with dozens of layered tracks, but even there it is evident. Also, massed strings will sound fuzzier and less individualized with less air around them and bass is less controlled with softer attack. The better your system set up, the more apparent these differences will be. And the more discs you check (and mark them + or – polarity for future playing reference) the easier it becomes to judge recordings.

Note that with the exception of the early D-76A amplifier, Audio Research components are non-inverting, meaning you won't have to use the invert switch to correct for inherent polarity issues with them. Some audio manufacturer's components are inverting. This as well as the recording polarity through the signal chain, will affect and determine the final signal polarity at your speaker and whether it needs correction.

Once you get accustomed to positive polarity listening, it is hard to settle for the lack of musical impact and inner clarity. Blurring and confusion – a corruption of timing and spatial organizational skills – undermines your stereo and the music with the wrong polarity. Just. Push. The button.