

# WHAT HI★FI?

## SOUND AND VISION

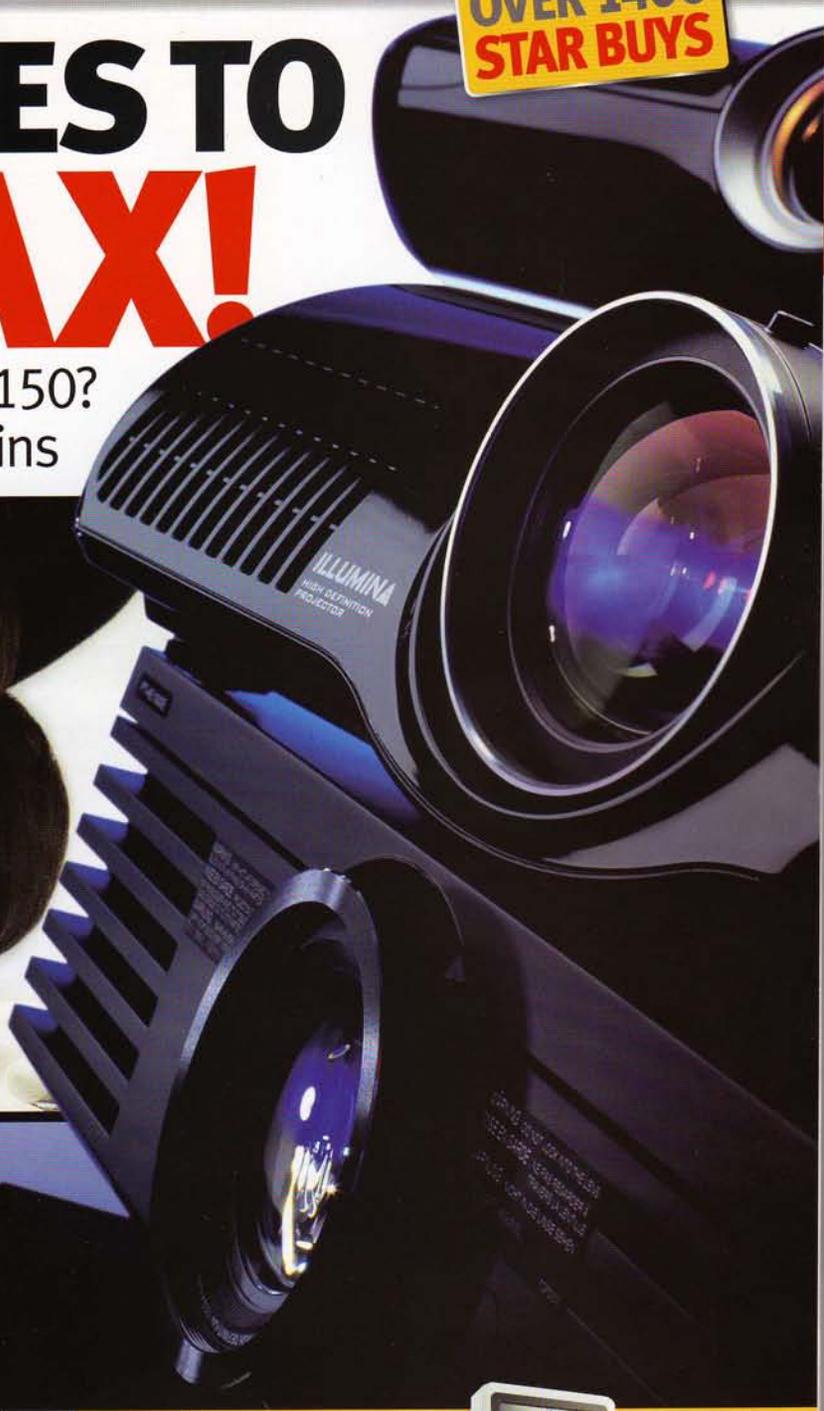
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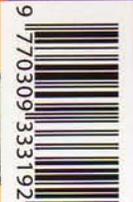


### ▶ ZUNE vs IPOD

Microsoft's MP3  
player in action



haymarket



03

HI-FI TEST SPECIAL ▶ STORMING CD PLAYERS & AMPS p56/76

# The best preamplifier we've ever heard: it's quite a claim, but then **Audio Research** isn't a company known for using the 'Reference' tag without good cause

STEREO  
PREAMPLIFIER  
AUDIO RESEARCH  
REFERENCE 3



£ 8999

## FOR

The most convincing all-round performance we've ever heard from a preamp. Yes, it really is that good

## AGAINST

Price puts it out of the reach of all but the wealthiest enthusiast buyers

## VERDICT

The Reference 3 is sonic landmark, and fully deserves the 'Reference' tag



## TYPE Valve preamp

## LINE LEVEL INPUTS

Seven balanced/unbalanced

## PHONO STAGE

No

## OUTPUTS

Two balanced/unbalanced

## TAPE LOOPS

One

## REMOTE

Yes

## HEADPHONE

No

## FINISHES

Silver, black

**UNLIKE SOME OTHER** manufacturers, Audio Research never uses the term 'Reference' lightly. In fact, it took almost two decades of making digital equipment before the company felt able to put the 'Reference' tag on a CD player, so clearly, its Reference 3 preamp is considered by the company to be something rather special. After a good long listen, we have to agree.

As you might hope given the price, this is a decently equipped, valve-powered line-level preamplifier: it features a full complement of balanced and single ended connections, and even has remote control.

However, there are some unusual touches: that large display almost

**"It reveals a mass of detail, arranged to make any recording lifelike"**

looks comical at first, but with longer acquaintance, you appreciate just how easy it is to read at a distance, even in a brightly lit room. Press a button on the rather basic remote and it shows how long the unit has been used, which is handy for keeping tabs on valve life.

Audio Research claims the valves should be good for around 4000 hours and, as always, uses commonly available tubes to ensure spares for decades to come. This is no hype: the company can still service its products from the 1970s, when it was founded.

## A realistic, positive sound

So, how does the Reference 3 sound? In a word, magical. As you'd expect, it reveals a mass of detail, but the real pleasure is in the way it arranges this to make any recording sound more lifelike. Many top-end products are unforgiving of below-par discs: they'll

emphasise the flaws rather than searching out the good. The Reference 3, for all its insight and clarity, always accentuates the positive. Yes, you'll be well aware of everything that's wrong with the disc, but you'll also hear everything that's right with it, too.

Voices sound as real as we've heard on any preamp, which is a real treat when listening to awe-inspiring talents like Nina Simone or Frank Sinatra. And a lot of that is to do with the impressively expressive dynamics. With an appropriate power amplifier – we used Audio Research's Reference 210 monoblocs and Bryston's 4B SST – large-scale crescendos have the ability to surprise: you'll actually blink when a powerful transient strikes. Perhaps more importantly, this preamp is

supreme at communicating the finest nuances of music – the microdynamics as well as the big stuff – that define the emotion in an instrument or voice.

## Yes, it's a love thing

We could go on about the Reference 3's ability to define the body and decay of a note better than anything else we've heard. We could rave over its skill in unravelling a busy mix so you can follow each musical strand with ease. We could even eulogise the expansive soundstage it delivers. But we think you get the idea by now. We've fallen for this preamp big time.



The world's biggest TV graced our testing rooms recently – and **Panasonic's** new **TH-103PX600** certainly made an impression...



**FIFTY GRAND. YES**, really: £50,000. That's a heck of a lot of money to spend on anything not made from bricks and mortar. Mind you, value is a relative thing: the Beckhams might consider Panasonic's new TH-103PX600 plasma a must-have.

There's no denying the visual impact of this 103in leviathan. It arrived in the biggest flight case we've ever seen, and it took a crane – yes, really – to heft it into action. But since the picture is 1.2m high and 2.3m wide, and it weighs 220kg (or 345kg on its floorstanding pedestal), that's not surprising...

The Panasonic sports 1920 x 1080 resolution and a variety of slot-in input boards that allow plenty of sources to be hooked in. Ours only had an HDMI input, but that was enough to link in both Blu-ray and Sky HD, as well as a

**“The picture is 1.2m high, 2.3m wide, and it weighs in at an amazing 220kg”**

standard-definition Freeview tuner (there isn't one included) to sample the Panasonic's eye-wateringly big picture.

But while it's big, is it any good? Well, like we said – value's a relative thing. Throw in the best HD signals, and you'll be happy with most picture elements: the image is bright, colourful and consistent from edge to edge. However, flaws like jagged lines and digital noise are (inevitably) amplified, while you drop down to standard-definition images at your peril. Not good.

Us? We'd have a high-end projector, a big screen, a fancy lens, a top-end source or two and enough change for some surround sound kit. Dream on, eh...

103IN PLASMA TV  
PANASONIC  
TH-103PX600  
★★★★★  
£ 50,000

**FOR**

Extraordinarily big picture; high levels of brightness for an image this large

**AGAINST**

Punishes poor signal quality ruthlessly; huge; amazing cost

**VERDICT**

For the millionaire who has everything – and even then, it's something of a toy

