

Audio Research Reference 3 line preamplifier

In John Atkinson's review of Era Acoustics' Design 4 loudspeaker (\$600/pair) in the January 2007 *Stereophile*, he exclaimed: "Bob Reina shouldn't get to review *all* the affordable speakers, right?" My reaction: "Well, JA shouldn't get to review *all* the expensive preamps, right?" So I thought I'd take a stab at a "Follow-Up" review of Audio Research's Reference 3 line stage (\$9995), originally reviewed by Paul Bolin in December 2006.¹

How this "Follow-Up" came about actually has more to do with my upcoming review of ARC's Reference 110 power amplifier. ARC's William Z. Johnson indicated that he wanted to send along a Reference 3 as well, so that I could listen to them together. But when it came time to send amp and preamp, ARC's Warren Gehl backpedaled a bit. It seems that demand for the Reference 3 had, for the time being, outstripped production, and ARC couldn't let another sample out for review—unless, Gehl suggested, I wanted to coax Paul Bolin's original review sample away from JA. When I suggested this to our Fearless Leader, his typical British reserve crumbled. "No! You can't have it! I *won't* let it go!!" Eventually, he relented.

I'm no stranger to ARC. In my early audiophile years, when I could afford only Apt and Dynaco, I lusted after friends' ARC gear: SP6B and SP10 preamps, and M100 power amps. Over time, I was able to purchase an SP11



The Audio Research Reference 3 line preamplifier with remote.

Mk.II preamp and Classic 60 and VT100 (Mk.I and Mk.II) power amps, most of which I've reviewed for *Stereophile*. And I spent quite a bit of time with a Reference 1 preamp and D125 amp borrowed from a friend.

I don't disagree with any of the conclusions reached by PB in his thorough and insightful evaluation of the Reference 3. I loved the spartanly minimal but useful layout of the display and remote control, but what floored me was the sound. With many recordings I thought I'd memorized, the Ref3's open, transparent, and colorless midrange enabled me to hear layers of detail I'd never heard before. Well-recorded female vocals were repro-

duced as vibrant, resonant, holographic images floating in space between my speakers. Renata Tebaldi (CD, *La Tebaldi*, London 430 482-2) and Aretha Franklin (CD, *Amazing Grace*, Atlantic 2-906-2) were equally angelic. In John Rutter's *Requiem* (CD, Reference RR57-CD), I could almost count the numbers of male and female vocalists in the choir. That recording also revealed—as did every other classical recording I played—that the ARC was able to

² While I share BJR's enthusiasm for the sound of the Reference 3, I should note that it took a long time to break in (something I don't usually believe in). When I first set up the preamp, it sounded bright and forward. Over the next few days, the brightness receded, a sense of ease set in, and the ultimate presentation was as stunning as Bob describes. —JA

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unravel an uncanny amount of hall ambience and room sound. The ARC showed me that my Alón Circe speakers were capable of much wider, deeper soundstaging than I'd thought they were. The resolution of detail was extraordinary with rock recordings as well, as I picked apart every instrumental line in George and Giles Martin's layered collage rearrangement of the finale of "Strawberry Fields Forever," from the Beatles' *Love* (CD, Capitol 09463 79808-2).

Two aspects of the Reference 3's performance really astounded me. First, its high-frequency presentation was unique. Not only were the highs detailed, extended, and colorless, but there was a sense of purity and cleanliness that I'd never heard from a preamp. Presumably, this is related to the extended bandwidth and harmonic-distortion signature JA discussed in the "Measurements" section that accompanied PB's review.² The upper partials of orchestral woodwinds were pristine and extended, and ride cymbals in all jazz recordings were indistinguishable from those heard live—as were Bill Ware's vibes in *Sir Duke*, his recording of duets with guitarist Marc Ribot on tunes by Duke Ellington (CD, Knitting Factory Works KFW295). Kraftwerk's *Mini-*

mum/Maximum (CD, EMI ASW 6061) revealed subtleties of electronic percussion transients that enabled me, for the first time, to divine how Ralf Hutter and Florian Schneider create their unique electronic waveforms. It wasn't necessary to use an audiophile recording to hear the ARC's high-frequency strengths: even the anchor on the nightly news seemed to project crystalline sibilant clarity.

Second, the ARC exhibited a tremendous sense of ease: no matter how complex or dense the recording, the Reference 3 never seemed to be working hard to reproduce it. The preamp seemed relaxed—but in saying that I don't mean to imply that it sounded soft, muffled, or blurred in any way. With every recording I tried, transients were lightning-fast without being etched. Love Derwinger's rendition of the explosive first movement of David Chesky's Piano Concerto, with Rossen Gergov and the Norrlands Opera Symphony Orchestra (*Urban Concertos*; SACD, Chesky SACD326, "Red Book" layer), put the ARC through its paces, but low- and high-level dynamics were equally linear and organic, without a trace of compression.

I found the Ref3's bass response to be extended and uncolored. My only quib-

ble was that, compared with some other preamps I've heard, electric basses and timpani sounded just a touch softer and less explosive than they should have. On the Kraftwerk recording, for example, the lowest bass-synth blasts seemed a touch rounded and could have used a hint more dynamic slam. But I'm really splitting hairs here.

I compared the Reference 3 to my reference line stage, the Audio Valve Eklipse (\$4200). The Eklipse's midrange is equally rich, uncolored, and seductive, but the ARC resolved more inner detail. Although I feel the Eklipse is very strong at ambience retrieval and soundstaging, the ARC bettered it in almost every respect. And while the Eklipse had extended and uncolored high frequencies, the ARC's lack of electronic haze made me notice, for the first time, that the Eklipse sounded a bit more mechanical and less pure in the highs. Through both preamps the bass was extended and neutral, but I felt that the Eklipse had more dynamic slam, power, and tautness than the ARC, particularly in the midbass.

The Audio Research Reference 3 is a stunning achievement that, in many areas, achieves a level of realism that I did not think possible from any audio component.

—Robert J. Reina

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