



## AUDIOMAT PHONO<sup>2</sup>

It occurs to us that we have reviewed a great number of Audiomat products, a number out of all proportion to this French company's profile in the market. We've reviewed three outstanding tube integrated amplifiers, the *Arpège*, *Opéra* and *Récital*, which were featured in *UHF* No. 68, 69 and 73 respectively, we've done the *Tempo* and *Maestro* digital-to-analog converters, and this is the *fourth* phono preamp from Audiomat to come through our listening room. Why all this attention to the products of what is, by any standard, a minor brand?

It's simple. We like them.

Take the case of the phono preamplifiers, since one of them is featured here. The original Phono-1 was reviewed in *UHF* No. 56, and it got a reasonably good review, but not enough that we were tempted to reach for our cheque book. We were then using Bryston's wonderful but long-discontinued step-up transformer with the tube phono stage in our Copland preamplifier (one of which is still used in our Alpha reference systems), and we were perfectly happy. Our happiness was stirred, if not shaken, by the very-different Phono-1.5 (*UHF* No. 69). We don't make changes to our reference systems unless that change will improve our ability to review other products. That was finally the case, and we bought it. It would do us forever, we figured.

Then came the Phono-1.6 (*UHF* No. 87). In sonic terms it was just like the earlier one, except for one thing: the magic. We spend a good deal of

time listening to vinyl, both for work and pleasure (often for both at the same time), and at every level we would be enjoying ourselves more.

And now?

We could expect this new Audiomat product to be a significant upgrade, but to be blunt we began with no intention whatever of buying one. At well over \$5000, it isn't the most expensive phono preamp available, or even close, but there can always be something a little better, and that means we could go on upgrading forever. Enough was enough.

Case closed, then, but we'll return to this topic shortly.

Unlike the earlier Audiomat phono preamps, this one is not a replacement for the previous one, but an extension to the line. It costs \$2200 more than the Phono-1.6, and therefore by implication it must surely offer more. We suppose there could eventually be a Phono<sup>3</sup> at an even higher price, though we rather hope not.

The Phono<sup>2</sup> (the "2" is now written as superscript) is in a wide chassis like that of the Phono-1.5, but with a separate power supply, as before. The two are linked by a detachable cord with a five-pin XLR plug. There is but a single control, a front-panel switch that selects the MM or the MC input. There *is* a power switch, but it's placed unobtrusively on the power supply, and you are not encouraged to use it, except of course to turn it on when you first get it. There's a knurled post for attaching a ground lead if your turntable has one, but as ever it isn't just a chassis ground,

and it's wrong for most turntables, perhaps all of them. We got better results connecting the ground lead to the chassis with a small alligator clip.

So far there's not much new.

We did our listening with our best turntable, the one in our Omega system. It's a Linn LP12 with all the upgrades except the Keel, sitting on a Target VW-1 wall stand, with an Alphason HR-100S titanium tone arm and a London Reference cartridge. The London uses a unique transducer with a high output, and so we would be using the MM (moving magnet) input on both phono preamplifiers. We selected half a dozen particularly challenging LPs, and sat down to what we were certain would be a most pleasant session.

We weren't wrong.

We began with a classic that is reportedly worth money today, not that we care: an original Mercury Living Presence recording of Janos Starker playing the Bach *Suite No. 2 for Unaccompanied Cello* (Mercury SR 90370). It sounded downright terrific with our reference. With the Phono<sup>2</sup>...

Well, there *were* certainly differences, and they were all for the better. Both Toby and Gerard found the piece shorter with the Phono<sup>2</sup>, *too* short in fact. Though you might not expect "dynamics" to be high on the list of preoccupations with a solo instrument like the cello, the Phono<sup>2</sup> did provide improved dynamics, though — at the same time — the dynamic *changes* seemed less abrupt. The space, broad and deep with our reference, was if anything better yet. "It's a more natural sound," said Albert, "with less emphasis on each note, a more natural flow. The timbre of Starker's cello seems spot on. "If I were in the next room," said Toby, "this would bring me in."

We then turned to another classical piece, the *Andante* from Mozart's *Piano Concerto No. 21*, played by Géza Anda, who also conducts the Salzburg Mozarteum. It is this very version that was used in the Swedish film *Elvira Madigan*, and the work is still popularly known as "The Elvira Madigan Concerto," though the film has not been available for decades and is otherwise

forgotten.

All three of us noticed the strings right off, because they were so silky, but not because their sound had been softened. We noticed the piano next. Its notes blossomed (in a good way — we don't mean "bloomed"), and the relation between the piano and the orchestra was enhanced. The gentle rhythm, carried in part by the pizzicato string passages, was a delight. "You can imagine the musicians with their eyes closed and a smile on their lips," said Albert.

The third recording is a rarity, trumpeter Shorty Rogers' *Swinging Nutcracker*, a superb big-band adaptation of the Tchaikovsky ballet (RCA LSP-2110). We don't share the common admiration of early RCA stereo discs, perhaps because we're Canadian, and RCA's Canadian pressings were then made to such a low standard, but this LP is a gem in every way. It's from the late 50's, as witness the size of the flamboyant "Living Stereo" banner at the top of the sleeve. We played the long intro, titled *Like Nutty Overture*.

It was with this recording that the word "magic" was used for the first time (Gerard said it first, but it later seemed like the only adjective that would do). The bottom end — and there's plenty of it on this recording — was ample. The growl of the brass was admirably clear and gorgeous, but that didn't translate into roughness or any other unpleasant artifacts. Indeed, the saxophone passages, for all their detail, were even smoother than with our reference. Everything was livelier. "The muted trumpet is more realistic," said Toby. "You can feel the *embouchure*. And there's more depth, for what it's worth."

We returned to a recording that is famous in audiophile circles, though you can't find it anymore even in France, French singer Michael Jonasz' *La fabuleuse histoire de Mister Swing*. It's a double concept album. It was first popularized (in CD form) by Daniel Dehay, who would use it to demo his 3a Design Acoustics speakers (ancestors of today's Reference 3a) in the early 90's.



Everyone's favorite selection is *Le temps passé* from the second disc.

In contrast to the preceding selections, this one is anything but a natural acoustic recording. It was recorded live, with electric instruments and synthesizers, with lots of reverberation and other added effects. Why did it become an audiophile legend? You have to hear it to know.

"I love how this recording fills the room!" exclaimed Toby once we had heard it with the Phono<sup>2</sup>. "The powerful bass, the timing, the pauses...all are as they should be. And there was great contrast between the music and the near silences."

With Jonasz singing into a vocal stage microphone, his "S" sounds were not really natural, but even so they were noticeably improved with the Phono<sup>2</sup>. The lyrics were easier to follow, and that's especially important in an album that, like this one, tells a story. The rhythm is also important, and it worked especially well. The sharp transient sounds of the electric bass had extra impact, but without exaggeration. Even the finger snaps were more natural.

### SUMMING IT UP...

**Brand/model:** Audiomat Phono<sup>2</sup>

**Price:** C\$5490

**Size of main unit (WDH):** 42 x 30.5 x 8.6 cm, including cone feet

**Size of power supply:** 10 x 12.5 x 6

**Inputs:** MM and MC

**Outputs:** Coaxial

**Most liked:** Performance that borders on magic

**Least liked:** None of the usual adjustments, ineffective ground lug

**Verdict:** We bet this preamp could play a mean game of quidditch

"Normally I loathe artists who snap their fingers," said Gerard, "but Jonasz makes it work."

Well, as long as we're playing LPs you probably can't go out and buy... We wish Mary Black's wonderful *No Frontiers* were still in the stores, even if only in CD form, but it isn't, and we're glad we own our copies.

Albert didn't write a word. Said Toby, "When this song is reproduced properly, there's a sense of abandonment that emerges about halfway through. You just let yourself go and flow along with her voice. But in this case it appeared from the very start." The recording's other qualities were of course present, not only undiminished, but enhanced. There was a trace of reverberation at the ends of her syllables, but with the Phono<sup>2</sup> we could hear it all the time. The bongos were virtually perfect, as were the other instruments. The transients were quick but remained natural.

And above all, there was the warmth... We sometimes say that a particular product under test has a "cooler" sound, which of course doesn't mean it's wrong. A "warm" sound can be wrong too, and you know it's wrong when it superimposes itself on every musical passage. Warmth, like coolness, can be a coloration, and we sometimes analyze it in terms of color: bluish for cool, reddish or orange for warm. However Mary Black has a naturally warm voice, and that warmth came through most satisfyingly. At the same time, the effect was never overdone.

Yes, we could have said pretty much the same thing about the Phono-1.6, but the Phono<sup>2</sup> does it better, in some ways we can define, and in others we cannot.

We ended with a current LP, Opus 3's *Showcase* album (LP20000), from which we selected a jazz favorite, *Comes Love*.

We know it almost by heart. We've heard it play wonderfully well, and we've heard it...

"Wonderfully well" was the appropriate description here, of course, and we especially noticed how Kenny Davern's clarinet was reproduced. "He's a snake charmer," said Toby, "and when he wails you know why. It makes more musical sense." Gerard also noticed the sousaphone, which rumbles along in the nether regions of the scale, to great effect. "The rhythm is joyous," said Albert, adding that it was clear the musicians were having a good time.

As were we.

With the review session over (not that we were in a rush), it was time to take the Phono<sup>2</sup> out of the Omega system and put the Phono-1.6 back. Except that we didn't. We had a nearly a week before the preamp *had* to go back, and, well, surely no one begrudge us spinning a few more

discs, would they?

Now we know that there may be a handful of conspiracy theorists cynical enough to suspect that, if we give a product a sufficiently good review, we'll get to keep it (that would be a powerful incentive to trot out our most flowery adjectives). With hardly any exceptions, mainly small accessories and inexpensive cables, that's just not true. We only wish it were! If we keep it, we have to pay for it. And we have a budget. Is there an item in our 2011 budget for a new phono preamp? There is not!

Oh, but Pascal (of North American distributor Mutine) can be persuasive. The price he quoted us was relatively high, higher than the offers we get from most manufacturers and distributors, but perhaps, he suggested, we could create a slot for it in our 2012 budget. What about a postdated cheque?

We said no, no, absolutely not.

But then we made a fatal mistake. We listened to a whole lot more recordings during the week remaining with the Phono<sup>2</sup>. And "no" turned into..."your cheque is in the mail."

Well, that was us. The more important point is this: should *you* let yourself be drawn in the same way?

It depends on the extensibility of your budget, needless to say, but it also depends in part on what your music system most needs, or what it can best profit from. It's obvious that our Omega system is rather highly developed, from turntable to electronics, to loudspeakers to cables. It needs to be, because it is a working tool, but let's be frank. The reason all of us are involved in this magazine is because we enjoy it. We would rather be doing this than anything else. Would we enjoy it more with a Phono<sup>2</sup>?

Well d'oh! To ask the question is to answer it.



## CROSSTALK

The Starker performance of the Bach solo piece, an original copy of this LP, was riveting. It had me on the edge of my seat all the way through. It had dramatic tension, musical passion, loads of delightful detail, succulent string timbres...and *that* was with the reference Audiomat Phono-1.6, a phono preamp which had always impressed me. What the Phono<sup>2</sup> did was round all that out, place it in a physical space, smooth the dynamic gradient so that the music flowed easily from loud to soft... and then make the piece about two minutes shorter!

That's telling. When the music is over much too soon, you *know* you are hearing something exceptional. The exceptions went on and on through the program of test pieces, until by the end I was more or less speechless, and my pen refused to write. A listening session like this will transform your grumpy companions — if you have them — into poets, and your life into art.

Most of us will look at the large price tag on this marvelous preamplifier and conclude, for understandable reasons, that we can't afford it. It would be a mistake to turn down a chance to listen to it, though, just in case it spoiled you for more modest gear.

That wasn't my experience. I have two

of the six terrific vinyl recordings used in this review, and afterwards I couldn't wait to get home and enjoy them. The Phono<sup>2</sup> had opened new doors to the music. Hear it if you can.

—Toby Earp

I anticipate that the trolls on the Net will call me names if I identify "magic" as the defining characteristic of this phono preamplifier, but quite honestly I don't know what other word I can use. Forget extra extension of the bottom end, liquidity of the highs, and all that high-end talk. A good recording played through this device has an extra touch of *magic*.

Which takes nothing away from the older (but still current) Phono-1.6. You may recall that we used the same "magical" adjective in describing it, and the adjective was deserved. But this one is a Hogwarts graduate!

I suppose I would prefer that it have internal adjustments, as the Moon 310LP does, but if it did, it would be a pain to use as a reference, since by its nature a reference component will be used with many other products. And it's not as though I can actually *hear* any harm being done to the Phono<sup>2</sup>'s

sound just because I can't tweak the output capacitance.

You don't need me to tell you whether you should buy one too. Lend it an ear...and let it tell you in its own voice.

—Gerard Rejskind

How would you describe a clear pane of glass? Well, you wouldn't. Listening to reproduced music often seems like watching a movie through a sealed glass window, and every improvement in the system makes that pane of glass a bit clearer, a bit cleaner, a bit more transparent.

Well today that glass became a whole lot...less. I could say that performers popped to life, but then you might think that they jumped out of the speakers. Actually it wasn't quite like that. It sounded as if they did more of whatever they had been doing. As if they were naturally more convincing. When they played softly, their music was softer, when they played with a smile and a wink, they cracked up, a sad lament became gloom and everything flowed.

A superb phono stage such as this one shows you all that you've been missing and didn't even know it. Start saving.

—Albert Simon