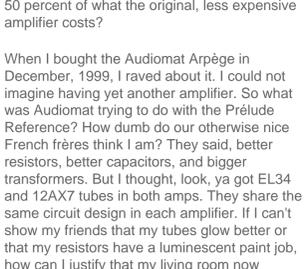


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Audiomat Prélude Reference Amplifier Magic, Depth And Revelation Make The Prélude Special

by Neil Walker



The Law Of Diminishing Returns

Is there such a thing as a law of diminishing returns? How can an amplifier that has identical manufacturer's specifications cost an additional 50 percent of what the original, less expensive amplifier costs?

When I bought the Audiomat Arpège in December, 1999, I raved about it. I could not imagine having yet another amplifier. So what was Audiomat trying to do with the Prélude Reference? How dumb do our otherwise nice French frères think I am? They said, better resistors, better capacitors, and bigger transformers. But I thought, look, ya got EL34 and 12AX7 tubes in both amps. They share the same circuit design in each amplifier. If I can't show my friends that my tubes glow better or that my resistors have a luminescent paint job, how can I justify that my living room now houses an amplifier that costs another 1,400 dollars?

I was not about to be fooled. No European smooth talk for me, boy. I went as far as learning how to put the backward sloping accent over the "e" in Arpège. That was it for me.... Then I was stupid enough to agree to review the Prélude Reference. Bad move.

All the way back from Montreal, with most of the back seat filled with the double-cartoned amplifier, the Love Goddess asked things like, "Neil, why are we doing this?... How long is this thing going to be in the family room?... Are you sure you want to review another of Pascal's units?..." I began to wonder just what would happen when I plugged in this monster (the amplifier, that is, not the Goddess) and started the break-in.

My greatest fear was that I would not be able to hear the difference and I would have to turn in my *Enjoy the Music.com*[™] "This Reviewer Has The Ears of a G-d" badge. We arrived home. I waited till morning to unpack the thing. Finally, I lifted it out of its inner box. I looked at it sideways.

"Hmmp. Doesn't have a cool black Lucite panel through which I can admire my beautiful tubes. Just a light aluminum case, not that cool, thin black steel. Weighs about the same, though."

I set it up on my nice little table from Vecteur, another French item (beautiful metallic grey, looked fab with the black Arpège, thought it would improve marital relations when I replaced my trusty old Target stand with them). I plugged in the power cord and all the other cables. "Jeez I wish these JPS thingles were a little more flexible," I whined to no one in particular.

Then I turned it on. Its volume control quietly set itself to zero as soon as I flipped the switch. I waited. And waited. A green light was flashing. A red light glowed steadily. Finally the red light went out and the green light stopped flashing. I turned the selector switch to position two, for my CD player. Bill Frisell's *Gone Just Like a Train* [Nonesuch, 79479-2] was sitting in the tray in ambush. It caught me right in the gut. The bass shook me. The sheer presence of the guitar, the bass, the drum and the cymbals. I could not believe the difference between the two amps.

Just Add Transformers And Electrify

Later, after I had simmered down and allowed the amp its required 200 hours of break-in (My local Audiomat dealer always says, "Give it plenty of volume; transformers like lots of current."), I heard a refined amplifier with a lot more snap, and bass slam and transparency than the Arpège has. Not that the Arpège lacks these; it does not. I stand by my first evaluation - the Arpège is an incredibly good amplifier with real depth to be plumbed by the audiophile. It's just that the Prélude Référence has all the good stuff that the Arpège has - but a lot more of it.

The Prélude helps start audiophile fights. As one instance where the law of diminishing returns does not apply, it is also an example of how little statistics tell us and why I and everybody else on the masthead say, "Listen. Trust your ears. Enjoy the music. If it allows you to enjoy the music, then it is doing its job."

Now, on to the review. The Prélude Reference is a silvery white box (brushed aluminum) that clads some very simple, very well assembled electronics. At seven and a half inches high, 17.5 inches wide and 17.3 inches deep, it is a fairly bulky piece, but attractive nonetheless. Its front panel is a one-quarter inch thick slab of beautifully machined aluminum with its switches and lights aligned in a groove between the volume control and the input selector knobs. According to the manufacturer's blurb, the case is "aircraft aluminum." I do not know what that means, but I guess it means something good (for \$3,490 it must mean something good). Certainly, it looks good and accounts for the fact that, despite the extra transformer size, this amplifier weighs slightly less than the Arpège, 51 pounds according to the manufacturer (150 pounds according to me).

Like the Arpège, it rests its 51 pounds on three sharp metal cones that make a great job of sinking into whatever you rest it on. Just in case you plan to put it on top of an heirloom, Audiomat supplies three little bronze cups in which these cones may sit. They are, of course, also beautifully machined, just like the ones which accompany the Arpège. However, remove the cups and the sound is just a little tighter, a shade more focussed sounding. Yes, my beautiful, sonically superb audiophile table looks like hell when you remove the amplifier, but the solution is obvious. Do not remove the amplifier and do not use the shelf to support the minuscule phono stage you bought.

The back of the amplifier is much easier to work with than that of most others. Too many amplifiers have their input sockets places so closely together that attaching, tightening and loosening your RCA connectors are almost impossible operations for anyone whose fingers are thicker than a sparrow's claws. The Prélude has its RCA connectors relatively well spaced, a good 15/16 of an inch apart, center to center. There are five input receptacles and one pair of tape outs. However, no tape loop or pre-amp outs are available.

The speaker terminals are also easy to get at, and having two complete sets of them means that bi-wiring is easy. However, despite the amplifier's impressive quality throughout, Audiomat uses those awful plastic terminal tightening nuts. They invariably lose their grip on the metal nuts that do the actual gripping of your spade lugs or wire once you try to tighten them with your little speaker terminal wrench. For \$3,490 we should expect better.

Inside the Prélude, the layout, quality of assembly and those three custom-wound transformers are a visual treat, just like the interior of the Arpège. However, in the Prélude, the transformers look different (they are) and standing behind the output transformers at the back of the chassis are large, serious looking capacitors. "Aha!" thought I. "That accounts for the feeling in my gut when I turned it on the first time." Rumour has it that the transformers account for about half the cost.

The circuit board is an upgrade (Teflon, I am told) from the Arpège as are many of the parts. It is also meticulously assembled. When you buy an Audiomat, you buy a gem of handmade manufacture. The solder joints, the layout, the arrangement of the wires; every bit of it is enormously impressive for its obvious care. Sometimes, there is a wait to get an Audiomat and the reason is obvious. The company, founded by two brothers in 1986, has three people building amplifiers in batches of 40. Audiomat takes years to perfect their products before release.

The sound you hear is the result of this care. In the months I have listened to this amplifier, I have learned that it handles all kinds of music with accuracy and musicality. It also handles a wide range for loudspeakers with ease: that big power supply gives it the drive to take on chores which belie its rated 30 watt per channel output.

Magic In Music

You also cannot let the power rating dissuade you if you demand that your system rock. This amplifier has enough bass slam to satisfy anyone. The difference is that the Prélude is fast and detailed throughout the range, and has enough power to drive the woofers hard without losing its composure in other parts of the sound spectrum. It may be getting old, but I still like Ministry's "Jesus Built My Hot Rod" (*Psalm 69: The Way To Succeed and the Way To Suck Eggs* [Sire/Warner Bros. CD 26727]). The Prélude does not even breathe hard to deliver a hard driving wall of sound on this disc. Same with the kind of demanding bass on Lauryn Hill's "To Zion" and "Every Ghetto, Every City" on *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* (Ruffhouse - Columbia CK 69035).

If rock and rap are not your style, the Prélude also makes Beethoven's "Wellington's Victory" (live cannon and muskets) very impressive if you are really keen on watching the bass drivers try to leap out of the speaker cabinet. (By the way, if you like this piece (the critics consider it one of Beethoven's worst; everyone else loves it for its unashamed bombast), the best recording by far is by The Academy of St. Martin in the Fields conducted by Neville Marriner [Philips 426 239-2]. The other recordings, digital or analogue, do not capture the cannon and musketry with near the drama or realism of Marriner's.)

Bass slam for cannon and drums is not the only criticism I used for evaluating the Prélude. This amplifier offers much enhanced definition and resolution at every point on the auditory spectrum. Its speed and precision give voices presence, no matter whose. As examples, I chose sopranos Sumi Jo and Emma Kirkby, jazz singer Jacintha, saxophonist Dexter Gordon and the King, Elvis. Sumi Jo's voice is crystalline - every time I play her singing Constanze's "Martern aller Arten" from *Die Entführung aus den Serail* [Sumi Jo sings Mozart, Erato 0630-14637-2], I shiver. The Prélude frees her voice from any constraint. Not only is there the crystalline sheen her fans love, there is the texture and detail with which she gives her role life.

So it is when you listen to other singers: the Prélude reveals the human voice in detail. Even the spoken voice takes on deeper textures. The slow-talking Dexter Gordon's introduction to each piece on *Dexter Gordon Live at Carnegie Hall* [Columbia/Legacy CK65312] appears as a separate track - his speaking voice is almost as big a feature as his playing. With the Prélude's detail, he lives with a realism I had not heard before. Elvis Presley's performance of "Fever" on the LP, *Elvis Is Back* [RCA Victor LSP 02231 re-issued by DCC as LPZ-2037], takes on a new dimension with the imaging and the texture that the Prélude gives his voice and the instruments, bass and percussion.

I also noted another quality of song with this amplifier. You can understand the words, not just with Elvis, but with operatic singers such as Sumi Jo and with other individual singers and choirs. This ability is probably related to the way in which the Prélude's supplies low-level detail and offers pitch black silence between the notes. It demonstrates this quality on all the music I played, but is especially noticeable as it plumbs the emotional depth of Shirley Horn's "If you leave me," [You Won't Forget Me, Verve, 847 482-2].

So, do I need to say more? If we go to instrumental music, the Prélude enhances the timbre of the piano on so many of my CDs and LPs. For example, Mikhail Pletnev's performance of Domenico Scarlatti's sonatas on the piano [Scarletti: Keyboard Sonatas, Virgin Classics, 7243 5 45123 2 2] are light, quick and natural sounding. Every note is clean and lacks any heaviness or plummyness that so many amplifiers give to piano music. Similarly, Jacques Loussier's playing of "Clair de Lune" on *The Jacques Loussier Trio Play Debussy* (Telarc CD-85511) stirs you because of the way the Prélude unleashes the poetic understanding he brings to the piece.

When Leila Josefowicz performs Heinrich Wilhelm Ernst's "Le Roi des Aulnes - Grand Caprice for Solo Violin after Schubert D. 328," the Prélude brings the very wood of the violin, the grit of the terrifying ride of the father and son into the listening room (*Leila Josefowicz Solo*, Phillips 446 700-2). The accordion, the bass drum, the and James Carter's baritone saxophone in Django Reinhardt's "Nuages (Clouds)" on Carter's 2000 CD, *Chasin' the Gipsy* [Atlantic, CD83304] offer another example of the depth of power and detail this amp possesses.

The Bad News

For a good portion of this review, I borrowed the Audiomat Tempo 2.5 DAC from the Ontario Audiomat dealer, Toronto's Applause Audio. It is a superb DAC which I hope to review some day. What it did for my review was provide a very high quality signal to the Prélude, with more presence and detail than my trusty Audiolab 800DAX could ever manage. Both these pieces of equipment are good enough to handle the Prélude. However, the Tempo gave me a much better idea of the depth this amplifier possesses. When I switched to vinyl, same thing - depth is the only way to describe the additional dimension the amplifier offers. When I went back to the Arpège, I heard how genuinely excellent it is. But switching between the two made the Arpège sound almost as there were a blanket over the speakers. The Prélude will destroy any idea you ever had that a tube amplifier is soft and warm and fuzzy. It is present and detailed and unforgiving - but it also possesses a degree of musicality most other manufacturers would kill for in this price range.

Does this amplifier follow the law of diminishing returns? No. The Arpège costs 60 per cent of the price of the Prélude and it is 60 per cent the amplifier which the Prélude Référence is.

Is there anything bad about this amplifier? No. There are better amplifiers in the world, but they will cost you a great deal more. This amplifier works extremely well and is a rare example of outstanding attention to build quality. Depending on your tastes, it can rock or it can offer poetic insight and detail in the quietest of classical music.

If you are accustomed to the way in which the Arpège or another amplifier forgives a weak front end in your system or a poorly made CD, then the Prélude may surprise you. It will expose any weakness in the source, be it the electronics or the recording. For that reason, if you are upgrading your system, improve your source first.

Finally, if I had to upgrade from the Audiomat Arpège, would I consider the Prélude? Absolutely - watch the list of audio gear that accompanies my reviewer's bio for the next few weeks.

Tonality	98
Sub-bass (10 Hz - 60 Hz)	97
Mid-bass (80 Hz - 200 Hz)	97
Midrange (200 Hz - 3,000 Hz)	97
High-frequencies (3,000 Hz on up)	97
Attack	98
Decay	97
Inner Resolution	97
Soundscape width front	97
Soundscape width rear	97
Soundscape depth behind speakers	97
Soundscape extension into the room	97
Imaging	97
Fit and Finish	99
Self Noise	100
Value for the Money	95

Specifications

Power: two channels, 30 watts each operating in "Class A" up to mid-power (minimum)

Inputs: five high level

Outputs: One tape out

Over-rated transformers designed according to Audiomat specifications

Direct coupling between the two first stages

Automatic Bias

Tube Complement: three 12AX7A, four EL34WXT

Input Sensitivity: 300 mV

Minimum power consumption: 70 watts

Weight: 51 lbs.

Dimensions: 7.5" x 17.5" x 17.3" (HxWxD)

Warranty: two years, tubes six months

Company Information

North American Distributor

Mutine Inc.

Voice (514) 221-2160

E-mail mail@mutine.com

Website: www.mutine.com