

MOON LP3 PHONO PREAMP



Simaudio may not hit a home run with every new product it brings out, but its record should give it a shot at the Hall of Fame. We thought it did particularly well with its Moon LP5.3 phono preamp (reviewed in *UHF* No. 83). Of course that product costs more than a lot of consumers can budget for, particularly if they have entry-level turntables and nothing to plug them into. What could the company do for very significantly less money?

Like any company that's thinking clearly, Simaudio likes to recycle its hit technologies in simplified — and therefore less expensive — form, hoping to bring in a wider audience that less experienced companies cannot hope to reach. That doesn't always work, and some companies have succeeded in doing nothing more than trashing their brand names. However that is essentially what Simaudio has attempted with the LP3, and cleverly too.

The circuit configuration is in fact similar to that of the upscale LP5.3, and it still has both MM and MC inputs, a capability that it too often sacrificed on the

altar of economy. However the parts used in the LP3 are not quite as expensive, and it has omitted some features. You can't change the impedance and capacitance settings for the MC circuit, for instance (not that most people do). There are no balanced outputs, as there are on the LP5.3. And there isn't a hefty power supply either. The LP3 gets its electricity from one of those ubiquitous wall warts. We'll get back to that a little later.

Like its big brother, the LP3 doesn't have a convenient switch to select the MM and MC inputs. Instead you have to pull out a set of Allen keys to remove the cover, and then find some tweezers in order to move tiny jumpers from one position to the other. This isn't what you call user-friendly, but at least the LP3 doesn't have any live high voltages lurking about inside. Simaudio says it selected this arcane adjust method in the interest of keeping the signal path as short as possible,

We gave the LP3 plenty of time with our special break-in disc (intended specifically for phono preamps), and then installed it alongside the reference preamp in our Omega system, an

Audiomat Phono-5.1. Plugged into it was our Linn LP12 with Alphason arm and London Reference cartridge.

The first question we had was whether the LP3 would be reasonably silent, as its big brother was. We weren't sure it would be, because it seemed evident that the tiny unshielded cord from the wall wart would make a lovely conduit for all the noise emerging from the power line and the rest of the system. We need not have worried. If you go by our experience, this preamp is unlikely to disturb your listening with hiss, hum or buzz.

We began the listening session with William Walton's rollicking orchestral suite *Façade*, with its broad variety of instrumental solos. With the LP3 there was a little extra energy in the higher frequencies, which is not really a good thing, but it's not what we focused on initially, because there were more important things going on. We can sum it up this way: the music was fun to listen to.

Oh, of *course* you want to know more. Toby Earp praised the midrange, the heart of the music. "It's wonderful," he said. "The colors are delicious, and the roundness of the clarinet is full." Albert and Gerard were on the same wavelength. Both found the varied musical passages lyrical, even in the case of background melodies, and of course of the suite's complex counterpoints. The trumpet was particularly pleasant, and it was easy to tell one woodwind from another. No homogenization of timbres here!

True, the huge sound stage was smaller, and indeed *everything* was smaller, but we didn't much care. Music trumps mere sound anytime.

Would the LP3 give a little too much edge to the top end of a well-recorded violin? We put on the Uccellini *Sonata e Corenti* from an Open Window LP we have long owned and admired. We say it's "well recorded" because the timbre of the instrument is very close to what a violinist would hear, but of course

MM AND MC

First things first. If you are (finally) adding a turntable to your audio system, can you just plug it into any input that's free? No you can't. An input meant for a CD player, a tuner or an iPod expects to "see" a signal of perhaps 2 volts. A phono cartridge typically has an output of 0.002 volts, or even 0.0002 volts. What's more, LPs are recorded "on a curve," with lows de-emphasized and the highs boosted. You need a phono preamplifier that can reverse that curve, as well as adding the necessary amplification.

Possibly you know that there are two sorts of phono cartridges, MM and MC, and that each requires a different treatment. In fact it's not quite that simple.

Conventional magnetic cartridges have a fixed coil and a moving magnet: that is, the magnet is on one end of the cantilever, with the stylus on the other. The magnet has to be small, so it will be easy to move, and so the coil must be large, with a lot of turns of wire. That means high inductance, and in all but a few expensive models it means compromised high frequencies. However the output voltage is relatively high, typically 2 millivolts, and an MM phono preamp "expects" a signal of that voltage.

An MC pickup does things the other way around: the magnet is fixed, and the coil is wound around the end of the cantilever. But now it is the coil that must be kept small, with fewer turns of wire. It will have low inductance, and very extended high frequency response, and that is good. You'll often see it stated that such cartridges have *low output*, and therefore require extra amplification, but that isn't actually true. In fact they have *low voltage* (but correspondingly higher current). You can use a transformer to swap out the current for voltage, but most designers actually do provide extra gain, to accommodate the low voltage (0.2 to 0.5 mV). Doing it that way adds noise and distortion, but quality phono-grade transformers are rare and expensive.



The higher frequencies were a little prominent, but there was no glare, and nothing truly objectionable. It is in the midrange that this phono preamp shines. If her tone was less warm than we like, she still sounded captivating.

So did the accompanying instruments, including the accordion and the percussion.

The LP3 did equally well with a male voice, that of Bluesman Doug McLeod on *Master's Plan* from the LP version of *Come to Find* (Audioquest AQ1027). The song opens with a beautiful introduction on the acoustic guitar. The very good clarity let us hear the touch of McLeod's fingers on individual strings. "It's difficult to reproduce a real guitar realistically," said Toby, "so it isn't as natural as with our own preamp, but what you do get is the music."

As we have already noted, a broad dynamic range is one of the touchstones of this phono preamplifier, and McLeod's voice, especially in this song, requires strong performance at both ends of the dynamic spectrum. His final syllables are so soft that you can easily lose them in the fog, and if you do, then the song won't work for you. When he sings (much) louder, on the other hand, that can be a problem too. On many systems, rising volume gives the impression that the artist has taken a couple of menacing steps toward you. That's wrong, and this LP is good enough that you should never be left with that illusion. The LP3 gets this right.

We ended with *I'm Scared*, a classic rock piece from Burton Cummings, recorded (can it be?) over three decades ago. It's a busy piece, with piano, bass and strings, as well as Cummings' own powerful voice.

Toby praised the roundness of the bottom end, but there seemed to be a little less of it, and that brought our focus back to the voice. "You hear he has a good voice," said Toby. "The strength of this preamp is in the midrange, and it is warm, extending into the mid-bass. If you have to sacrifice something, this isn't a bad way."

Surprisingly, then, the lyrics were actually easier to follow. "The intention of the song is well served," commented Gerard.

violinists are very close to their instruments, and that gives prominence to the higher harmonics. Emphasizing them in playback could be a recipe for auditory catastrophe.

The LP3 *did* give them extra prominence, and we judged that the violin didn't have quite the transparency it had with our reference preamp, but once again that was not what captivated our attention. As before, it was the liveliness that particularly pleased us. The violin had wonderfully clear articulation, and the harpsichord was clean and easy to follow as well. Rhythm was strong, and we had the impression that the playing was particularly quick, or at least that nothing was slowing it down. Even the softer passages, often left behind by economy products, survived well. "It's not the reference," said Albert, "but I'm happy."

We turned to the title song from Mary Black's (alas!) unavailable LP *No Frontiers*. Black's voice is notable for its effortless power, and that has been well captured on this recording (not all of her recordings, unfortunately, do her justice). With the LP3 her voice had all of its power and none of the effort.

SUMMING IT UP...

Brand/model: Moon LP3

Price: C\$599/US\$499

Size (WDH): 10.5 x 10.3 x 6 cm

Most liked: Lively dynamics, surprising musicality, lack of noise

Least liked: Finicky switching from MM to MC

Verdict: Simaudio tries to make the phono preamp its competitors have worked on for years, nails it

Albert didn't write much. Usually that's because he is too captivated by the music, so in this case nothing particular struck him.

But we were unanimous about one thing: Simaudio has done a fine job of shoehorning most of its expensive technology into a product for the lower economic range that seems so much in fashion currently. The LP3 serves the cause of music better than we normally expect from phono preamps of this price category. The flaws — and they aren't many — affect secondary aspects of sound.

But good as it is, could it be better yet?

Toby's eyes turned to the wall wart that supplies the electricity for this device, one of the smallest you're ever likely to see, so tiny you need a magnifying glass to read the label. "I see it's 12 volts," he said. "Do you suppose it would work on 13.8 volts?" We understood what he was driving at. That's the voltage of a car battery charger, capable, of course, of much more current.

"Why not a car battery?" suggested Gerard.

"That would be overkill," said



Toby, but the conversation turned to interesting possibilities. You can buy 12 volt batteries to fit motorcycles, burglar alarms, or even those (supposedly) uninterruptible power supplies for computers. They're cheap, too. Top it up with a charger now and then.

Of course, a number of designers have built amplifiers, and especially preamplifiers, that were battery-powered. The advantages are evident. There's lots of current when needed (try shorting one out with a screwdriver and see what hap-

pens!). It's inherently noise-free. And it's separated from ground, which sidesteps a lot of potential problems. The LP3 has a standard power plug, and upgrades are definitely possible.

To put this into perspective, Simaudio makes an expensive outboard supply for its LP5.3 phono preamp, and we listened to it with the optional cord allowing us to run it from the huge power supply in our P-8 preamplifier. Yes, a bigger, better power supply makes a difference.

But even without some sort of DIY upgrade, the LP3 is a killer product. It can be a god match for a turntable costing many times more than its own modest price.



CROSSTALK

Have you fallen in love with a moving coil cartridge for the first time? Looking to move up from an entry-level phono stage? Have a good integrated and now a yen for vinyl?

The LP3 is bound to please. It's tweakable via its power supply, and the warm feeling you get as you listen to it play will be reinforced by the warm feeling in your wallet pocket.

The reference is still the reference, but both phono preamps come from families that really get music. The LP3 played the heart of every piece we listened to. It swings, it sings, it scampers, it rocks. I wouldn't hesitate if it were anywhere within reach of my budget.

—Toby Earp

I felt wonderfully comfortable during the listening tests. Everything sounded so right, so balanced, that I often forgot they *were* tests and ended up flowing freely with the

music. There were no noticeable excesses, no flagrant problem signs. Just good sound and lovely music.

No, it wasn't perfect (what is?), but what it did, it did equally well throughout the whole spectrum. Was the energy too obvious on the highs, in some recordings? Perhaps. Did it bother me? Not in the least.

Would I consider *repeating* the tests, just in case I was too busy enjoying the music? Anytime.

—Albert Simon

I know I've said this before, but there was a time when Simaudio (and Sima Audio before it) couldn't build a good phono section to save its life. Its forte — and it was quite a forte — was power amplifiers, big iron that could handle big signals, and render them with a mix of big muscle and gentleness. Even its preamplifiers weren't in the same class.

Need I add that this was a long time ago?

Its flagship preamplifier, the Moon P-8 is in one of our reference systems, and we didn't get it because it was cheap (it wasn't). And when we listened to the LP5.3, well...you know the rest.

But building a phono stage for \$1600 is one thing, building one for a thousand bucks less is another pair of sleeves, as the French say. Mission accomplished! I've heard a lot of phono stages in this price category, some with famous names, but they don't do what this one does.

What *does* it do? It gives life to the music. That's despite some obvious flaws, details of which you'll find in our review. What I appreciate from vinyl, over and above smoothness of highs, body and all that stuff, is the feeling that there are people breathing behind that invisible wall of sound.

The LP3 lets that through. There is nothing more important.

—Gerard Rejskind