



Audio Research Reference Phono 3

If ever there was any doubt that the current resurgence in vinyl record sales is not about to fizzle out, the arrival of a brand new, unashamedly high-end phono pre-amp from Audio Research should prove otherwise.

The Audio Research Reference Phono 3 is an all-new design, replacing the venerable Reference Phono 2 SE, which arguably remains one of the most desirable phono preamps on the planet. It also means its replacement has big boots to fill.

The Ref Phono 3 follows the aesthetic lead set by the most recent crop of Audio Research pre-amplifiers and power amplifiers. It's a handsome component, albeit in a practical, no-nonsense kind of way.

The sleek all-alloy chassis looks more functional than fancy, but there is something strangely alluring about the grooved side panels (for heat dissipation and vibration resistance), and transparent top and bottom covers that allow a clear view of the meticulous circuitry and hand-selected circuit components.

The fascia is dominated by a large alphanumeric display offering a comprehensive overview of the PH-3's operational status, including gain, load, equalisation setting, input and mute status. The display is dimmable, and the text is large and bright enough to be seen from a distance.

A row of selector buttons below the display looks after power on/off, input selection and mute activation, as well access to the settings menu, which allows all the operational facets of the phono stage to be adjusted.

Most of these functions can also be accessed and changed via the included remote control handset.

The rear panel offers two sets of single-ended, stereo RCA inputs, which can be set up independently to suit the requirements of two different cartridges for those users who have two turntables, or a turntable with two arms.

There is a choice of single-ended or balanced outputs, while power is provided via a C19-terminated power socket. RS-232 and IR inputs allow the PH-3 to be seamlessly integrated into custom installations.

Like the Reference 6 pre-amp, the Reference Phono 3 features thoroughly reworked internals, starting with an increase in the tube count from two to three per channel.

There's also a new power supply to match the extra valves while promising improved dynamic range. The remainder of the circuitry has been reworked, and features proprietary coupling capacitors, revised wiring and cryogenically treated items in the quest for improved performance and sonic integrity.

The tube complement consists of six 6H30 dual-triode valves, three per channel, while the power supply is fitted with one 6H30 and a 6550WE for power regulation.

Like the Ref 6 pre-amp reviewed a few issues back, the phono stage demands lots of running-in hours — around 600, according to Audio Research's recommendations. Nor is it good enough to simply keep it switched on: no sir, you need to be chasing an actual signal through those intricately configured innards.

The review unit arrived with 120 hours





on the clock, so to speak, and I might have added another 12 to 15 hours during the review period. But the bottom line is that the Ref Phono 3 will continue to improve for at least the first year of use, depending on how much time the owner spends spinning vinyl – and given its level of talent, that should be a lot!

Don't expect the warm and fuzzy sound so often associated with – or more accurately, expected – from valve designs. This not a phono stage that panders to those who like their musical fare rich and saucy.

Rather, the Ref Phono 3's focus is on fending off noise, preserving the integrity of the incoming signal in the best possible way, and then presenting that signal with a commitment to precision and musical honesty.

That honesty means that the Ref Phono 3 is able to clearly distinguish between – and highlight – the differences between MC phono cartridges, while also making the most of their often divergent talents. Rarely have I heard my three reference MC cartridges sound so enthralling, and yet so patently different, as in the company of this phono pre-amp.

The Ref Phono 3 is an athletic, lithe and nimble performer that refuses to be bogged down by the depth of the bass and the fullness of the mids. It's fast and incisive in a way that sounds pure solid

state in terms of intent and execution, but with the wonderful texture, tonal breadth and almost tactile reality of tube designs.

The Audio Research approaches and re-

veals both the macro and micro elements of a performance with an intensity and presence that is quite mesmerising.

In some ways, this is a phono pre-amp

VITAL STATS

MM/MC	Selectable
Selectable loading	Yes: 50/100/200/500 ohms/1 kOhm/47 kOhm
Gain	Selectable: 45/67 dB (single-ended) 51/73 dB (balanced)
Equalisation	Selectable: RIAA/Columbia/Decca
Frequency response	10 Hz – 60 kHz (±0,2 dB, RIAA)
Output impedance	400 ohms (balanced), 200 ohms (single-ended)
Dimensions (WxDxH)	480 x 419 x 198 mm
Weight	16,6 kg
Price	R231 000

Verdict

A phono stage for purists who demand – and can afford – the best. Delivers its wares with clarity and musical empathy. Demands ancillaries of equal excellence to show off its true class.

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OUR RATING: 91 / 100





that gets out of the way of the music, preferring to open up the sonic space and set the stage for the performance. There's no sense of the Ref Phono 3 attenuating or emphasising any aspect of the music – instead it keeps the channels between what's captured in the record's groove and what reaches the listener as unencumbered, as authentic as possible.

It's pointless here to talk about staging, for instance: the Ref Phono 3 will sound as expansive or as intimate as the incoming signal will dictate. That sonic image will be as perfectly focussed and as dimensionally expansive as the original producer intended, and it will be able to showcase not only the broad thrust of the music, but also those fine slivers of sound that transform the listening experience from merely entertaining to gripping and enthralling.

Given that the phono pre-amp can be easily set up for different cartridges, it stands to reason that it's able to accommodate the often divergent requirements of those cartridges in order for them to sound at their best.

My recently recalibrated Van Den Hul The Frog sounded boisterous and energetic, partly due to its fairly high (by MC standards) output level. It easily produced the 'biggest' sound, by which I mean that it painted a large, bold, impactful picture of the music.

My go-to top-end MC, Ortofon's Cadenza Black, sounded more concise, more controlled and slightly darker, but with an underlying muscle and momentum that made for equally riveting listening. Staging was seamless and holographic, if not quite as expansive as The Frog's, but with a vivid sense of intent and focus that allowed both insight and engagement.

Perhaps the surprise of the trio auditioned for this review was the Blue Angel Mantis – a ruby cantilevered design I was fortunate enough to acquire last year, and which has been enchanting me ever since.

In the company of the Ref Phono 3, it was able to show its true class to spell-binding effect: a beguiling ease of pace linked to finely resolved detail, a generous but perfectly proportioned soundstage,

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and a sense of musical cohesion and truthfulness that transcended the very notion of hi-fi to the benefit of exhilarating, goose bump-inducing music.

I describe these differences only because it's important in highlighting the ability of the Audio Research to distinguishing so clearly and unequivocally between the sonic characters of a trio of fine, upper-class cartridges.

Not only that, but the Ref Phono 3 was also able to distinguish and explore each cartridge's individual traits, doing full justice to those elements that make each of these cartridges fine and memorable expressions of the cartridge maker's art.

Bottom line: rest assured that whatever high-end cartridge/tonearm/turntable is providing the source signal to the Audio Research, the end result will do the true potential of that combination the fullest possible justice.

Jazz vocalist Patricia Barber's husky, moody performances have long been audiophile favourites, but it's better to set those sonic expectations aside, and to concentrate instead on the way she interprets the music with an intensity that commands attention.

Software

Patricia Barber – *Café Blue* (Premonition/Mobile Fidelity 45rpm Remaster)

Patricia Barber – *Companion* (Premonition/Mobile Fidelity 45rpm Remaster)

Rodrigo y Gabriela – *Rodrigo y Gabriela* (Music On Vinyl 180g)

Sting – *The Last Ship* (Interscope 180g)

Jeff Buckley – *Grace* (Columbia/Simply Vinyl 180g)

Associated Equipment

Avid Diva II SP/SME 309 turntable

Blue Angel Mantis/Van den Hul The Frog/

Ortofon Cadenza Black cartridges

Naim Uniti 2 music player

Vivid Audio V1.5 loudspeakers

TelluriumQ Black speaker cables

TelluriumQ Black and XLO Reference interconnects



The Ref Phono 3 dug deep into the heart and soul of Barber's renditions, extracting not only the full intensity of her voice, but contextualising those vocals with the perfectly presented accompaniment of her backing band.

While Barber was always allowed to dominate musical proceedings, that prominence was never achieved to the detriment of overall balance: the bass was powerful and timbre-rich, while the percussion was acutely etched on a generous, compelling soundscape.

Mexican guitar duo Rodrigo Sanchez and Gabriela Quintera spin musical narratives that are as compelling as they are as exciting, while presenting a considerable challenge to any audio system in the process.

Their self-titled third album covers several rock classics, notably the Led Zeppelin anthem 'Stairway To Heaven', and the Ref Phono 3 easily kept up with the frenetic pace and punishing dynamics of the duelling guitars.

It was also able to show off an impressive unflappability, highlighting the individual characters of the guitars, while retaining a sense of measured poise and clarity that allowed the recording's layers to be presented with both sonic precision and musical believability.

Sting's storytelling on *The Last Ship* is reason enough to invest some time in actually listening to this album, rather than having it rambling along in the background. But the narrative apart, the music is sublime, capturing the pathos and the humour of the characters and the situations he sketches with a vivid, nostalgic but absorbing beauty.

The Ref 3 opened the windows wide to the performance and the pristine production, bringing Sting's evocative vocals into the centre of the listening room, and filling space with the power and impetus of the biographically-inspired music. It allowed the music to flow with an effortless ease that only benefited the

overall accessibility of the music.

There's something particularly engaging, but also inevitably nostalgic, about listening to Jeff Buckley's apparently fragile but also profane performances on the aptly titled *Grace*. Proving, yet again, that only the good die young, this is a set that bears repeated listening.

Buckley's vocals are simultaneously whimsical and powerful, the lyrical falsetto underpinned by a resolve and an emotional power that is unrelenting, and never loses the ability to enchant. Every listen reveals something new, something significant, while there are enough hooks and surprises to keep the music fresh and exempt from typecasting.

The Reference Phono 3 was able to peel back the layers of angry guitars and frenetic drums, relegating them to a slightly more distant sonic layer, while focussing on Buckley's candid, heartfelt, even tender vocals.

The delivery was powerful and emphatic, with no softening or slowing of the music signal. The Reference Phono 3 managed to exploit the full scope and potential of the incoming signal, translating it into something both audibly accurate and emotively enchanting.

And that, in short, sums up what lies at the core of the Audio Research Reference Phono 3's appeal: a combination of input signal integrity, revealing transparency, and unencumbered flow that allows this phono pre-amp to link precision to a powerful, generous, thoroughly enchanting performance.

Clearly, a phono pre-amp operating at this level of superiority (and carrying such an elevated price tag) demands a record deck and a hosting system that's able to explore the phono stage's considerable virtues with confidence and aplomb.

Those fortunate enough to preside over a suitably top-end turntable, with tonearm and cartridge to match, will appreciate the clearer view, the stronger empathy and the outright musicality the Reference Phono 3 delivers so convincingly.

Yes sir, this is a phono pre-amp that thoroughly deserves the Reference designation.

Deon Schoeman