



Audio Research Reference 6

There's been a lot of debate about the aesthetics of the Audio Research Reference 6 pre-amp. Traditionalists believe it looks too modern. Modernists believe it looks too traditional. And then there are those who don't like the slimmer handles, or the round buttons.

I'm slightly bemused about such debates, especially when we're talking about a six-digit high-end audio device that's been created with the sole purpose of achieving sonic accuracy and yes, musical Nirvana.

Styling, after all, is a matter of personal taste. Your ugly may be my beautiful, and vice versa.

Execution, however, is something different. You'd expect a component such as the Reference 6 to be robustly and meticulously constructed, with switchgear that provides tactile reassurance of reliability and longevity.

You'd also expect the internals to express innovation and engineering skill. And you'd expect the facilities on offer to match the component's expected functionality. Finally, you'd expect an overall aura of quality.

The Reference 6 ticks all those important boxes. Personally, I also quite like the aesthetics, which combine both traditional and contemporary elements, but remain unmistakably Audio Research. The design allows form to follow function, and in terms of ergonomics, that's always a good thing.

The Reference 6 is an all-new design: everything – from the more rigid case-work and the circuit boards to the circuit components, the larger power supply, the extended tube complement and the more precise volume control – is new.

At just under 17 kg, it feels as substantial as it looks, while the large fascia is dominated by the equally generous, green-hued vacuum fluorescent display. It's flanked by the grab handles typical of many Audio Research components.

The switchgear comprises a pair of rotary controllers for source and volume respectively, and a row of six buttons below the display. Four of these look after power on/off, mono/stereo selection, phase inversion and volume mute. The remaining two are a menu button that opens up a set-up/options menu, and an enter button that's used to confirm menu selections.

The Reference 6 comes with an ergonomically sensible remote control handset that will be the control interface of choice for most users, and adds several additional features, including balance adjustment, direct input selection, display brightness adjustment and an 'hours' button that will show the pre-amp's accumulated operating hours.

On that subject: the 6H30P dual triodes employed in the Reference 6 have a quoted life expectancy of 4 000 hours, while the 6550C pentode should last for 2 000 hours, Audio Research claims.

The rear panel offers a total of eight stereo input sets, of which four are balanced XLR, and four are single-ended RCA. There are two main output sets, again offered in both balanced XLR and single-ended formats. A fixed-level record output, again in balanced and single-ended formats, completes the output offering.

All inputs are line-level and can be individually named to reflect the associated source components.

I particularly liked the transparent top cover of the Reference 6, which not only allows one to admire the glow of the tubes



when the pre-amp is operational, but also the very tidy circuit boards, and the circuit layouts. They're a work of art in own right.

The Reference 6 uses three pairs of 6H30P tubes in the analogue stage – two more than its Reference 5SE predecessor, while the power supply uses a seventh 6H30P in conjunction with the 6550C pentode. The Ref 6 also gets a beefier power supply and new custom capacitors. Features worth mentioning include home theatre pass-through capability and a programmable anti shut-down function.

The review unit had around 30 hours logged when I received it, which is probably not enough to experience the full capabilities of the pre-amp, but given the Reference 6's riveting performance during the review, I'm wondering just how much better it could get ...

The Reference 6 was reviewed in conjunction with two equally high-end, and intriguing, loudspeaker sets: the new B&W 803 D3 featured on the cover of this issue, and the highly anticipated Yamaha NS-5000 (review pending).

The partnering power amp was our regular Parasound Halo A21, which might not match the Reference 6 for finesse, but has oodles of urge and a boisterous nature in the best John Curl tradition.

A Briston BDA-3 D/A converter curated and enhanced digital signals from our Oppo BDP-95EU universal deck, a classic Marantz SA-KI Pearl Lite CD/SACD deck, and an Olive One network player sourcing files from a Synology NAS.

It takes 45 seconds for the Reference 6 to warm up and switch on, and another 15 minutes or so before it's fully on song. That's when the magic starts.

This is a pre-amp that sounds transparent and open, with a delivery that's utterly devoid of any electronic signature. It allows the sound to flow with an ease and a grace that creates an instant, almost startling rapport with the music.

So electronically unencumbered, so approachable is that sound that you tend to approach its contents holistically, revelling in the intent and emotive appeal of the music in its entirety, rather than

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resorting to stone-cold analysis.

There was no need to look for and identify individual elements, voices or instruments – they were already there, clearly audible and perfectly balanced – from the subtlest sliver of sound to the boldest bass beat.

If the task of the pre-amp is to provide control functions without even the slightest of obstructions to flow or tone; if the objective is to ensure that the view of the sonic vistas it's custodian to remains completely lucid, then the Reference 6 is that pre-amplifier.

It examines those vistas with an exquisite thoroughness, revealing hues and textures in all their smooth-grained, finely resolved glory. The attention to detail is painstaking, but the presentation of that detail is utterly captivating.

This is also a pre-amp that creates

VITAL STATS

Frequency response	0,5 Hz – 200 kHz (+0,-3 dB, balanced, 200 kOhm load)
Crosstalk	-80 dB or better (1 kHz and 10 kHz)
Inputs	4x stereo RCA, 4x stereo XLR
Outputs	2x stereo RCA, 2x stereo XLR pre-out 1x stereo RCA, 1x stereo XLR record out
Tube complement	6x 6H30P dual triodes (three per channel) 1x 6550C, 1x 6H30P in power supply.
Input impedance	120/60 kOhms balanced/single-ended
Output impedance	600 ohms balanced, 300 ohms RCA main
Dimensions (WxHxD)	480 x 198 x 419 mm
Weight	16,6 kg

Price R231 000

Verdict

Lives up to the highest musical and sonic expectations with an approach that's as expansive, lucid and revealing as it's musically truthful and enchanting. A reference component in the true sense of the word.

Supplied by

Esoteric Audio
021-438-7294

e-Mail

esotericaudio@vodamail.co.za

Website

www.esotericaudio.co.za

OUR RATING: 90 / 100





impressions of space and dimension with an almost off-hand aplomb. It spreads its musical wares wide and deep, yet never sounds too effusive or too conservative: orchestras exude the majesty and the presence one expects; jazz trios ooze just the right intimacy and cohesion.

Even an early, exaggerated stereo recording like the 1964 Stan Getz/Joao Gilberto rendition of Antonio Carlos Jobim's classic 'The Girl From Ipanema' (off *Getz Gilberto*) with the vocals, sax, percussion and piano almost completely separated, was treated with equanimity: the Reference 6 managed to express a sense of unity by highlighting the ambience of the recording, and the intuitive rapport between the performers.

The sound was simultaneously bold and delicate – bold enough to endow the double bass with percussive presence and pace, but delicate enough to render the finest strands of music with accuracy and respect.

Gregory Porter's burnished vocals on 'No Love Dying' (from *Liquid Spirit*) sounded effortless, smooth and, yes, liquid, with the Audio Research creating a totally immersive listening experience.

Porter's vocals were closely scrutinised, but never in a merely dispassionate, analytical sense. Instead, the pre-amp dug deep into the emotive content of the recital, with such close attention to fine detail that it became easy to believe that one could reach out and touch the performers!

Porter's vocals were presented with flourish and confidence – the Reference 6 highlighted every aspect of his phrasing and enunciation. The piano was lucid and smooth, and the sax solo crystalline and

succinct, to the extent that you could hear the fine vibration of the reed.

And, yet despite the brilliance and shimmer of the sax, it never sounded brittle or attacking. The sense of space and air allowed the full harvest of the music to be presented with an almost uncanny realism, further emphasised by an unwavering focus and a total lack of grain.

La Segunda's *Sera Una Noche* is remarkable for the way the recording captures both air and space, and for its close appraisal of each instrument in the ensemble. While there is a lot going on, there's never any sense of crowding, and the recording manages to pay attention to both macro and micro detail, while never losing sight of the overall thrust and intent of the music.

On 'Betinotti', the haunting vocals are centre stage, but surrounded by an eclectic collection of backing instruments – from the deeply resonant bass notes of a bassoon to the gentle strains of an acoustic guitar, the equally subtle beat of tom-toms, a melancholy accordion, and the broad bow strokes of a cello.

Even the subtlest silvers of sound were beautifully, meticulously



Software

Eiji Oue/Minnesota Orchestra – Rachmaninoff Symphonic Dances (Reference Recordings)
Daft Punk Random Access Memories (Sony Music)
Pat Metheny Unity Group – Kin (<—>) (Nonesuch)
La Segunda – Sera Una Noche (MA Recordings)
Gregory Porter – Liquid Spirit (Blue Note)

Associated Equipment

B&W 803 D3 loudspeakers
Yamaha NS-5000 loudspeakers
Parasound Halo A21 power amp
Primare PRE32/MM30 pre-amp
Oppo BDP 95EU universal deck
Marantz SA-KI Pearl Lite CD/SACD player
Musical Fidelity V90 DAC
Bryston BDA-3 DAC
Olive One network player/renderer
Synology DS212SE NAS

captured and projected with exceptional balance and composure. The Reference 6 had an uncanny ability to unravel the density of the music, and to present it in a way that allowed full access to its every facet.

‘Rise Up’, from the Pat Metheny Unity Group’s cryptically titled *Kin (<—>)*, is a dense recording that can sound almost mushy and broodingly inaccessible on lesser

systems, with the shimmer of cymbals washing over the soundstage like waves, punctuated by intricate percussion lines, a rousing piano, and sheafs of rhythm guitar.

But the Reference 6 wasn’t easily intimidated, eloquently tracking the progress of the music. After the initial, almost raucous introduction, Metheny’s liquid, lyrical guitar emerges in a gentle, melodically intricate mode, engaging in an



increasingly pacy dialogue with the bass, against an expansive backdrop of glittering percussion, with the piano adding further melodic depth.

Again, it was the ability of the pre-amp to recreate an open, three-dimensional space on which the music was allowed to come to its fullest right, and to remain electronically transparent, that was so addictive – the music always sounded free-flowing and natural, reverting to its own pace and impetus.

So, and the Reference 6 rock? You bet! The deep, driving beat of French electro-dance duo Daft Punk may not be everyone’s glass of Pernod, and it can make even high-end systems wilt, but on ‘Beyond’ (from *Random Access Memories*) the pre-amp delivered its wares with pace and precision.

It easily coped with the music’s multiple layers, with synths and percussion all vying for – and receiving – the pre-amp’s full attention. The result was a glorious, fascinating and revealing listening experience, delivered with verve and impetus.

Regardless of the material translated, the Audio Research Reference 6 always allowed the music to communicate the underlying passion of the performance. And therein lies the real appeal, and the magic of this pre-amp: it reveals and unravels the finest strands of the music, always offering listeners the perfect seat in the house.

The result is a component that lives up to its high-end credentials, while also offering an alluring mix of versatility, build quality and, yes, attention-grabbing aesthetics.

Deon Schoeman

