



PS Audio BHK Signature Pre-amplifier & BHK Signature 300 Monoblocks

PS Audio caused something of a stir when it released a high-end pre-amplifier and a pair of power amplifiers during 2015.

The Boulder, Colorado-based company used to build pre-amps and power amps years ago, but until recently, the only amp in its current portfolio was the compact, trendy Sprout integrated.

While the Sprout focuses on affordability, versatility and innovation, the PS Audio BHK Signature components are unashamedly high-end. They also benefit from the experience and sheer talent of one of the best audio designers in the business: a certain Bascom H. King.

King, a five decades veteran of top-end amplifier designs for some of the biggest names in the business – think Conrad Johnson, Constellation, Marantz and Infinity, among others – considers the PS Audio Signature amps his finest work to date.

I reviewed the BHK Signature 250 stereo power amp for our Dec15/Jan16 issue, and was struck by its effortless control and authority, linked to a fleet-footed flow, and unsullied musicality.

Since then, the BHK Signature Pre-Amplifier has joined the fold, and it seemed opportune to review the BHK Signature 300 monoblocks at the same time for this review, almost exactly a year later.

The gear arrived brand new, and it therefore spent much of its time in our listening room simply running in, with

an occasional progress check. Just like the BHK Signature 250, purchasers of the monoblocks should set aside at least 100 hours for burn-in time, and still expect further improvements thereafter.

The aesthetics of the pre-amp and power-amp are sleek and minimalist, reflecting the current PS Audio design approach: think all-metal construction with a thick alloy fascia, rounded corners and a gloss black top plate. The review units boasted a silver anodised aluminium finish, but you can also order them in black.

The pre-amp is slimmer and sleeker than the beefy monoblocks. It looks and feels the solid, crafted high-end part. The blue PS Audio logo on the left is also a soft-touch standby/on switch that flashes during start-up, and remains solidly lit when operational.

There's a blue, alphanumeric OLED display next to the rotary volume control, as well as a 6,35 mm headphone jack. The display shows the output level in

large digits during normal operation, but also shows input names and the various set-up options.

Inputs can be renamed, the balance and 12V trigger settings can be adjusted, and a home theatre pass-through setting can be invoked via the set-up menu. The display can be switched off completely, too.

At the rear, the pre-amp offers a choice of five inputs, in either single-ended RCA or fully balanced XLR form. The stereo output set also offers the choice of RCA or XLR. An IEC power socket and power on/off toggle switch complete the rear panel offering.

The supplied PS Audio system remote controller will also operate and control the key features of other PS Audio devices, such as the DirectStream DAC, for instance.

The BHK Signature pre-amp combines a tube-based, zero feedback balanced input stage with a true Class A MOSFET output stage.



Again, it was the way the system opened up the music, how it revealed both macro and micro detail, that made listening so enthralling.

The fully balanced input stage employs a matched pair of 12AU7 dual-triode valves, located under the removable top cover. This makes experimenting with different tubes easy – a process popularly referred to as tube rolling.

The high-current, low-impedance MOSFET output stage is said to be impervious to cable and power amp choices.

Other highlights include a discrete, zero-feedback headphone amplifier, an oversized toroidal power transformer, and an all-discrete circuit design, with top-flight circuit components, including hand-selected PRP resistors, and audio-ophile-grade capacitors.

Finally, the volume and balance controls combine stepped attenuators for coarse adjustment with gain adjustment of the vacuum tubes for fine attenuation. The design effectively minimises any impact on sonic fidelity due to volume adjustment.

The BHK Signature 300 monoblock is identical to the Signature 250 stereo amp in size and weight. Cosmetic features include heatsinks neatly integrated into the sides and a gloss-finished top panel.

The absence of grab handles makes these 37 kg monsters awkward to manoeuvre, and it's best to get a second person's help to lift and carry them.

The rear panel features a single set of inputs (XLR balanced or single-ended RCA) instead of the 250's stereo input set. Dual speaker binding post sets make bi-wiring a lot more convenient, especially with thicker-gauge cables. There's also a main power switch and an IEC power socket.

As already mentioned, the BHK Signature 300 is a hybrid amplifier that combines a zero-loss valve-based input stage with a high-bias, differentially balanced MOSFET output stage. A pair of Golden Lion 6922 vacuum tubes, operating in parallel, populates the input stage, and can be seen behind a small, removable panel at the rear.

Rated output power per monoblock is 300 watts into 8 ohms, 600 watts into 4 ohms, and a huge 1 kW peak output into 2 ohms. Average, extended use at 2 ohms

still yields a massive 750 watts.

Once allowed to settle in over an initial period of about 100 hours, the BHK Signature pre-amp/monoblock combination sounded majestic and muscular. The monoblocks bristled with power and control, but were also delicate, agile, and musically adept.

They projected the music with a faithfulness that not only stemmed from a very broad tonal range, but also from an ability to create an expansive, thoroughly

VITAL STATS

PS Audio BHK Signature Pre-amplifier

Frequency response	20 Hz – 20 kHz ($\pm 0,1$ dB)
Bandwidth	0,1 Hz – 200 kHz (-3 dB)
THD	<0,03%
Inputs	1x stereo RCA, 1x stereo XLR
Outputs	2x stereo RCA, 2x stereo XLR
Dimensions (WxHxD)	430 x 100 x 360 mm
Weight	19 kg

PS Audio BHK Signature 300 Monoblocks

Power output	300 watts minimum (8 ohms) 600 watts minimum (4 ohms)
Frequency response	10 Hz – 20 kHz ($\pm 0,1$ dB)
THD	<0,1% (1 watt, 8 ohms. 20 Hz – 20 kHz)
Inputs	1x RCA, 1x XLR
Outputs	2 sets of gold-plated binding posts
Dimensions (WxHxD)	434 x 221 x 381 mm
Weight	37,7 kg

Price

BHK Signature Pre-amplifier	R87 500
BHK Signature 300 Monoblocks	R218 000 (pair)

Verdict

Simultaneously impactful and graceful, with both the muscle and the empathy to make musical magic.

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OUR RATING: 92 / 100





immersive sound picture that was less hi-fi, and more living, breathing music.

Indeed, there was an inherent authenticity to the PS Audio system's delivery that was as much due to the sheer pace and athleticism of the performance as it was to the way the system seemed to reproduce every element – major or minor, bold or subtle, mainstream or incidental – with sonic and musical integrity.

The monoblocks had loads of urge, but never sounded overbearing or muscle-bound, while using their headroom and succinct control to compelling effect. The KEFs seemed to gain an extra octave in the lower registers, but that extra bass was served up with impressive substance and agility.

Tonal range and balance were superb, while the tonal progression was linear and direct.

Given the presence of tubes in the monoblock's input stage, you'd be forgiven for expecting a certain warmth, a measure of glow to the sound. But that wasn't the case here – instead, there was tremendous substance, texture, and presence.

Vocals sounded startlingly real, while instruments truly came alive. Indeed, the sound achieved a level of tactile realism that turned mere notes into real, believable instruments that seemed to be right there, in the listening room.

The tonal intensity of the BHK Signature combo went hand in hand with a close commitment to contextualising and preserving detail, so that the final sound picture was not just an impressionist array of broad strokes, but rather a close approximation of the real thing.

That sense of reality was also boosted by the dimensionality and boundless scale of the system's staging. Rather than being hemmed in by the physical boundaries of the listening room, the BHK Signatures had the rare ability to render the reality of the performance – not only dimensionally, but emotively.

Here, the inherent power and authority of the monoblocks allowed the music to be delivered with a sense of effortless flow,



with a grace and an ease that wasn't hi-fi – it was music.

Staging was magnanimous, but not for the sake of impressing or overwhelming the listener. It wasn't larger than life, nor exaggerated. It didn't swagger, because it didn't have to.

Instead, it completely beguiled to the point where it became difficult to tear oneself away from the music. The sound assumed a weight, a body, a presence that shaped each instrument and each voice as an almost physical entity.

The sonic image itself was spread across all three dimensions in a way that afforded even subtle elements loads of air – and yet, the system never dissected the music into individual slices, preferring to present the entire cake.

Listening to the Ray Brown Trio's 'The Real Blues', off *Summer Wind: Live at the LOA* (88/24 FLAC), Brown's stirring

double bass solo that kicks off this set felt almost visceral in its intensity.

The instrument has such presence that it became a real, living entity, finely and believably presented on the stage. The piano initially sounded delicate and fluid – a sonic counterpoint to the deep, resonant, driving bass – while the percussion's splashy presence was clearly positioned behind these two.

The music was presented with a swinging, foot-tapping momentum, while the live ambience and the enthusiasm of the audience only added to the compelling nature of the listening experience. The system's talent for dynamics allowed an effortless transition between the hard-driving trio in full flight, and the quieter, almost delicate passages.

'Killer', from Seal's atmospheric *Seal II* set (44/16 WAV) allowed up close and personal access to the charismatic



performer's vocals. I could hear every inflection, every intake of breath, every rasp of vocal timbre.

Seal only has a percussive xylophone for company in the first part of the song, creating an intimate interplay between voice and instrument, until the bass and percussion join in, revealing the full extent of the soundstage in the process.

That soundstage was huge and inviting, allowing a clear, engrossing view of every facet of the performance. There was a sense of precision and crisp, clean detail, but the system also treated the music with emotive empathy.

The delivery exuded an organic wholesomeness that added to the realism of the listening experience. That trait became even more prevalent on 'Crazy': the guitar sounded lustrous, the bass had a hit-it-in-your-chest urge, and the piano was majestic in both register and timbre, with Seal's vocals reigning effortlessly supreme.

I really enjoyed the way the PS Audio trio dug deep into the soul of Bonnie Raitt's 'Million Miles' (*Slipstream*, 88/24 FLAC). Raitt's almost wistful vocals were finely focussed and presented with intent, but it was the way the accompanying instruments surrounded and supported her that created

the real magic here: the gentle rhythm guitar on the left and delicate piano on the right, the almost tender percussion – all played an embracing, supporting role.

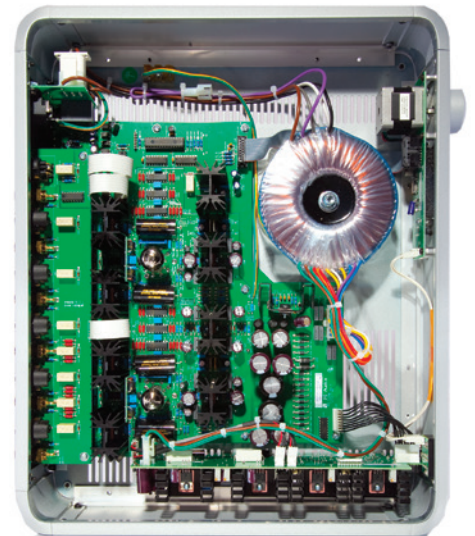
The songstress' own, searing slide guitar solo early on temporarily takes centre stage, but for the most, her vocals are in command. The timing and pace were exquisite, while the open layers of the soundstage ensured accessibility.

Again, it was the way the system opened up the music, how it revealed both macro and micro detail, that made listening so enthralling. The system's tonal breadth further contributed to the realism and the appeal of the music.

It's easy to think of the two beefy BHK Signature 300 monoblocks as the stars of this system, and there is no doubt that their combination of muscle and subtlety, of momentum and grace, play a huge role in the overall sound.

But let's not forget the BHK Signature pre-amp, which impresses mostly because it provides a completely transparent, seamless bridge between source and power amp. It never sounds too bright or too dull, too analytical or too vague, because it doesn't interfere with the music at all.

What it does do is present a perfectly



preserved, utterly honest, gain-adjusted signal to the monoblocks, without translating, adapting or attenuating the signal's content. It doesn't try to enhance, to sharpen, to declutter or augment what it receives.

So, if you thought that the tube-based input stage was there to add a burnished glow to the music, you'd be wrong. Its role is to deliver isolation and linearity, to present an accurate, musically convincing signal, in King's own words. And that's exactly what this BHK Signature pre-amp achieves in practice.

Combined, the BHK Signature pre-amp and the Signature 300 monoblocks create a formidable, musically authentic, and ultimately captivating sound that is right up there with the very best.

Deon Schoeman

Software

Ray Brown Trio — *Summer Wind: Live At The LOA* (Concord 88/24 FLAC)
 Rolling Stones — *Grrr!* (Universal 88/24 FLAC)
 Seal — *Seal II* (Sire 88/24 FLAC)
 Bonnie Raitt — *Slipstream* (Redwing 88/24 FLAC)
 Dire Straits — *Love Over Gold* (Warner 96/24 FLAC)

Associated Equipment

Bryston BDA-3 DAC
 Olive One network player
 Primare PRE32/MM30 pre-amp/streamer
 Parasound Halo A21 power amp
 KEF R500 floorstanding speakers
 StraightWire Virtuoso speaker cable

