

# ASR Mini Basis Exclusive Phono Stage

- 15 Sep 10
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## In Germany, an unrelenting enthusiasm for analog



Vinyl has made quite a comeback in the US in the 21st century, especially considering the severe decline of LPs in the late 1980s and '90s. In other parts of the world, however, audiophiles never entirely turned their backs on the big black disc, or so completely succumbed to the promises of the Compact Disc as did their American counterparts. A classic example is Germany, where an evidently unflagging enthusiasm for the benefits of LPs ensured that Deutschland would retain a disproportionate share of companies devoted to making equipment to play them with -- and the halls of Munich's annual High End show have provided ample proof of vinyl's position there. From turntables to tonearms to phono preamplifiers, the efforts of companies such as ASR, Clearaudio, Schröder, DPS, Transrotor, Einstein, Brinkmann, TW-Acoustic, and Lehman have contributed to what must now be called the Second Golden Age of Vinyl.

Prominent in that list of German companies is ASR Audio Systeme, known in Germany as ASR Friedrich Schäfer, which for 30 years has produced and refined Herr Schäfer's flagship phono stage, the ASR Basis Exclusive (\$9000 USD). The Basis Exclusive is available in several variations; the full-blown version features dual inputs, balanced operation from input to output, and an exceptionally stable, external battery power supply. Revered for merging the best of the tube and solid-state worlds, the Basis Exclusive is celebrated for its ability to convey the gestalt of the music while sounding pleasing and exciting.

For years now, ASR has been distilling the grandeur of the Basis Exclusive into the Mini Basis (\$2000), a scaled-down, much more affordable phono stage. When Zed Husain of Musical Sounds,

ASR's North American distributor, invited me to audition the hot-rod version of the Mini, the Mini Basis Exclusive (\$2900), it was a perfect opportunity to hear just how much of the legendary performance of the ASR Basis Exclusive had been trickled down to the crowded \$2000-\$3000 range.

### **Smallish, stout, squarish, smoky**

There was no question about the country of origin of the ASR Mini Basis Exclusive (hereafter the MBE): its shipping container had Deutsch written all over it: "Audiosysteme Friedrich Schäfer," "Vorsicht Zerbrechlich," and "Produkt aus Deutschland." For something containing a stout, squarish, but relatively small component measuring 10.5"W x 4.3"H x 12.5"D and weighing just 8.8 pounds, the cardboard box seemed rather large and heavy. The MBE itself was wrapped like a papoose in a large white cloth and supported by protective panels of Styrofoam; the box also contained multiple bubble-wrap sleeves that cradled everything from the audiophile-grade power cable (which ASR has dubbed the Magic Cord) to a liter of acrylic cleaner. The instruction manual may suffer from some idiosyncrasies of German-to-English translation, but is nevertheless comprehensive and comprehensible.



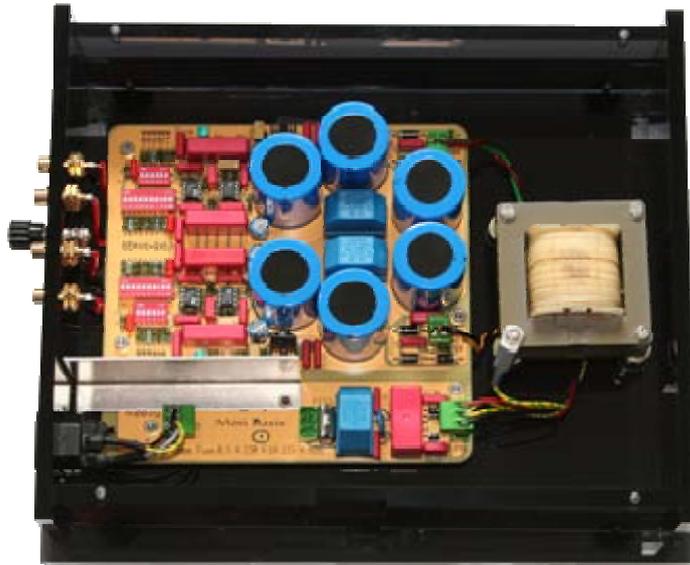
Having put away my scissors (ASR goes overboard with the tape gun), I was able to admire the fit and finish of the MBE, which, while dark, is hardly the usual black box. Precision-cut panes of transparent acrylic, tinted a dark gray or smoky black, form the four sides, top, and bottom, and give a full view of the inside workings. The top and bottom plates extend beyond the front and back plates, which themselves exceed the dimensions of the side panels. The MBE looks like a miniature of Chicago's McCormick Place, which used to host the Summer Consumer Electronics Show. A friend at an erstwhile competitor of ASR's assured me that it's costly to make a chassis of acrylic instead of the usual stainless steel or aluminum, but ASR's choice of material seems motivated by neither accounting nor aesthetic priorities. It turns out that acrylic has a significant advantage over metal: it doesn't "ring," but rather has inherent vibration- and resonance-damping properties.

The front panel, devoid of any display, is engraved with the ASR logo and the words "Mini Basis Exclusive." Two blue LEDs toward the rear of the enclosure's interior are clearly visible through the acrylic whenever the unit is powered up. The rear panel is similarly Spartan, with an IEC power input at the left, and, at center, a ground screw and pairs of RCA connectors for stereo input and output. WBT Nextgen copper or silver connectors and ground screw are optional upgrades (\$220 and \$365, respectively). Although there is no standby switch -- the MBE draws little power and is best left on at all times -- you can have one fitted to the front panel for an additional \$111.

### **Staying on top and going topless**

To access the MBE's loading and gain functions, its top must be removed -- a simple process of removing the four hex-head screws securing the top panel (an Allen wrench is included). Having looked under the hoods of more than a few audio components, I appreciated the sensible and precise internal layout of the MBE. The workmanship was extremely clean, with accurately applied solder, switches, and other component devices.

The power-input module is extensively shielded from the sensitive audio circuitry. The shielded EI transformer -- a type of transformer that provides propagation and containment of the magnetic field superior to those of common toroidal transformers -- is located at the very front of the internal chamber, again to separate it from the audio circuits. Compact signal paths between inputs and outputs trace their way through rearward segments of the golden-brown circuit-board material. (ASR prefers the mechanical and dielectric characteristics of this more expensive material over the ubiquitous green fiberglass.) While the standard Mini Basis relies on more common, yet fast and low-noise integrated circuits from Analog Devices, the MBE's main upgrade (in addition to the Magic Cord) consists of the same, higher-performance AD843SQ devices used in the flagship Basis Exclusive. Schottky rectifiers and Philips power-supply units dominate the forward half of the board.



On the board, at the point closest to the RCA inputs, internal DIP switches make possible a vast variety of loading options (from 22 to 47k ohms) and gain options (from 30dB to 72dB, in 6dB increments), to optimize the MBE for use with virtually any cartridge. For my Benz L2, I began with 48dB of gain, and maxed out the resistance. After some experimentation with both variables, I ended up with a slightly lower gain setting of 42dB, which gave the best balance of quiet operation and dynamic drive, but I kept the input resistance at 47k ohms.

Given what's inside the MBE, it's interesting to note which features of the full-blown Basis Exclusive are *not* included. As previously noted, the Basis Exclusive's fully balanced operation is scaled back to single-ended in the MBE. Rather than two individual, fully addressable inputs, only a single input remains (although at the lower price of the MBE, end-users are less likely to have two turntables or a pair of tonearm-and-cartridge combinations, either of which would necessitate dual inputs). Most obviously, battery operation and its separate power supply are dispensed with in the MBE, while the amount of rectification is significantly scaled back, and the buffering capacity is reduced by almost 85% (200,000 $\mu$ F vs. 1,300,000 $\mu$ F).

## System

The Mini Basis Exclusive was coupled to my VPI Scout turntable (with Benz L2 cartridge) for three months. Amplification duties were carried out by an Ayre Acoustics KX-R preamplifier and matching MX-R monoblock amplifiers, driving my Vandersteen 5A speakers. Other than the amps, which rest on dedicated HRS platforms, all other equipment resides in a double-wide Harmonic Resolution Systems MXR rack with M3X shelves. I've recently moved this rack, which used to run along one

sidewall; it now stands behind and between the speakers. The rack's new position slightly degrades the sound, particularly the soundstaging, but makes more space for my family.

I was forced to mix and match cables. Normally, I use only one RCA-terminated interconnect -- a 1m run of AudioQuest Wild -- between the turntable's junction box and the phono stage. While I continued to use the single-ended AQ Wild in this capacity with the MBE, given that the MBE does not output a balanced signal, I needed to reach into my reviewer's bag of loaner cables -- in this case, for a 1m pair of Cardas's wonderful Clear RCAs -- to link phono stage and preamp. All other system interconnects were various lengths of the balanced version of AQ's Wild, with the speaker cable being a 1m, internally biwired set of AQ K2. Power was delivered via AudioQuest NRG100 AC cords and a Furman Sound IT-Reference 20i power conditioner.

## Listening

The Mini Basis Exclusive is designed to be left on continuously, so I did. Nevertheless, I was advised that it needed at least 100 hours of playing time before it would really show its stuff -- consistent with my own experience of solid-state gear, especially designs employing dielectrically and mechanically robust circuit-board material, which require significant running in. Unlike a CD player, which can be run on Repeat Play for a week before being placed in a system, a phono stage requires the playing of many records to get 100 hours of active use. I set my treasured 45rpm reissues aside and concentrated on the longest-playing LPs I had. During this period I tried to grin and bear it, as the sound expanded from a shallow, two-dimensional, and somewhat discordant presentation to the much more full-bodied and musical one detailed below.

If you've read my recent reviews, you'll have noted that, to focus on the strengths and weaknesses of the product under review, I regularly take for a spin the 45rpm, 180gm reissue of René Leibowitz and the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra's *The Power of the Orchestra* (RCA/Analogue Productions AAPC 2659-45). Throughout Mussorgsky's epic *Night on Bare Mountain*, a few characteristics of the MBE became clear.

First and foremost, the MBE communicated the lyrical aspects of music in a pleasing, stress-free way. ASR describes this characteristic as a "smooth and relaxing" sound -- the principal element of the firm's philosophy of sound. Rather than etch exaggerated leading edges in transients and upper registers, the MBE let passages develop with a lifelike progression. While many solid-state components try to create an "exciting" sound by applying artificial contrast, eventually such sounds become grating, and typically result in listener fatigue. Not so the MBE. Following its break-in period, no listening session, regardless of duration, resulted in any weariness of my ears.

Through the MBE, the RPO's massed strings avoided any tendency toward the shrill or strident. However, individual string players lost distinction, as the phono stage evinced a propensity to congeal the sound of the section into a single mass. Other instrumental families also lost the nuances of tonal definition necessary to identify particular chairs. The lower bass octaves were a bit loose, having less of the pitch character I prefer. While it benefited lesser recordings, this inclination toward a slight softening affected the soundstage, preventing the coalescing of a fully developed three-dimensional perspective. Luckily, such limitations are all sins of omission, and didn't impinge on ASR's overriding sonic philosophy.

As the MBE's temperament and overall balance favored the midrange, and smaller rather than larger ensembles, I was encouraged to turn to my collection of jazz recordings from the 1950s and '60s, and two John Coltrane records in particular, which I ended up playing repeatedly through the MBE. In the first, *John Coltrane and Johnny Hartman* (LP, Impulse!/Original Recording Group ORG 18), the singer and the tenor saxophonist are backed by pianist McCoy Tyner, bassist Jimmy Garrison, and drummer Elvin Jones. Hartman's sensual, silky-smooth baritone meshes with Coltrane's passionate, lyrical side -- perfect twin muses to inspire the potencies of the MBE. There was an effortlessness to the sound that was beguiling, a facility that surely saturated Rudy Van Gelder's studio on March 7, 1963, when five of the album's six songs were each recorded in a single take. The same instrumentalists, the John Coltrane Quartet, sans Hartman, reunited for 1964's *Crescent* (LP, Impulse!/Original Recordings Group ORG 17). Here Coltrane is at his most romantic, playing tenor saxophone exclusively on this set of his own compositions. Returning from a period of freeform experimentation, Coltrane devised meticulous form and structure for each of these ballads. The lush, swaying dynamic of this album was perfectly complemented by the MBE.

I'd left my Aesthetix Rhea Signature powered on, in standby, for the duration of my listening to the MBE, so comparisons between these phono stages was only a single cable swap away. A few such substitutions laid bare some significant contrasts, the most obvious being the solid-state MBE's absence of the drive and energy that the tubed Rhea delivers in spades. There is a spark of life (jump factor) to music played through my Aesthetix phono amplifier that is immediately obvious -- a quality I've heard in demonstrations of other top-flight phono stages, such as the Audio Research Reference Phono 2, another superlative tube design.

It's not particularly surprising that the \$2900 solid-state MBE couldn't hold a candle to the \$7000 Rhea Signature, as the more expensive, tubed model excels in so many facets of performance while having no obvious deficiencies. With regard to the "jump factor" missing from the ASR, I have yet to live with any solid-state phono stage that can dish up a full serving of that quality. (However, a new crop of state-of-the-art, extremely expensive solid-state phono stages from Vitus Audio and Constellation

Audio are claimed to do just that. Perhaps I'll have the opportunity to live with one or more of these exciting, edge-of-the-art devices and report back to you.)

A more appropriate comparison product is Ayre Acoustics' P-5xe (\$2500), a phono preamplifier that served as my reference for several years before being unseated by the Aesthetix Rhea. Like the ASR MBE, the P-5xe is a plug-and-play phono stage designed to remain powered up at all times and featuring a single input (which also has a good range of gain and loading options, although not quite as expansive as the MBE's). However, like ASR's flagship Basis Exclusive, the P-5xe offers balanced inputs and fully differential throughput. The Ayre's jet-black background -- at least a shade or two lower than what's offered by the MBE or Rhea Signature -- may well be attributable to balanced operation. While the ASR has a more mellow, midrange-oriented perspective, the Ayre is uniquely evenhanded from top to bottom, and produced a slightly more three-dimensional soundstage -- though neither could approach the expansive, rock-solid soundstage laid out by the tubed Rhea. Consistent with its more analytical, intellectual nature, the P-5xe retained more composure during complex, dynamic passages such as orchestral crescendos and harder-edged rock, whereas the MBE was distinguished by its relaxed, lyrical qualities, especially in the midrange. Both of these solid-state contenders have distinct strengths that will appeal to the preferences of different listeners.

Given the similarity of price, I would be remiss not to mention two new phono preamplifiers likely to enhance the competitive fervor in their price range. Legendary circuit designer John Curl has lent his talents to the development of Parasound's JC 3 solid-state phono stage (\$2000). The Fosgate Signature (\$2500), designed by audio luminary Jim Fosgate for Musical Surroundings, is a tubed alternative that perhaps offers some of the elusive jump factor I so enjoy with my Rhea Signature.

### **Solid German engineering**

Rather than wholesale changes or flavors of the month, ASR focuses on the evolution and perfection of a limited product line. The Mini Basis Exclusive is a representative product of that approach. Audio components costing from \$2000 to \$3000 seem to sit squarely at the elbow of the price/performance curve, where the promise of the high end begins to coalesce into musically satisfying sound, and following which the laws of diminishing returns begin to wreak on one's cash flow their logarithmic carnage. The MBE is a solid contender at that elbow. In making sound engineering choices that have decanted into an attainable "mini" package much of the magic of the big Basis Exclusive, ASR has produced yet another example of German engineering excellence. Originating from a firm that, for more than 30 years, has contributed to Germany's unwavering enthusiasm for vinyl, the Mini Basis Exclusive can be expected to provide years of stalwart performance.

Given my preference for the equilibrium offered by the slightly less expensive and fully balanced Ayre P5-xe, as well as the design pedigree behind the similarly priced entrants from Parasound and Fosgate, my recommendation of the ASR Mini Basis Exclusive is qualified. I wouldn't buy any of these phono stages without auditioning at least several of them, as the diversity of one's vinyl library and taste in sound will make all the difference in one's ultimate selection. For those who settle on the MBE, central to that choice will almost certainly be its refined, musical midrange.

. . . *Peter Roth*

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**ASR Mini Basis Exclusive Phono Stage**

**Price: \$2900 USD as reviewed.**

**Warranty: Two years parts and labor.**

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