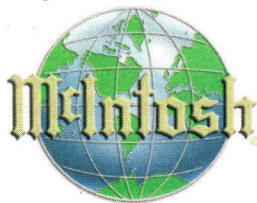


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more than the cost of the muscular-sounding, fully suspended, tank-like SME 30, and more than *three times* the price of the TW-Acoustic Raven. It's therefore difficult for me to work up a great deal of enthusiasm for the more expensive, sonically pleasing, but hardly exceptional Metronome Gaia.

ASR Basis Exclusive Revised phono preamplifier

I reviewed ASR's Basis Exclusive³—a fully balanced, battery-powered, moving-magnet/coil phono preamplifier—in the October 2003 "Analog Corner." Since then that exceptionally fine performer has been subtly upgraded, and now operates at slightly higher voltages.

The Basis Exclusive Revised (\$6200) comprises two discrete, independently operable phono preamps, each based on an exceptionally quiet and pure-sounding microphone-preamp op-amp from Analog Devices. Inside the acrylic chassis (designer Friedrich Schäfer is against metallic enclosures) are DIP switches that permit an exceptionally

wide range of options in gain and resistive loading, all independently adjustable for each of the two preamps. Please see my original review (www.stereophile.com/phonopreamplifiers/1003asr) for more details.

My system has changed in so many ways since then that it's impossible for me to tell you exactly what ASR's upgrades might sound like. But listening to the latest version, the ASR Basis Exclusive remains one of the top five phono preamps I've ever heard. It combines the jet-black backgrounds found in the hideously expensive (and worth it) Boulder 2008 (\$29,000) with the lush suppleness of Balanced Audio Technology's VK-P10SE (\$8000), but its dynamic presentation and tight-fisted rhythmic authority are closer to the Boulder's.

My reference phono preamp is the Manley Steelhead (\$7300); its overall balance is still what best suits my system, and continues to provide me with everything I want from a phono preamp. I'm no gear cherner, I'm a music lover. If you're looking for stellar dynamic contrasts, lightning-fast, super-clean transients set against black backgrounds, and supple (though not warm and rich) musicality, the ASR Basis Exclusive Revised should be on your very short list, though if you want—or your system's balance cries out for—an injection of warmth, especially in the midbass, the Basis won't deliver it. But if you consider its price, versatility, and stellar sound, it's easily the best value in top-shelf phono preamps.

Go Blow a Fuse

When I was a poor audiophile, I loved tiny tweaks. Without switching out components, I could improve my system's sound without spending too much money. Bypassing or replacing cheap capacitors, cleaning connections, applying Star typewriter-cleaning gum to vibrating headshells, and other tiny tweaks made memorable sonic improvements.

I recently replaced the cheap fuses in my Musical Fidelity kWp preamplifier with fuses made by HiFi Tuning in Germany, sent to me by The Cable Company (www.fatwyrre.com). These have silver filaments, ceramic bodies, and gold-over-silver terminations, and damn if they didn't seem to produce a subtle but noticeable improvement in smoothness and coherence. For less than \$30 each (available in various sizes) they're worth trying, if only for the diversionary entertainment.

3 US distributor: Fanfare International, Inc., 500 East 77th St., Suite 2923, New York, NY 10162. Tel: (212) 734-1041. Fax: (212) 734-7735. Web: www.fanfareintl.com.

IN HEAVY ROTATION

- 1) Rosemary Clooney/Duke Ellington, *Blue Rose*, Pure Pleasure 180gm LP
- 2) Alison Krauss+Union Station, *Live*, Mobile Fidelity 180gm LPs (3)
- 3) Elvis Presley, *Elvis Is Back!*, RCA/Speakers Corner 180gm LP
- 4) Plas Johnson, *Positively*, Concord/Pure Audiophile 180gm LPs (2)
- 5) Darkel, *Darkel*, Astralworks 120gm LPs (2)
- 6) Yes, *Fragile*, Atlantic/Analogue Productions 180gm LP
- 7) The Butterfield Blues Band, *Keep On Moving*, Elektra/Sundazed 180gm LP
- 8) Nina Simone, *Emergency Ward*, RCA/Speakers Corner 180gm LP
- 9) The Decemberists, *The Crane Wife*, Capitol 150gm LPs (2)
- 10) Wire, *Chairs Missing*, Harvest/EMI/4 Men With Beards 180gm LP

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