

TEST

Accustic Arts
Preamp V Phono

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2023

100+

Luxury-Klasse

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Accustic Arts Preamp V Phono

PERFECT PURITY



**Tangible
materiality,
grandiose
precision**

Sculpted looks
and HD display

Impressive presence: the Accustic Arts Preamp V Phono immediately gives away its acoustic excellence with its visual appearance.



Accustic Arts Preamp V Phono

Perfect Purity

World premiere in full configuration: Accustic Arts present the latest, once again sound-optimised generation of their reference preamplifier - simply called Preamp - which they also offer in an XL version with its own MM/MC phono module already integrated. This crowns the already abundant variety and flexibility of connections and features. The high-end preamplifier, now bearing the title of Preamp V Phono, got to prove its sound quality in the first test by lite-magazin.

Accustic Arts make a clear statement in their portfolio with this advancement of the Preamp. The company in Lauffen offered its predecessor as a pure transistor preamplifier or as a tube/semiconductor hybrid - but the ability to upgrade with a phono module was somewhat undersold. These upgrade options have now become their own model versions. The brand-new Preamp V is available in four variants, and the two vinyl-affine preamps proudly show off their phono capability on the front. We had the transistor version as our guest - and this Preamp V Phono had our editorial team's eyes gleaming. And little wonder: it continues the excellent design of the Preamp III and the Tube Preamp III Phono, which

combines tradition and modernity. An Accustic Arts component is always a dream made in aluminium and chrome and the Preamp V is no exception, impressing us with the shiny metal finish of its controls and gently shimmering chassis made of thick-walled, finely brushed and noble anodised aluminium.

Sculpted looks and HD display

Accustic Arts combine these trademarks with a modern appearance: the case has an evocative design that uses plenty of relief-like sculpting. This architectural-looking corpus simply begs to be experienced hands-on - and the excellent quality of workmanship hits you immediately when you touch it. The manufacturer from Lauffen in Southern Germany is known for this: for a quarter of a century, the Swabians have been crafting their high-end components by hand with utmost meticulousness and effort. For example, the upper relief structure on the Preamp V has not been created by machining, but by precisely fitting two aluminium sheets together. Except, there is one classic Accustic Arts feature that has



The perfectly machined logo is a real eye-catcher - made as an opening with a perforated grid behind it that serves to dissipate heat.

been artfully machined: the attractive company emblem has been carved as perfectly as prominently out of the metal surface. This logo is underlaid with a perforated grid. This might just be the most perfectly styled solution for dissipating the amplifier heat. The modern look of the Preamp V continues with the high-resolution OLED display. With crisp sharpness, high contrast and a fine modern typeface, it displays the information with perfect legibility - in one of six colours of choice.

Noble high gloss, superb handling

The large and shiny control knobs flanking the display on each side, by contrast, are classic trademarks of Accustic Arts. These have always been made of solid, chrome-plated brass. Thus in the Preamp V, too, they offer a sensationally good operating feeling - combined with their softly sprung but perfectly defined clicks. A reassuring clack gives feedback on the left knob, which is used for input selection: here, switching relays ensure absolutely clean mechanical connection and disconnection of the signal path. Turning the right knob, on the other hand, changes the volume level in extremely fine increments from zero to 115. This is done via four-channel digital volume control with absolute precision and optimal synchronisation. Both knobs can also be pressed as buttons. This way, they are also used for switching on/off/mute and navigating the menu. Next to each of these large push/turn controls is a small chrome button: one activates the headphone output and mutes the speaker connections at the same time. The other is a magnetically attached cover for the headphone jack.

Input opulence with balanced and unbalanced inputs

Let's turn the Preamp V Phono around. Here it impresses with the abundant number of analogy connection options. The input section offers six inputs. The first three are balanced and implemented as XLR sockets. This is the optimal type of connection: in balanced signal


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Model:	Accustic Arts Preamp V Phono
Product category:	Preamplifier (stereo)
Price:	Euro 27,600.00
Warranty:	2 years
Designs:	Silver, Black
Sales:	Accustic Arts, Lauffen Telefon +49 7133 97477-0 www.accusticarts.de
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Dimensions (HWD):	128 x 482 x 379 mm
Weight:	13.8 kg
Inputs (analogy):	3 x line balanced (XLR) 1 x line unbalanced (RCA/cinch) 1 x line unbalanced (RCA/cinch), configurable as "surround bypass"
Outputs (analogy):	1 x balanced (XLR), AC coupled 1 x balanced (XLR), DC coupled (switchable to AC coupled) 1 x unbalanced (RCA/cinch), AC coupled 1 x unbalanced (RCA/cinch), DC coupled (switchable to AC coupled) 1 x headphones (stereo jack, 6.35 mm), switchable 1 x fixed out balanced (XLR) (for external headphone amplifier) 1 x fixed out unbalanced (RCA/cinch) (for external headphone amplifier)
Phono module:	- for MM and MC operation - capacitance adjustable in MM mode (in 25 pF steps from 50 pF to 425 pF) - impedance adjustable in MC mode (47 Ω / 100 Ω / 220 Ω / 470 Ω)
Distortion:	< 0.001 % (THD+N)
Signal-to-noise ratio:	- 99 dB (unweighted) - 102 dB (A-weighted) (manufacturer specification)

Score

Overall score:	100+
Class:	Luxury class
Value for money:	appropriate



The control knobs are, as always with Accustic Arts, made of chrome-plated solid brass. With their pleasant weightiness, they offer a superb operating feel, intensified further by the perfect gliding and subtle clicking while turning them. Turning the "Input Select" knob switches inputs. Pressing it like a button opens the "Settings" menu. The "Phones On" button to the right is used to activate the headphone output, which mutes the other outputs at the same time.

routing, the music signal is transmitted twice, namely once normally and once phase inverted. This trick can avoid all environmental influences on the signal path, which would otherwise be noticeable as humming or buzzing. Due to the double signal transmission, the incoming signal is also stronger in level and therefore has a higher signal-to-noise ratio. Therefore, you should choose this type of connection whenever you can. More common, however, is unbalanced signal routing via RCA/cinch jacks. Again, the Preamp V Phono delivers in this respect: it offers two line inputs. One can even be configured as a "surround bypass" using an adjacent switch. Then the signal of a receiver or surround processor will be put through unchanged. This means the preamplifier can also be integrated into a home cinema system.

Phono module for MM and MC

In addition to these two line inputs, there is yet another unbalanced input available. In our Phono version of the Preamp V, this "IN 4" is designed as a connection for a turntable. The phono module behind it supports analogy turntables with MM or MC pickups. You select which to use in the "Settings" menu. Here, the Preamp V Phono also offers further setting options. For example, the capacitance is adjustable for MM pickups. It can be adjusted in a range between 50 and 425 picofarad and is done in fine steps of 25. This adjustment is sonically advantageous for highly inductive pickups. But it can also compensate for the capacitive effect of the connection cable. MM systems react sensitively to this. For MC pickups, on the other hand, the Preamp V Phono allows you to adjust the input impedance. The manufacturers indicate the optimum resistance for their pickups, or typically a range of ohm values, for best performance. With the four impedance settings of 47 ohms, 100 ohms, 220 ohms and 470 ohms, the phono stage covers most applications.



Full portfolio of inputs: the Preamp V Phono is equipped with six inputs - three balanced as XLR sockets and three unbalanced as RCA/cinch jacks. "IN 4" is the connection for the turntable in this phono-capable amp. This input includes the excellent, gold-plated grounding clamp to prevent ground loops. Even large cross-section ground cables can be clamped or inserted in it. "IN 6" also offers a special feature: with the help of the associated switch, it either acts as a normal line input or puts the signal through unchanged in "surround bypass" mode. Therefore, the Preamp V Phono can be connected to a controlling receiver and thus integrated into a home cinema setup.

Output section with maximum connection diversity

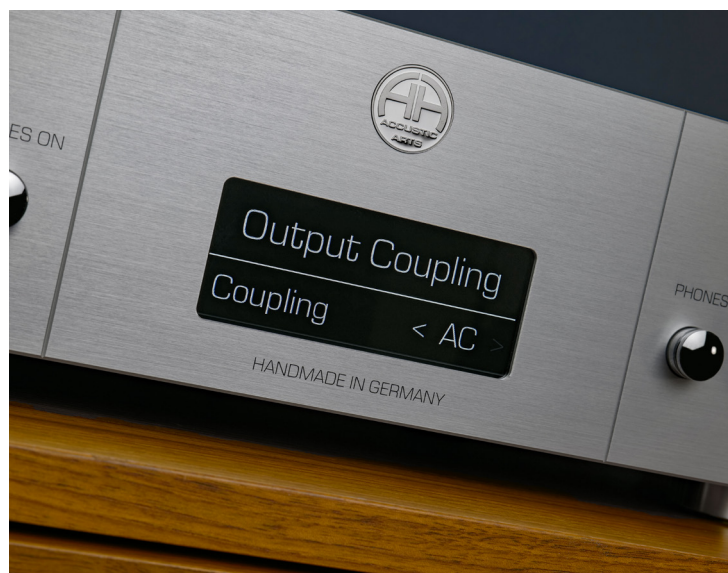
Now to the output department: once again, the Preamp V Phono shines with full features. This starts right away with the headphone section. The integrated headphone amplifier offers a headphone jack right there on the front. It is commendably designed for large jacks. On the back, there is also a "Fixed Out". This is used to connect an external headphone amplifier. The Preamp V Phono provides both a balanced and an unbalanced output for this purpose. We also have maximum connection diversity in the outputs for subsequent power amplifier(s). On this point, the Preamp V Phono scores yet again with balanced and unbalanced outputs - but now with even two of each. In addition to the conventional setup of a single stereo power amplifier or two monoblocks, this enables bi-amping as well - and this via both connection types. In bi-amping, separate power amplifiers are used for the high/mid range and the bass range of each loudspeaker. The preamplifier addresses these power houses with separate signals, so through separate cables.

Audiophile connection option: AC or DC coupling

Both the balanced and the unbalanced output offer a special feature that we don't see offered too often: the outputs allow both AC coupling and DC coupling. AC coupling means a capacitor and a resistor are inserted into the signal path at the amplifier output. This blocks all DC voltage components in the music signal, which are undesirable but also unavoidable. DC coupling, on the



In the phono section, the settings menu for MM systems allows you to adjust the capacitance. With MC systems, on the other hand, the impedance is adjustable.



The "OUT DC" outputs can also be converted into AC coupled outputs via the settings menu.



When it comes to outputs, the Preamp V Phono boasts two balanced and two unbalanced outputs, thus offering four connection options for the final amplification stage. Available outputs are AC coupled and DC coupled. If the subsequent power amplifier is suitable for DC coupling, you can choose between two different sound characteristics. "Fixed Out" is intended for connecting an external headphone amplifier. For this, again, the Preamp V Phono offers both a balanced and an unbalanced output.

other hand, omits the capacitor and resistor. Hence the name "direct coupling". Because the music signal passes through fewer components and the transmitted frequency range is unrestricted, DC coupling theoretically delivers a better sound result. But not all power amplifiers can handle this. DC coupling through tube amplifiers is quite unpleasant. Also, the sound result in practice depends essentially on the build of the power amplifier. With an unbalanced connection, AC coupling usually promises more filigree and spatiality as well as a softer, less analytical sound. Ultimately, it's also a matter of taste. So: try it out – as long as the power amplifier makes it possible.

Superior features, premium remote control

To top everything off, the DC coupled outputs can be converted into AC coupled outputs via the "Settings" menu. This is ideal for bi-amping with third-party products, for which Accustic Arts recommends AC coupling. But the "Settings" menu has even more great features in store. In the audio menu, we can change the balance between channels in 45 subtle steps. For each input of the amplifier, the level can be adjusted separately via "Volume Offset", in order to level out volume jumps when changing input source. We can also permanently set the starting volume for each input. "Output Phase" rotates the music signal phase by 180 degrees if desired. Adding to this are the settings already mentioned for the phono section and the display. If you prefer operating at a distance instead of close handling, you can use the remote control. Accustic Arts supplies an imposing, extremely high-quality and therefore perfectly fitting system remote control. Like the amplifier, it is housed in a noble aluminium body with shiny chrome buttons. These buttons are also a haptic pleasure with a well-defined pressure point.

Fully symmetrical design in the purest class A

The excellence continues inside the housing. Here, the Preamp Phono V reveals a squeaky clean construction with the best components. They have the tightest tolerances and are again selected by Accustic Arts according to the manufacturer's specifications. A large-bodied, high-quality 50-volt-ampere toroidal transformer forms the heart of a power supply that has lots of reserve. All components are mounted on the PCB by hand – and even this circuit board exudes noblesse with the matt black lacquer of its solder mask along with the gold-plated contacts and solder pads. The board design has been modified for this new preamp generation. The signal routing has been improved further still. Accustic Arts ascribes a



The Preamp V Phono includes a noble, high-quality remote control, which, like the amplifier, is implemented in aluminium and chrome. As a remote control for the system, only a few buttons will really be used much. Relevant are the top three, the "Menu" button, and the bottom group of four chrome buttons around the "Volume" label: the upper and lower ones are used to change the volume while the left and right are for input selection or navigating in the settings menu.

further increase in performance to this modification. The fully symmetrical design guarantees the purest sound: the amplifier is implemented from input to output with a total of four amplifier trains in order to exclude any mutual influence. The class A circuit of the output stages ensures the cleanest amplification in this setup. In class A operation, the transistors work exclusively in their linear range, which enables the most distortion-free amplification in the best possible fidelity.

The Accoustic Arts Preamp V Phono in practice

Now we finally get to listen to the Preamp V Phono. We have just the right partners for this purpose: two Accoustic Arts Mono IV amplifiers acting as power amps. They drive a pair of Elac Concentro S 507s. We first connect preamp to power amplifiers via the unbalanced signal path. We start with George Benson's "Rainy Night in Georgia". The number is superbly produced – and with the Preamp V Phono it is a treat for the ears. Already the short guitar intro, of just a few notes embedded in the room reverb, transports us directly into the recording room of the studio. Then drummer John Robinson and bassist Marcus Miller join in – and we are spellbound: this world-class rhythm section has an almost magical presence without pushing itself forward spatially. Robinson's hi-hat prelude, the quick step on the bass drum, the rim clicks on the snare – even after these few beats we have his drum set in our mind's eye.

Tangible materiality, grandiose precision

The Preamp V Phono delivers this drum kit with a wonderful, positively tangible materiality – and the same goes for the other instruments. Miller's bass starts precisely with the bass drum – and yet we can finely distinguish the kick of the drum and the attack of the bass thanks to the imaging power and resolution of the preamp. This four-string is also a revelation: Miller begins with a short phrase, where we perceive every stroke of his fingers:



The almost relief-like housing construction intensifies the high-quality appearance.

the slide over the windings, the metallic sound as he presses the strings down and strikes them. It's like we can watch Miller play. With the sustained notes that follow, this bass then floods our room – and we experience its power, but also an infinite calm and serenity. The rhythm section plays relaxed and to the point – and that's exactly what our sound chain, with the preamp as the heart, does as well. This precision is the basis for coherent, relaxed music reproduction.

Triad of virtues: clarity, purity, high resolution

Meanwhile in our Rainy Night in Georgia, the fellow musicians have joined in, with Benson on lead guitar and microphone while a keyboard and complete string ensemble enrich the instrumental setting. Despite the greater number of musicians, the reproduction remains absolutely open, airy and transparent. Nothing is hidden here, every musician can open up freely, and every note played, every nuance of the phrasing can be heard with complete ease. This is particularly noticeable on the rather subtle keyboard: Greg Phillinganes plays discreet, song-serving filling chords on this number. Nevertheless, his piano is easily recognisable as a Fender Rhodes: we hear the characteristic shimmering of this legendary keyboard instrument, which Phillinganes emphasises effectively in places with vibrato. It is such details that make up the enjoyment of music – and clarity, purity



With "Volume Offset", the level of each input is individually adjustable between -6 decibels and +6 decibels to level out volume differences between different sources. This can be particularly important for the phono input, as the output differs greatly between different MM and MC pickups.



The phones output allows you to connect headphones. However, the large jack socket only becomes visible when you remove the magnetically attached metal cover button. It is visually perfectly matched to the "Phones On" button. The "Volume" knob to the right mutes the preamplifier when pressed as a button.

and high resolution are the prerequisites for this. The Preamp V Phono delivers this triad of virtues in perfection with its distortion-free class A amplification, outstanding channel separation and supremely low noise and interference: we are listening to pure music.

Performance Plus via XLR

Now we switch from the unbalanced to the balanced connection – and all the merits we have mentioned about the Preamp V Phono are now even more noticeable. In addition to the grandiose vividness of the musicians, the three-dimensionality of the reproduction is even more impressive: the already superb spatiality has gained in height and, above all, in depth. The playback has thus become even more immersive – and more intense: George Benson's vocals are more present, his lead guitar seems more grippy, even the string ensemble in the distance can be heard better. We also experience a gain when it comes to dynamics: with the strings, the effective rise and fall of their chord playing, which is so popular in ballads, is more intense. The melancholy of this song is now inescapable. Of course, the drums also benefit from the boost in dynamics. They now sound even crisper, even fresher. These differences are confirmed when listening to other pieces of music – from the driving beats of the electro-psytrance duo Infected Mushroom to the famous Handel opera aria "Lascia ch'io pianga".



With "Startup Volume" you determine the initial volume of the pre-amplifier when you switch it on. Here, you can set levels between 10 and 60.

Sound freestyle: DC or AC coupling

The difference is especially striking with this aria: in both cases, the world-famous Cecilia Bartoli is clearly in the foreground – but over the balanced path her voice is even more captivating. The orchestra also comes out clearer: the bow strokes of the accompanying strings are far more discernible, the cellos and basses have more volume and gravity – and the theorbo of this early music piece now comes into its own. What about the differences in AC and DC coupling between preamp and power amp? Our amplifier combination allows both variants. Here the differences are more noticeable in the unbalanced path: the AC coupling delivers a rounder, slightly more restrained, more bass-rich sound. This is particularly evident in the richly backed "Rainy Night in Georgia". The DC coupling, on the other hand, comes across wirier, more robust, and the stage action is slightly more focused. We hear this especially in the opera aria "Lascia ch'io pianga". The choice is difficult – but we can change couplings at any time, like we're in freestyle, thanks to the lightning-fast switching.

Masterful phono capability

Now it's time for the Preamp V to show off its phono capability. So we hook up our Transrotor Dark Star. First, we equip the turntable with the MM system Transrotor Uccello. The needle picks up "Ordinary Guy" by Danish singer and guitarist Jacob Dinesen. In this ballad, the Dane sounds almost like a young Bruce Springsteen – and like Springsteen, he manages to stir us with his darkly timbered, calm, yet rough voice. The Preamp V Phono promotes this effect masterfully: Dinesen sits in front of us with a breath-taking presence, seemingly singing just for us – we cannot escape this magical mixture of intimacy and intensity. We get the first inklings of this power from the guitar Dinesen plays for the introduction: we hear the bright metal of the strings, which have that typical, slightly matt attack due to plucking with the fingers, as well as the resonating wood of the guitar body.



The noble look of the Preamp V Phono is further emphasised by the metal plaques embedded like ornamental inlays in both flanks and the front.

The "Ordinary Guy" becomes something special

Even these few initial chords have our full attention, because the Preamp Phono V continues its acoustic excellence: even from vinyl, the reproduction shines with wonderful clarity and purity – nothing disturbs this pure music. Dinesen is soon accompanied by bass, drums and discreetly supporting background vocals – and again we enjoy this relaxed feel and naturalness of the playback. A slight increase in the capacitance values in the settings menu even achieves a touch more silvery quality. Now we swap out the MM pickup on the turntable for the MC system Goldring Ethos, switch the preamp to MC and set the capacitance value in the menu to 100 ohms, as recommended by Goldring. We put Dinesen on again – and now the "Ordinary Guy" becomes something extra special. Already the opening guitar now shines with a wonderfully refined brilliance: every plucked note now bubbles. On top of this, the vibration of the resonating wooden body now has even more definition.

Fabulous spaciousness

Even more impressive are the gains in the singing: Dinesen is now present with his slightest breathing sounds, we hear every little tone formed on his lips, even the most delicate fricatives. His voice now sounds even more impressive, comes even closer to us. We hardly dare to breathe at first, because we don't want to destroy this precious moment. Despite all the proximity: the spaciousness of the playback has also increased significantly. The openness and experience of the 3D image are simply fabulous. This is also thanks to the increased resolution capability for which MC systems are known. Of course, all this benefits Dinesen's accompaniment just as much: the bass is more articulate, the brushed snare of the drums sounds more vital, more dynamic, and the bass drum, which is kicked with a very soft mallet, stands out cleanly from the bass guitar. If you prefer to experience this superb reproduction in a moment of private music enjoyment: the Preamp V Phono also proves its acoustic excellence through the headphone output.



Handmade in Germany: like all models of the Lauffen-based manufacturer Accoustic Arts, the Preamp V Phono is crafted by hand.

Conclusion

High end in perfection – that is what Accoustic Art's reference preamplifier stands for in its fifth generation. Once again sound-optimised, the Preamp V Phono delivers reproductions of exceptional purity, clarity and transparency. The vividness and spatiality of its imaging have an almost breath-taking impact. In addition to outstanding resolution and openness, there is the highest degree of precision and superb dynamics: voices and instruments unfold with wonderful vitality and freshness. The Preamp V Phono presents all this with perfect coherence, peace and relaxation. Its music reproduction is a true revelation. This class A amplifier is also fully featured in terms of connections – thanks to the large number of balanced and unbalanced inputs and outputs as well as the optional AC or DC coupling. The addition of an MM/MC phono module and a headphone amplifier finally elevates this preamplifier to the XL model in the preamp portfolio of Accoustic Arts. This excellence – also in terms of component, material and manufacturing quality – comes at a price. Those who want to listen to music at this supreme level will willingly pay it.



The Accoustic Arts Preamp V Phono in our listening test: in this setup played with the Transrotor Dark Star and the Oppo UDP-203 with two Accoustic Arts Mono V power amplifiers, the sound is reproduced by a pair of Elac Concentro S 507s.

Test & text: Volker Frech
Photos: Branislav Ćakić