

TEST

Shimmering aluminium,  
shiny chrome

Accustic Arts  
Tube Preamp III  
Phono

**lite** Testurteil  
2022

*Editor's Choice*

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Accustic Arts Tube Preamp III Phono

REFINED  
PERFECTION

Handy features, elegant remote control

The Accoustic Arts Tube Preamp III Phono is, like every audio component of the Lauffen-based manufacturer, a dream in aluminium and chrome. It looks confusingly similar to its purely transistor amplifying brother Preamp III. However, the added technology leads to more weight. The hybrid amplifier concept with a tube stage, separate transformers and the phono stage weighs 14.8 kilos, which results in 1,200 grams more than its predecessor.



Accoustic Arts Tube Preamp III Phono

# Refined perfection

**The delicacy from Lauffen is now even more attractive. Accoustic Arts offers its high-end preamplifier Preamp III in a hybrid version with a tube stage and optionally equips it with an MM/MC phono module. The preamplifier, thus upgraded to Tube Preamp III Phono, still shines with the flexibility of connections, and several neat features, such as the headphone jack. It has even improved its classy-modern appearance.**

It is a clever move: Accoustic Arts can score three times with the new Tube Preamp III Phono. On the one hand, the discontinuation of the ageing Tube Phono II caused a sensitive gap in the Lauffen-based company's portfolio. Secondly, With the hybrid version, Accoustic Arts offers an attractive alternative to the "normal", purely transistor amplifying Preamp III. There you cannot retrofit the tube stage. More on this later. The MM/MC phono stage, on the other hand, is available for both preamp versions as an optional upgrade. So the preamp is also interesting for vinyl lovers, regardless of their liking or disliking of tubes. After having had the Preamp III in the standard version as a guest in our editorial department, now its

hybrid brother is joining us. It features a tube and a phono stage. Let us take a closer look at this Tube Preamp III Phono!

## Exciting relief texture

From the outside, the Tube Preamp III Phono is no different from the Preamp III - and that is a positive aspect. Accoustic Arts have also put the same high level of effort and meticulousness into this preamplifier earning the Swabian high-end manufacturer an excellent reputation worldwide. For a quarter of a century, Accoustic Arts have been manufacturing their components manually. They focus on the highest material quality and craftsmanship standards. That is also evident in the Tube Preamp III Phono: In the tradition of the models we have already tested, i.e. the CD player/converter Player I and Player II, the integrated amplifier Power I, the amplifier combination Tube Preamp II MK2/Mono II and the stereo power amplifier Amp V, the Tube Preamp III Phono is a dream of chrome and aluminium. In addition, Accoustic Arts continues the new



The multi-layered cabinet construction underlines the high-quality look of the amplifier - as do the engravings of the cheeks and the excellent brushing of the anodised cabinet surfaces. In this picture, we see the Tube Preamp III Phono in silver. Alternatively, the preamp is also available in black.



*Haptic pleasure: The "Input Select", made of solid brass and chrome-plated, has an excellent feel and detent. Turning the knob changes the input. If you press it, you enter the "Settings" menu. The "Phones On" switch to the right activates the headphone output and mutes the other output channels.*

design of the Preamp III: The cabinet now has a relief-like multilayer structure. That makes the preamp look even more elegant and exciting.

## Shimmering aluminium, shiny chrome

Admiring this multi-layered design, you notice the finished look. Beautifully brushed and anodised surfaces of the thick-walled body provide the cabinet with an exceedingly fine line pattern and a soft, noble shimmer. The perfect engravings emphasise this elegant appearance: the Accoustic Arts logo adorns the raised cheek segments and the top. Here, a perforated grille-lined opening provides the large milled artwork - what an attractive way to dissipate heat! Of course, we cannot miss the Accoustic Arts-typical shiny rotary dials on the front. That also applies to the Tube Preamp III Phono: two large chrome-plated knobs from solid brass seduce you to turn and press them. The handling is a pleasure: Haptically, both the "Input Select" on the left and the "Volume" control on the right side shine in superb smoothness and perfect click-stop. Acoustically, we listen to the pleasant click of switching relays when we choose the source: The signal paths connect and disconnect mechanically and cleanly.

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**Model:** Accoustic Arts  
**Tube Preamp III Phono**  
**Category:** Pre-amplifier (Stereo)  
**Price:** - with Phono module: 22.600,00 €  
- without Phono module: 21.600,00 €  
**Warranty:** 2 years  
**Versions:** Silver, Black  
**Vertrieb:** **Accoustic Arts, Lauffen**  
**Telefon +49 7133 97477-0**  
**www.accousticarts.de**

**Dimensions (HBT):** 128 x 482 x 379 mm  
**Weight:** 14,8 kg  
**Inputs (analogue):** 3 x Line balanced (XLR)  
1 x Line unbalanced (RCA)  
1 x Line unbalanced (RCA), configurable as "Surround Bypass"  
1 x Phono MM/MC (RCA) (without Phono module configured as Line unbalanced)  
**Outputs (analogue):** 1 x balanced (XLR), AC-coupled  
1 x balanced (XLR), DC-coupled (Switchable to AC-coupled)  
1 x unbalanced (RCA), AC-coupled  
1 x unbalanced (RCA), DC-coupled (Switchable to AC-coupled)  
1 x Headphone (Stereo jack, 6.35 mm), switchable  
1 x Fixed Out balanced (XLR) (for external headphone amplifier)  
1 x Fixed Out unbalanced (RCA) (for external headphone amplifier)

**Phono module (optional):** - for MM und MC use  
- Capacity in MM mode adjustable (in 25 pF steps from 50 pF to 425 pF)  
- Impedance in MC mode adjustable (47 Ω/100 Ω/ 220 Ω/470 Ω)

## Score

**Total score:** **Editor's Choice**  
**Class:** Reference Class  
**Price/Performance:** Reasonable

## The crisp OLED display is an excellent source of information

With the volume control, you can change the volume in tiny steps between zero and 115. The operation seems analogue, but actually, it is a new, four-channel and digitally designed volume control working precisely and with optimal synchronisation. The most visible sign of digital modernity is the preamp's new high-resolution OLED display. It provides information with crisp sharpness and excellent contrast, and you can adjust it in 99 steps. The duration of the information presented can be defined with five options via the time-out function. Brand new: For the first time, Tube Preamp III Phono offers different colour options: On request, the display shines in white, red, green, blue, yellow, violet or turquoise. The smooth lateral sliding of the letters when the display content changes underline the elegance of the display - for instance when changing the input. The new housing design and this fresh display make the Tube Preamp III Phono look ultra-modern.



The OLED display is decisive in the preamp's modern appearance. It displays the information with excellent sharpness and outstanding contrast - and now also with a choice of white, red, green, blue, yellow, violet or turquoise.

## Armada of connections featuring balanced and unbalanced inputs

Regarding inputs, the preamp leaves no room for desire in the analogue input section with six feed paths. Three of these inputs offer a balanced design. They enable optimal signal routing via XLR sockets. Double information transmission with a normal and an inverted signal prevents interference such as humming or buzzing. Thus, balanced signals are standard in recording studios and the hallmark of high-quality audio components in the consumer sector. You should prefer these connections if the input device allows it. However, unbalanced signal routing via RCA sockets is more common. Preamp III offers two line inputs. One features a "surround bypass" switch positioned next to it. That allows for looping the signal through to a surround processor or receiver without any changes. Thus, the Tube Preamp III Phono integrates perfectly into an existing home cinema system. The connection section offers another RCA input. It is designed as an unbalanced line input in the standard amplifier version - but not in our upgraded version.

## Optional phono module for MM and MC

Our test preamp comes equipped with the optional phono module. The RCA input can now exclusively connect a turntable with a "moving magnet" or "moving coil" cartridge. The Tube Preamp III Phono thus supports the two most common types of cartridges. You can alter the MM/MC configuration in the settings menu. It offers further adjustment options for both types of cartridges. In MM mode, you can change the capacitance. That can be advantageous for highly inductive pick-ups. In addition, it can compensate for the capacitive effect of the connecting cable used. MM systems sometimes react sensitively to this. The adjustment accepts steps of 25 picofarads. It ranges from 50 to 425 picofarads. In MC mode, on the other hand, you can adjust the input impedance. Here, manufacturers usually specify a resistance value or an ohm range in which the pick-up offers its best performance. The phono stage covers most applications here with the four available impedance settings of 47 ohms, 100 ohms, 220 ohms and 470 ohms.



The settings menu in the phono section offers options to adjust the capacitance for MM systems and - as seen here - the impedance for MC systems.

## Abundant output section including a headphone jack

The output section also satisfies every wish. The service starts with offering the double option of connecting a headphone. You can do this directly at the front because the Tube Preamp III Phono comes with its top-quality headphone amplifier. The connection thankfully offers a robust 6.35-millimetre plug. A detachable, magnetically held metal knob elegantly conceals the jack on the front side. Alternatively, you can connect an external headphone via the "Fixed Out" on the back. For this purpose, both balanced and unbalanced connections are available. Now that's a choice! A maximum variety of options is also available for the outputs for a subsequent power amplifier: The preamp presents two balanced outputs and two unbalanced outputs. That enables bi-amping with both types of connections. In other words, you can connect separate power amplifiers for the high/mid-range and the bass range to control the following loudspeaker with individual signals via individual cables.



Connection-rich input section: The preamplifier provides six inputs in a balanced design with XLR sockets and RCA sockets in unbalanced form. Input 4 of the Tube Preamp III Phono is a turntable input. The preamplifier comes with an excellent, gold-plated ground terminal. Without the optional phono module, the input is a line-level input. With the corresponding switch, input 6 works as a standard line input or in "surround bypass" mode so that a received signal can pass through.

## Connection finesse: AC or DC coupling

Furthermore, these outputs offer an extra finesse: They are available AC-coupled and DC-coupled. AC-coupled the signal has previously passed a capacitor and a resistor. That prevents the transmission of unwanted but unavoidable DC components in the music signal. These are sometimes unwelcome for tube power amplifiers and loudspeakers. DC-coupling otherwise omits the capacitor and the resistor at the output. Therefore, this "direct coupling" theoretically provides a better sound as the signal passes through fewer influencing components. Also, there are no restrictions on the transmitted frequency range. However, not all power amplifiers are suitable for this. In practice, the result depends essentially on the design of the power amplifier. Especially with an unbalanced connection, the AC coupling can offer more filigree or greater three-dimensionality. Which one sounds more advantageous is also a question of taste - but the Tube Preamp III Phono helps answer this question by enabling both types of coupling.

## Handy features, elegant remote control

The settings menu offers to change the DC-coupled outputs into AC-coupled outputs to keep the same type of coupling. In addition to this "Output Coupling", the settings expand to further convenient features, which we can access by pressing the input button. In the audio section, we can change the balance to each side in subtle 45 steps. To equalise the levels of different input devices, we can raise or lower each input by up to six decibels via the "Volume Offset". This way, there are no volume jumps when changing sources. With "Output Phase", we turn the phase of the music signal by 180 degrees, which might be advisable for some music productions. In addition, there are the already mentioned settings of the display. You can make these and other settings on the unit itself - or via the supplied remote control. In unison with the amplifier, this system remote control comes in nobly brushed, solid aluminium with chrome-plated buttons.



The Tube Preamp III Phono offers two balanced and two unbalanced outputs. They are available both AC-coupled and DC-coupled. If the following output stage supports DC coupling, you can choose between two different sound characteristics. You can also reconfigure the "OUT DC" outputs to AC-coupled outputs.

## The finest amplifier technology

Even hidden from the eye - the amplifier construction - continues the claim of the highest quality. Here, Accustic Arts represents the concept of fully symmetrical construction. That is consistently realised from the input to the output with a maximum of four amplifier trains. The complete separation of the two channels prevents mutual interference. The Class-A circuitry of the output stages also ensures clean amplification. Class-A enables linear amplification with extremely low distortion. However, as a result of the principle, the sonic class of this circuit results in low efficiency: a good part of the supplied energy does not translate into amplification performance but heat. However, not power but the sound quality is the focus of a preamplifier. Therefore, in addition to the Class-A circuit, it is obligatory to use the highest quality components selected for the lowest tolerances. One look inside the preamp reveals that Accustic Arts used only the finest ingredients on the hand-assembled circuit board. It also includes two 75 VA toroidal transformers for generous reserves.

## "Tube Hybrid" Concept

When you look inside, however, the towering glowing valves catch the eye. A tube amplifier stage is working in the Tube Preamp III. However, the semiconductors, which are not as prominently visible, contribute to the amplification. We call this coexistence of tubes and transistors a hybrid amplifier. Accustic Arts pursues a self-developed "tube-hybrid" concept. The Tube Phono II, no longer in production, is realised this way and receives an update here. In this concept, the tube does not serve to create a warm and soft sound timbre, for which some other manufacturers use a tube section - which you can then sometimes switch off. The tube stage in the Tube Preamp III is an integral component of the amplifier. Combined with the transistor stages, it shall provide minimal distortion values and a "good-natured", perfect distortion spectrum, an "analogue" sound experience of extraordinary precision, and a maximum bandwidth of the amplifier stages. That is how Accustic Arts shows the merits of its "tube-hybrid" technology.



You can also reconfigure the "OUT DC" outputs to AC-coupled outputs.



The artfully milled logo on the top serves to ventilate the amplifier electronics and, more importantly, to dissipate the heat from the tubes.



Startup Volume allows setting the initial volume of the Tube Phono Preamp III in the range of 10 to 60.



Accoustic Arts supplies an elegant aluminium remote control for the Tube Preamp III Phono, which is adequate for the amplifier in terms of high quality. The system remote control does not offer a function on all buttons - and the relevant chrome buttons do not necessarily identify the meaning they serve here. Thus, among the four buttons arranged around the indication "Volume", the upper and lower ones act to change the level. The left and right ones select inputs or navigate in the settings menu.

## Noble tubes, tightest tolerances

Hierfür arbeiten pro Kanal je zwei Röhren, insgesamt also für diesen Zweck, zwei Röhren pro Kanal, d.h. eine Gesamtzahl von vier leuchtenden Ventilen. Accoustic Arts verwendet Doppeltrioden des Typs ECC83S. Die ECC83 ist extrem populär im Audiobereich, weil sie einen geringen Rauschpegel und eine minimale Anfälligkeit für schall-schädigende mechanische Störungen von außen aufweist. Das S hier bedeutet, dass es sich auch um eine Langplattenröhre handelt: Die Steuerrostgitterdrähte sind nicht gewickelt, sondern straff gespannt. Das soll das Mikrofonverhalten verbessern. Accoustic Arts ist bei der Auswahl der Röhren ebenso sorgfältig wie bei allen anderen Komponenten und der Fertigung. Hier wählen sie nur solche, deren Werte innerhalb des extrem engen Toleranzbereichs liegen, den sie sich selbst gesetzt haben. Und so, obwohl bereits zuvor passende Top-Röhren vom renommierten Hersteller JJ Electronic, etwa 50 Prozent der Fälle werden als ungeeignet für die Installation abgelehnt. Zuerst müssen die Proben eine Einlaufzeit von 100 Stunden überstehen. Danach wird der Verstärker einer weiteren Prüfung unterzogen - und erst dann verlässt die Tube Preamp III die Fabrik.

## The Accoustic Arts Tube Preamp III Phono in practice

So our test guest enters our listening room well prepared. But before we start, the amplifier needs two minutes for a warm-up. This warm-up time is an investment in the future: Slowly heating the tubes extends their lifespan significantly. Therefore, when you take longer breaks from listening to music, you might consider switching off the tube section by pressing the "Volume" button. Turning it on again provides another two minutes of leisure for selecting the next music track. To warm up and get familiar with the Preamp III, we first listen to songs we have already heard with the Preamp III. We select such as Bozz Scaggs with "On The Beach" or Fink's live recording of "Trouble's What You're In", but then also something fresh: "A Battle Between" by Blue Tofu. While listening to all of them, you get that wonderful feeling of total serenity. Once more, we experience that marvellous transparency - but still, something is different: the reproduction seems a bit more relaxed, even more harmonious.

## Immense fidelity to impulses

Yet the tubes of this hybrid amplifier are no "softeners". We discover this when operating the Tube Preamp III Phono with different power amplifiers, with purely transistorised and tube-loaded powerhouses. Especially with the solid-state power amplifiers, it becomes apparent that the hybrid concept by Accoustic Arts, despite all its refinement, does not deliver a cuddly sound. Instead, we enjoy a crisp, dynamic reproduction that achieves a declared goal. The sound remains balanced and full of integrity at low volumes and even at rich levels. We get musically stuck on the song "A Battle Between" because the percussion, in the beginning, impresses us right away. A powerful bass drum beat follows hand-beaten toms and a striking stick-beaten snare. The reproduction of these different percussion instruments has a tremendous presence, feeling so realistic that we can practically see them in front of us. That is also due to the excellent dynamic gradation. Drummer Louis Simon constantly varies his attack making Tube Preamp III Phono reproduce these dynamics perfectly thanks to its immense impulse fidelity.



When you switch on the Tube Preamp III Phono, it goes through a two-minute "warm-up". This slow warming up of the tubes serves their protection and significantly extends their lifespan.

## High-resolution acoustic

These beats come without a hitch, with vitality resulting in a wonderfully lively, fresh reproduction. The excellent resolution also contributes to this. Reverb and delay add to the percussion beat making the rhythmic performance seem more intricate and appealing. The preamp conveys each of the increasingly faint and distant echoes. Because of this high resolution and transparency, the imaging also has a splendid depth, a vastness and seems limitless. Even this beginning is a delight in acoustics. Andrea Mathews' vocals are the actual attraction, of course. The charismatic singer has an immensely appealing voice. Underpinned by agile percussion and, in contrast, warmly serene synth sounds, Mathews sings: "I feel like a sculpture, no hands, no legs". Some syllables are barely more than a dying whisper. But we can hear every detail, right down to the delicately breathed "s" at the end of the vocal phrase. We experience an almost intimate closeness causing goosebumps.

## Continuing the excellence: the phono stage

Now we are, of course, interested in whether the Phono stage can live up to this excellence. We connect our Transrotor Dark Star. First, we equip its tonearm with the MM system Transrotor Uccello. We choose the soundtrack "Zidane" by Mogwai as LP. The darkly elegant "Black Spider" opening the soundtrack is a delight. Stuart Braithwaite opens the song playing solely on his undistorted electric guitar. We recognise each stroke of the strings, the wiry sound, the delicate sliding over the wound lower ones as if the guitarist and his amplifier were standing right in front of us. We also experience this directness with the bass, which then begins, its low tone filling our space, and the drums. Despite the dense structure, we can perfectly hear even the bass drum. We listen to the filigree ride cymbal, whose decay we effortlessly follow with fascination and any change in timbre. We now experiment with the adjustable capacitance values, but the sound changes only in nuances.

## Outstanding plasticity

What about a moving coil pick-up? Here we convert the analogue drive to the Goldring Ethos, select "MC Cartridge" in the amplifier's menu and set the recommended impedance of 100 ohms in the resistance values. Now, we take another approach to Mogwai's "Black Spider". Again we are fascinated by how fine, transparent, and contoured MC sampling is, in particular, in combination with an excellent phono preamplifier. The guitar sounds even more wiry and silvery. But we also perceive more details - right down to the delicate hiss of the guitar amplifier played by Stuart Braithwaite! The bass retains its body but with sharper definition. Now, we can better understand acoustically how Dominic Aitchison plays the strings of his bass with his fingers. Most fascinating, however, is the drums: from the bass drum to the cymbals, there is more presence and definition. Especially the ride cymbal, which had already been impressive before, now has exceptional plasticity and presence!

## Effective adjustment

Here, playing with the settings, in this case, changing the termination impedance values, has a higher impact on the sound. At 47 ohms, the sound becomes duller. At 220 ohms, it becomes more brilliant, and at 470 ohms, significant treble-emphasised. With the 100 ohms recommended by Goldring, on the other hand, the adjustment is perfect. The preamplifier mutes during the change of settings until the new value is in place. That avoids switching noises. However, it also makes direct comparison of different options slightly harder. The menu navigation of the Tube Preamp III Phono then jumps back two levels to the "Cartridge" selection. Since you only have to make this cartridge adjustment once, this is a minor detail considering the sonic class of this phono stage. It continues what we have already heard before via the line-level inputs with the CD feed: We also enjoy an excellently three-dimensional, spatial, transparent reproduction with immense clarity, relaxation and tranquillity when operating the analogue drive.



The headphone jack is only visible and accessible once you remove the magnetically adhering metal cover button, which optically matches the "Phones On" switch. The shiny volume knob to the right of the Tube Preamp III has an additional function: a long press switches the tube section off and on.



In the "Settings" menu, "Volume Offset" allows to adjust the level of each input between -6 decibels and +6 decibels and thus lower or raise it. This way, volume differences between different players can be compensated. That can be particularly relevant for the phono input, as the output of the various MM and MC systems sometimes differs significantly.

## Immersion into music: the headphone section

So how does the onboard headphone amplifier perform? We first connect our open, circumaural Focal Utopia, which uses a beryllium broadband driver. Even in this reproduction, the sound retains the marvellous resolution and transparency. It also preserves the richness of the sound. The bass, for example, still offers a rich, defined foundation. Effects like the flutter-echoed guitar are now more intense and impressive. The room reverb is even more fascinating and invites you to immerse yourself in the music. The preamp also allows this enjoyment with the open, circumaural HEDD HEDDphone: it operates with an air motion transformer as a full-range driver. Its sound is more reserved and discreet in the bass, but its reproduction is more open and wide-ranging. Due to its principle, the HEDDphone has low efficiency, thus, requiring powerful amplification. Here, too, the Tube Preamp III Phono delivers impressively - and so here, too, we relax and delve into the music.

The Accoustic Arts Tube Preamp III Phono resides in a typical listening setup. Here it plays with the Transrotor Dark Star. We use the Focal Utopia. Two Elac Conentro S 509 are responsible for delivering the audio to the ears.

## Conclusion

The Accoustic Arts Tube Preamp III Phono is the refined completion of the Preamp III. It also shines with outstanding manufacturing quality and a noble appearance, ensuring a modern statement through the high-resolution OLED display. It also offers numerous balanced inputs and outputs and the option of AC or DC coupling to the subsequent power amplifier. However, instead of a pure transistor amplifier, a semiconductor/tube combination accomplishes the work here. With this hybrid concept, the preamplifier does not sound even better but is different. It is slightly rounder and more harmonious. The fundamental sound qualities, however, remain the same. The reproduction is wonderfully clear and transparent, incredibly impulse-frequent and highly dynamic. The rendition is breathtakingly three-dimensional and spatial. Listening to music with this preamp is a wonderfully relaxing musical pleasure. The optional phono module continues this outstanding sound quality and serenity seamlessly. Thus, the preamp is also a delight for vinyl lovers - and the Tube Preamp III Phono offers reference-level sound artistry in every aspect.

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