

Michael Fremer

Five New Phono Preamplifiers

Forget the two front teeth. All I want for Christmas is a plumber to install the reverse-osmosis water-purification system I bought when the weather was still warm. This is turning into a running joke—except for the water, which isn't.

How healthy is analog sound in the 21st century? Before I could wrap up my notes on these five new phono preamps, e-mails arrived offering a few more for review. Solid-state, all-tube, hybrid, battery-powered—whatever your preference, and at whatever price you can handle, there are good choices. That's how healthy analog sound is today.

But before I get started, I got an e-mail a few months ago from Chris Hoff of Balanced Power Technologies, offering to send me an Alesis MasterLink he'd modified. The MasterLink is a 24-bit/96kHz-capable digital recorder with a 40GB hard drive, typically available online for around \$900. Mastering veteran Stan Ricker thinks it's one of the best two-channel recorders he's ever used, analog or digital. I use mine mostly to digitize LPs and to make CD compilations. It's versatile, easy to use, sounds great, and measures well, according to JA (see www.stereophile.com/hirezplayers/605), who uses one on his live recording sessions.

Hoff offers two modifications of the MasterLink: the Signature (\$600 to mod your MasterLink, or he'll sell you a modified new unit for \$1399) and the Signature Plus (\$1000 to mod yours, \$1799 new). For the Signature mod, Hoff replaces all 22 electrolytic capacitors on the MasterLink's A/D board with Black Gate nonpolarized caps, adds larger-value Black Gate nonpolarized caps and polystyrene-film bypass caps to the digital power supply, lines the entire interior with copper foil and ERS cloth (made of metal-coated carbon fibers and said to absorb, reflect, and diffuse RFI/EMI) for RF rejection up into the gigahertz region, wraps internal wiring with ERS, adds copper foil and ERS to shield the main power supply, wraps the CD-RW and hard



BPT modified Alesis MasterLink.

drives with foil and ERS, adds separate Litz ground wire from the hard drive to the mains ground, damps the hard drive with Sorbothane, replaces eight electrolytic caps in the main power supply with Black Gate Power Tank and Elna Cerfine caps, treats internal pressure contacts with Walker SST contact enhancer, and uses silver solder throughout.

The Signature Plus mod includes all of the above, as well as a separate power supply for the analog section that includes a shielded, low-noise toroidal transformer and a low-impedance 15V regulation board, polystyrene bypass caps for the analog power supply, and replaces the generic circuit-board-mounted analog input RCA jacks and digital-out RCA jack with chassis-mounted WBT Nextgens of platinum-plated silver.

I got a Signature Plus. When it arrived, it was much heavier than my stock MasterLink. Hoff had mounted a set of sharply pointed cones on the bottom of the chassis, which I definitely didn't like—though he'd also provided some dimpled shelf-protecting discs, the points scratched my shelf as I slid the unit into place. Most audiophiles into mods such as this will want to use their own isolators; I suggest specifying "no cones" if you order a BPT-modified MasterLink.

I compiled an 80-minute sampler CD on my stock MasterLink and an identical compilation on the Signature Plus. I then sent copies of both to Wilson Audio Specialties' Peter McGrath, a world-renowned recording engineer and another MasterLink owner. I didn't

tell him which was which.

When I played the two CD-Rs on my Musical Fidelity kW SACD player, I heard a definite difference in favor of the disc recorded on the Signature Plus: it was warmer, less edgy, more smooth, yet with more apparent detail; in short, more analog-like.

I called McGrath. Which disc sounded better, A or B? Without hesitation, he said that disc B sounded warmer, less edgy, more analog-like. Disc B was the one I'd recorded on the BPT-modified player. Case closed.

If you're serious about transferring your LPs to CDs, I unhesitatingly recommend Balanced Power Technologies' Signature Plus modification of the Alesis MasterLink. As Ron Popeil likes to say, "And it really, really works!"

Bellari VP129 tube MM phono preamplifier: \$200

This one-tube wonder, made in the US by the Rolls Corporation, packs a moving-magnet (MM) phono preamp and a headphone amplifier into a single chassis. The input circuitry is based on op-amps, but the output stage includes a classic dual-triode 12AX7 tube, and there are separate pots for the main line-level output and the ¼" headphone jack. There's even a switchable rumble filter at 20Hz. Gain is specified at a relatively low 30dB, meaning that only MM or very-high-output moving-coil (MC) cartridges should be used. The signal/noise ratio is specced at a pleasingly high >80dB, unweighted. When I opened the chassis, I found a high-quality circuit board chock full o' parts. The VP129 is powered by a wall wart.



The Bellari VP129: All for \$200 and made in the USA.

With its curved, bright red case and top-mounted tube, the versatile VP129 looks great, and it sounded as good as it looks. It was quiet, and golden-sweet and liquid in the midrange, as you'd expect from a 12AX7-based phono preamp. I wasn't expecting its top end to be so nicely extended, fast, and clean, or its bass to be so snappy, articulate, and extended. The first record I pulled was Speakers

I plugged in a Roksan Radius turntable (review in the works) fitted with a Roksan Corus cartridge and was absolutely captivated by what I heard. The strings sounded rich and buoyant, the flutes airy and complex, and the percussion had plenty of transient "bite" and resolve. The stage floated pleasingly, with a nicely rendered three-dimensionality.

Corner's excellent-sounding reissue of a DG Archiv classic, *Dance Music of the High Renaissance* (Archiv SAPM 0198 166), a longtime favorite. It features superbly recorded strings, keyboard instruments, lutes, bells, flutes, and lots of percussion. I've been playing my original copy since 1969 and still enjoy listening for both the music and the vivid sound. This was the early 17th century's version of Saturday Night Fever.

Every type of music I played through the surprising little Bellari sounded full-bodied and rich, yet detailed and crisply rendered. The bass was well extended and satisfyingly punchy, and vocal sibilants were clean and pure. The only things missing were the usual brightness, etchiness, and hardness I expect to hear from phono preamplifiers at this price.

The Bellari VP129 gets my highest recommendation, and is the budget phono preamp I will now enthusiastically recommend for every genre of music. Its sins are strictly of omission, and it worked well as a headphone amp, too. Well done—and a genuine bargain. With the exception of top-shelf collectibles, most used classical LPs are now dirt cheap. If you're thinking of taking the analog plunge and you listen to a lot of classical music, get a Bellari VP129 and a budget turntable, and I promise that your CDs will start to gather dust.

**Jasmine Audio LP2.0
MM/MC phono
preamplifier: \$1500**

The two-box LP2.0, from Jasmine Audio, in the People's Republic of