

# VINYL LP FILE

The digizine for discerning music lovers



Stable - Progressive - Committed - Reliable - Established - Trustworthy - Dependable - Proven



**YES!** T.H.E. Show Las Vegas Returns!

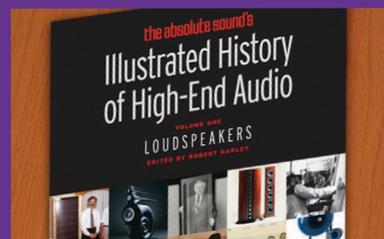
**January 7 - 10, 2014**

The **Number One** Show in Las Vegas  
dedicated **ONLY** to high-end audio and home theater!

Purchase a signed, First Edition copy of Volume One.  
Exclusively at T.H.E. Show: "Special Attendee Pricing"

320 PAGES • CLOTH-BOUND • COFFEE TABLE BOOK

Meet the Editors, Contributors and some of the Legends - in person!



Join the innovators of tomorrow for live demos from companies brought together from across the globe.  
Experience new audio revelations *BEFORE* they hit dealers!

Also browse T.H.E. Marketplace  
with the best in personal listening,  
Vinyl Recordings, CD's and more.  
Experience Acoustic Sounds' DSD  
through SUPER HIREZ.com



info@theshowlasvegas.com • www.theshowlasvegas.com

at the Newly Remodeled **Flamingo Hotel**



**16<sup>th</sup> Annual**

**LAS VEGAS, NEVADA**

**THE HOME ENTERTAINMENT SHOW**

*Your Industry's Show!*

in association with:

The Los Angeles and  
Orange County Audio Society



*We Know Audio!*

"T.H.E. Show Newport just keeps getting bigger and better"  
~Robert Harley; Editor-In-Chief, The Absolute Sound

At the Hilton Hotel & Atrium Hotel  
John Wayne/ Orange County Airport

NEWPORT BEACH, CALIFORNIA

*Best Attended Consumer Show in North America!*

**WWW.THESHOWNEWPORT.COM**

**4<sup>th</sup> Annual**



**May 30<sup>th</sup> - June 1<sup>st</sup>, 2014**

VINYLP<sup>HILE</sup>

## Cast of Characters

Publisher,  
Editor-in-Chief Rich Teer

Graphical design Jenny Teer

Reviewers and  
contributing  
writers Annie St. Jean,  
Atane Ofiaja,  
John Adrian Spijkers

Advertising Rich Teer

Website rite-online.net

**www.vinylphilemag.com**

Got questions or comments?  
Please send them to:

rich@vinylphilemag.com  
(250) 317-2210

© 2013 by Vinylphile Magazine.  
All rights reserved.

# Contents

## Features

- 5**      **Editorial**
- 6**      **Dealer Spotlight**  
We have a chat with London Drugs' Colin Cottrell.  
*By Rich Teer*
- 11**     **Annie's Audio Adventures**  
A pair of beautiful Italian speakers are the latest  
items in Annie's audio room.  
*By Annie St. Jean*
- 33**     **Advertisers Index**

**Back page:** London's Tower Bridge on a chilly October evening, as seen from the south bank of the River Thames. Not to be confused with its upstream brother, London Bridge, Tower Bridge is a bascule design from the Victorian age. The the two centre bits raise about three times per day to allow tall boats to pass.

**This issue's epigraph:** "The man that hath no music in himself, Nor is not moved with concord of sweet sounds, Is fit for treasons, stratagems, and spoils; The motions of his spirit are dull as night, And his affections dark as Erebus. Let no such man be trusted. Mark the music." —William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*.

# Equipment Reviews

**13**

## **Audio Research PH8**

This phono stage could be just what the audio doctor ordered.

*By Rich Teer*

**20**

## **Audio Research LS17 SE**

What better to keep you warm at night than the sweet glow of tubes?

*By Rich Teer*

**25**

## **Lyra Atlas**

Lyra's new top-of-the-line cartridge is something special.

*By Rich Teer*

# Record Reviews

**31**

## **Featured Record Review**

Canadian singer-songwriter, Leonard Cohen's *Old Ideas* is this issue's featured record.

**32**

## **Rock Record Reviews**

Records from Coldplay and Lee "Scratch" Perry.

# Editorial

This issue, as small as it is, has been a *long* time in the making—too long, in fact. The main reason for this is that earlier this year, my dad was diagnosed with cancer. He wasn't given very long to live, and unfortunately passed away in September. My dad (the subject of the photo to the right, which was taken a few years ago in one of his favourite pubs) was the person who introduced me to audio (although I took our hobby much further than he!), and it was dad who nurtured my eclectic musical taste by introducing me to many different genres when I was young and impressionable. It is therefore to my dad's memory that I dedicate this issue of *Vinylphile*.

However, life must go on, so now that I am back from his funeral, I have decided to try to get the wind back into *Vinylphile's* sails. Consequently, this issue has a hardware focus: we have in-depth reviews of the Audio Research PH8 phono stage, the LS17 SE line stage, and Lyra's new flagship MC cartridge, the Atlas. To make up for the lack of record reviews in this issue, the

next issue will have a software focus, the plan being to go back to our usual hardware and software mix after that.



The preceding notwithstanding, an issue of *Vinylphile* wouldn't be complete without *Annie's Audio Adventures*! She has been listening to a pair of Italian speakers, and we also have an interview with London Drugs' Colin Cottrell.

I had planned to attend CES in Las Vegas earlier this year, but Mother Nature had other ideas: as our plane was taxiing towards the runway, one of our wheels slid off into the snow and grass beside the apron! Fortunately no one was hurt, but my flight was cancelled thus putting the kibosh on my Vegas plans for this year; such is life in the Great White North!

As I write this Christmas has just finished and the Boxing Day madness has set in, so I hope you had a very merry Christmas and wish a happy and prosperous New Year to all our readers, and industry friends and colleagues!

Finally, my thanks to our readers for sticking with us and their patience while waiting for this issue, and as always, thanks for reading!

*Rich*

# Dealer Spotlight

## London Drugs

By Rich Teer

It's no secret to vinyl aficionados that sales of vinyl records have been growing at an amazing pace the last few years. It's also not a secret that although vinyl has always been available from mail order outlets like Acoustic Sounds, Music Direct, Elusive Disc, Soundstage Direct, and Audio Basics, it has all but disappeared from bricks and mortar stores. So imagine my surprise when I noticed that my local London Drugs store here in Kelowna not only sold vinyl records, but their prominence and selection was increasing. Curiosity piqued, I started digging for more information and was put in touch with Colin Cottrell in London Drugs' head office. We had a conversation about how London Drugs came to be selling vinyl, and how well vinyl is selling; what follows is the transcript of our conversation.

**So, Colin, thanks for having a chat with me. You're the Merchandise Manager for the Electronics and A/V divisions, right?**

Correct.

**Cool; and how long have you been doing that job?**

Oh, that's a good question! Umm, I've been with the company for 30 years, and I've been a merchandise manager for the last 19, I believe. Sorry, 18 years.

**Wow, so you're fairly well tenured, then?**

[Laughs] Well, in relation to other people in this company, I'm probably about average. It's a good company.

**Well, obviously they know how to recruit, and more importantly, retain good people.**

Absolutely.

**So, London Drugs selling vinyl. How did that come about?**

Well, well, well, well... It's kind of a long story so I'll skip some of the details. It started just two years ago now; EMI released an anniversary edition of [Pink Floyd's] *The Wall* on CD, and of course

we agreed to do a promotion with them including flyer advertising and what not. As I was leafing through the information they gave me I noticed that they had re-released a 180 g vinyl version as well, so I thought, "You know, if we're dealing specifically with Floyd fans here, there could very well be some that want to replace their old vinyl". So the long and short of it is that I put in an ad and I advertised *The Wall* on CD and vinyl, and actually the vinyl out-sold the CD five to one.

**Really?!**

Yeah! That was kind of the beginning. Then I went into dealing with EMI and the same group. I figured, "OK, we'll do *Wish You Were Here* and *Dark Side of the Moon*, and see what happens there". It was the same thing. So it was at that stage where I started working with EMI and we went through their vinyl catalogue. We brought in I think at the time it was a total... This was over the course of seven to nine months, because back then we were working with a distributor so the distributor

made most of the calls on what we were doing. Actually, last December we parted ways with them. But during that process as we progressed, we went to about eighteen titles from EMI. Everything we brought in sold, and continued to sell through. We had expanded pretty much to the degree that we could with a single label, what was available at the time, so I then started pursuing other avenues. Since then, we've found another distributor that works with us very closely and our selection right now on paper is about 280 titles, but that being said, this stuff is so difficult to get a hold of in quantity that at any given time I've got at least half of my inventory on back order.

**Wow.**

Yeah, it's not readily available. I guess if you're four or five stores, or two stores or whatever, I suspect it's fairly consistent, but when you're dealing with 66 locations selling the stuff, a minimum order from me is going to be 100 pieces and the way the category is now in the country those kinds of quantities are difficult to come by. I think we're progressing in that matter because we're very consistent: our distributor or EMI knows that if we need a title, they know exactly how much we're going to need initially, and they also know that I'm going to need backup. So hopefully that's going to fix itself as we progress and move on because, as I'm sure you're aware, if you're a vinyl nut like I am, selection is

everything. I mean it's gotta be fresh, it's gotta be new, new and old, and it's got to be continuing to change on a regular basis.

**Yeah. So from what you've been telling me, demand has been outstripping your ability to supply?**

Yes. It's very difficult for me to measure let's say, the top 20 for example, because if I get 100 or 125 pieces come in in a week, half of that could be gone in 20 days, or 30 days, or 10 days. Then I'll have stores out of stock, I'll have back orders, and it might be two months before I get a fulfillment again. At any given time I can look at a snapshot and say, "OK, here's the number one for the year", but you can't do that unless it's been consistently in stock throughout the year compared to the other titles. It's interesting to say the least!

**I bet! So, talking of selections, how do you decide which titles to carry? I noticed that you have quite a variety in the stores: you've got everything from what I would call stuff that's very accessible to the younger crowd to stuff that's more accessible to older farts like me, and you have audiophile stuff as well, which is great.**

Basically, it's kind of a weird answer here, but it's literally what's presented to me and what is available in quantity. Not everything of course, but I fine tune from there with my limited experience

and the experience of the label or distributor that I'm working with in trying to cater to as many genres as we possibly can because in talking with the stores, the customer ranges anywhere from 12, 13, 14, and 15 year old kids all the way up to 40, 50, or 60 year olds. It's very, very broad, and the classics like *The Wall* or *Dark Side* or Hendrix or whatnot, they sell consistently, but also when you gut stuff in like Mumford and Sons or Broken Social Scene, you know, the newer bands—Jack White is another one that comes to mind—sells in the same relation. I mean the volumes are the same or very, very similar. So it's across the board and a lot of blues and jazz move too, and yeah, the Mobile Fidelity audiophile stuff is, I'm sure you're aware, just incredible quality.

**It is, yes. I've got quite a few: I've spent more than a few bucks on my share of Mobile Fidelity Sound Labs records!**

Me too, me too! [Laughs]

**So you're a vinyl lover, judging by what you're saying here?**

Absolutely, yeah. I've been buying... Actually, I kind of jumped back into vinyl about six years ago. I just decided one day to pull out my turntable and I kept all my vinyl from when I was a kid. At that stage I was buying a lot of used. It's always been a hobby of mine and I've always loved it, but in a position like mine I couldn't really take my personal

Distributed in Canada by  
AudioScape Canada Inc.  
www.audioscapecanada.ca  
info@audioscapecanada.ca  
(905) 833-0010



# PrimaLuna®

Excellence is a habit NOT a single act.

box of opinions and apply it to corporate because at that stage I thought it was just me.

**Apparently not!**

Apparently it's not!

**So what sort of gear do you have? Spill the beans!**

I have a bunch of gear but I've tuned it down to two-channel, and that's pretty much all I listen to. I've got a PrimaLuna tube amplifier, which is bi-amped to a pair of Klipsch horns, and that is my system in a nutshell.

**Nice. I actually have a pair of PrimaLuna ProLogue Seven power amps.**

That's what I have—great minds think alike!

**We do, yes: tubes and vinyl! So what sort of turntable do you have?**

I have—I don't know if I'm getting the model number right—a Dual 415. It's one of the newer ones, out of Germany. I also have a Technics SL2202 but I switched over to Dual. I went from direct drive to



belt drive. It's lots of fun, I haven't felt like this in years!

**If you had to guess, roughly how many records do you think you have?**

Oh, personally, I'd say 500 or 600.

**A good selection then.**

Yep. Like I said, I never threw them out. They moved from city to city with me. I could never throw them out.

**I'm much the same way. My dad got me into music back when I was a youngster and I didn't have much money so I was buying records and then like you I never got rid of my stuff, even when I got into the digital medium that we shall not name, I didn't sell any of my vinyl and then a year or two later, when I actually heard how good a good vinyl system could sound I was like, "OK, to hell with this". I actually sold most of my CDs to fund my first turntable purchase.**

That makes sense.

**Of course, now that I have my own source of income I've gone rather more insane, but hey!**

You and me both! You'll find me at our Langley store virtually every weekend. When we get a new selection in I'm usually one of the first guys I there.

**You get the cream of the crop, right?**

I get to see what's coming in, which is a disadvantage to others and an advantage to me, but you know, I'm not breaking any rules.

**I think it's called a perk of your position.**

I guess, I guess. Mind you, if they're in limited quantities, I won't put anything aside for me. If I walk in like a normal customer and it's there, I'll buy it. So I don't take advantage there. There's nothing like walking into one of our stores and picking out five or six albums. I mean, that's an awesome Saturday afternoon!

**Oh yeah, oh yeah! So I think you mentioned 66 stores earlier. Is that Western Canada, or...**

Just Western Canada. The furthest east we go is Winnipeg. We have 78 stores but only 66 have the Audio Video Systems department in them.

**OK. So, trends. I know you can't mention any specific numbers but how would you describe your vinyl sales trends?**

It's nothing but up. I mean it's constantly up. I measure our unit volume and our sales volume on a weekly basis and it's constantly growing, but what I do see on a regular basis is when we get some fresh titles, fresh selection, then

I see the numbers spike more than they normally do. I think the word's still getting out to a lot of people that we're a destination for vinyl. I think that is evident in our weekly sell through, but the real spikes come when I get five or six new releases out there.

**That's cool, because to be totally honest, London Drugs isn't the first place that comes to mind when it comes to records, at least it wasn't until recently.**

Agreed.

**Now, it's, "Oh great, there's a record store local to me", so I can flick through and spend even more money on records, so thanks a bunch for that! [Laughs]**

It's our responsibility to keep that selection fresh for you!

**Exactly: keep taking my money, it's great. So I guess you would categorise London Drugs' decision to sell vinyl as a successful one?**

Well, I have to watch how I say that because it was my decision! I don't want to blow any horns or anything! [Laughs] Most definitely. Most definitely. But again, the biggest problem is getting product.

**Yeah, but I guess that's a great position to be in though, right?**

Yep. It is, but also a... Actually, I'll answer that question in two ways, because it really depends on who's asking. If you're my competitor, I'm going to tell you that it was a mistake. [Laughs]

**Exactly! "Oh, don't go into selling vinyl, no no no"!**

"Don't do, don't do"! Even if they did it's going to be a struggle because they're just not pressing the volumes that mass retail would require.

**Yes, it's a popular niche, but it's still a niche would be a good way of categorising it.**

Yep, 100% right. Let's call it what it is.

**But bring it on, that's what I say!**

Me too, me too! Well, as long as I'm at this desk I'll be doing that, and as long as there's the sell through that justifies it, I'll keep going at it.

**Excellent. So, that's a good segue into my last question, which is what are London Drugs' future plans for selling vinyl? More prominent positioning, maybe? Larger selection?**

Yes, I'm working with our business unit to come up with a decent display. We've only had the selection that we have for the last seven months, so I just keep bringing it in and the guys in the stores and our business unit are kind of improvising as to where to put it and

how to display it and what not. We've obviously proven that it's a viable category for us, so our business unit is working on an actual fixture that we'll place in CD music section. I'm hoping to see that in the stores in the next six weeks or so.

**That soon, huh?**

Yeah, 'cause right now I think it's a little difficult to shop. It doesn't matter to fans like you and me 'cause we want to buy anyway, but for shopping ease you literally need to have something in front of you at waist level that you can flip through and right now we don't have that, but we are working on it.

**Good. That was one of the things that I noticed when I was flicking through the Kelowna store was that it was a bit awkward to flip through the records, but I still managed to find a few!**

I'm in the exact same boat. It's not displayed optimally, and we understand that so we're working on a solution there.

**That's excellent! Well, Colin, thanks very much for your time. It's much appreciated.**

No problem, Rich, it was nice talking with you.

# Annie's Audio Adventures

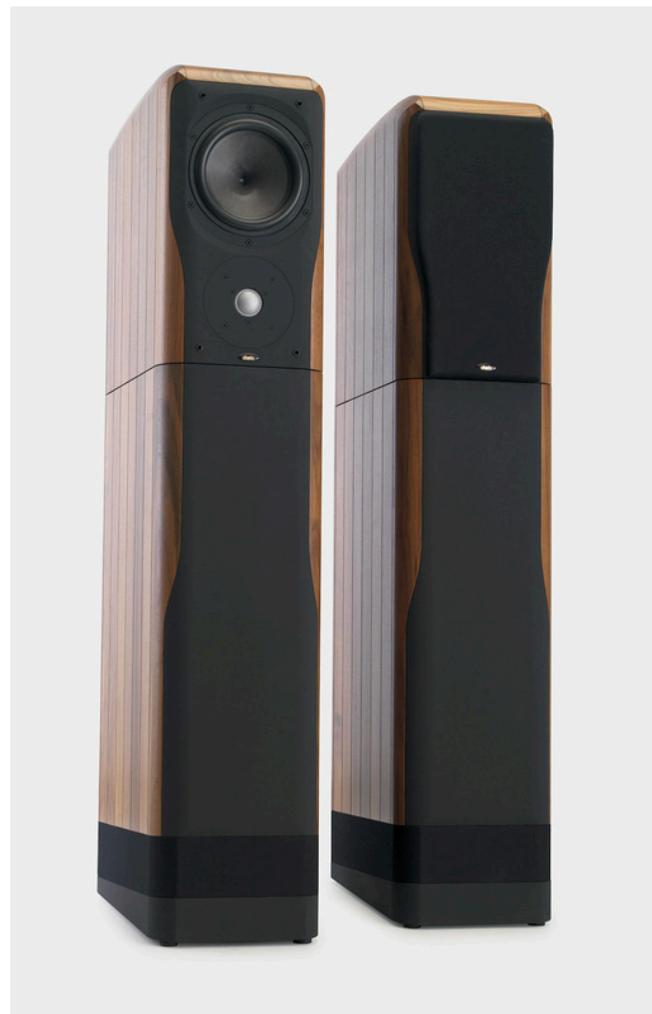
## Chario Academy Sovran Speakers

By Annie St. Jean

**Y**ou see, when I think about Italian design, I see a red Ferrari, some old stone columns, white Carrera marble, and Alessi kitchen gadgets. However, the Chario Academy Sovrans are none of the above. They are walnut speakers!

Good points: they look good, rich in colour, and smooth in finish. It does help a bit that walnut is one of my favourite woods, along with cherry and maple. We're off to a good start! Another positive: the top third of the speaker separates and makes it easier to carry around and set up. These can also live on their own as a mini monitor. However, in the name of honesty, I must admit that I'm not crazy about seeing a horizontal line all the time. But then again, I don't like lines on tables that extend to big ovals or rectangles! I'm also not sure about the side looking a bit like wood floor. But then again, I usually have my eyes closed when I listen critically, so who cares about

the looks, right?! I think they do look good in the living room, however, and they bring warmth and they have a



rich furniture-like appearance to them. The person in your life who hates slick, shiny black equipment will be more

than pleased! So, good marks for the overall looks.

Now, on to the sound. A very dear friend of mine asked me to review them without comparing them to other speakers. Not an easy task when you've been teaching for 19 years, and comparing new materials and concepts with what the students already know has become second nature! But I shall try very hard!

The Chario has a very clear, crisp, and detailed sound. It is warm, although a bit shy in the mid range for my taste. The voices are clear and quick, the bass has a full presence. Brass instruments are clear and precise, while cellos and pianos are smooth, round and warm. One thing I really enjoy about these speakers is that they really disappear and let the music fill the room. I think it is always a good thing when the equipment disappears and the musical instruments come to life

on their own. Well, maybe with a little help from my friends! The Chario are a very happy match to the Marantz (Yep! Still babysitting!), although I must admit that I didn't really have the chance to critically listen to them with any other equipment yet. That will be your homework! It would be very interesting to listen to them on an analog system! You will have to play around with the placement too, as they seem to have a specific sweet spot. So, good marks for the sound too!

When I review any piece of equipment, I make a point of never asking how much it is worth before I have formed my own opinion. Why? Well, I don't want to be influenced, of course! So here is where the biggest issue arose for me: their price. Yes, I do understand that something made in Italy is bound to cost a lot more than the same object made in China. However, I'm having a difficult time justifying such a jump for the Chario. I promised I would not compare, but please let me say this: if you're lucky enough to be playing in the \$20,000 range, you might want to explore your options. There are many great speakers out there in that price range. There are other speakers that are still manufactured in countries where workers make a decent wage, like France, England, and even in North America that would compete very strongly with the Chario. Don't worry: I'm not flipping out over the price: my favourite speakers are worth \$90,000! Unfortunately, they are not living with

me yet! I would definitely need a big inheritance or a big lottery win for those French babies! (Oops! Was that too big of a hint?) But, like I always say, it all depends on what your own preferences are, what equipment you are using with them, and how your room works.

The verdict? I like the Chario, like the looks and the sound, but I still have a hard time wanting to pay that much without comparing them to other speakers in the same price range.

Happy listening!

# Audio Research PH8

## Phono Stage

By Rich Teer

One of my earliest memories from when I started getting interested in

high-end audio

(or hi-fi as we called it back in the UK) is an advert for a Warrington-based dealer called Doug Brady Hi-Fi. The gear in the ad was all very

drool-worthy for this then-neophyte audiophile: a pair Mission 770 Freedom speakers, a Linn LP12 turntable, a Krell KSA50 power amp, and an Audio Research SP8 preamp (the latter sitting atop a Mission Isoplat and Target stand, a preamp set up I have nearly duplicated—I have an SP9 rather than an SP8—all these years later!). Between the two speakers was a serious-looking gentleman in a jacket and tie (the Brits love their ties; personally I can't stand

'em!), and across the top of the ad was its headline, "You really must hear this".

didn't start reading North American magazines until a few years later), and my curiosity was piqued.



Since those early days I've had many opportunities to listen to Audio Research equipment, mostly in dealers' stores and

at trade shows. A few years ago, I managed to squeeze my budget enough to purchase a used SP9 Mk 2, which has remained my reference preamp since then.

Skipping forward a few years, I was talking with Audio Research's Dave Gordon about the possibility of a review sample. "How about we start with a PH8 phono stage?", he suggested. I readily agreed, but expressed some

I can't recall if my love affair (or, perhaps more accurately given my impoverished student status at the time, lust affair) with Audio Research gear started with that ad, but the time (the mid 1980s) is about right. Brushed aluminum (or should that be aluminium?) face plates, grab handles, a serious, no-nonsense aesthetic, and the warm glow of tubes from within: what's not to love? Add a reputation for good sound quality via rave reviews in the UK press (I

reservations about partnering it with my SP9—I didn't want the latter to short-sell the PH8. "Well," said Dave with a twinkle in his eyes, "why don't we lend you one of our new LS17 SE line stages as well?". With an offer like that, how could I possibly refuse?

## Technical Details

The PH8 is the middle model in Audio Research's trio of full-sized phono stages, sitting comfortably between its smaller and bigger brothers (the PH6 and Reference Phono 2 SE respectively). (I should add that since I wrote this review, Audio Research have announced their flagship two-box phono stage, the Reference Phono 10.) It has a single pair of single-ended inputs and outputs, and features user-selectable input loading resistance. Unlike its bigger brothers, the PH8 offers only RIAA equalisation, but this is not likely to be a serious drawback for the majority of users.

The rear panel houses the gold-plated input and output RCA sockets, an earth post, and a 15A IEC mains socket.

The front panel, which is made from a 6 mm thick sheet of machined aluminum, is available with either a natural or black anodised finish; the purchaser can also specify the finish of the front handles (natural or black anodised). The default is for the handles to match the front panel, but I find black handles with a natural faceplate aesthetically pleasing.



In addition to said handles, the front panel is also home to a vacuum-fluorescent display, just below which are four round aluminum buttons. The buttons control the power, mono/stereo mode, the input load (47K, 1K, 500, 200, and 100 Ohms), and mute functions. The display has eight

selectable brightness levels, and may also be turned off (in this state nine pixels remain dimly lit to remind the user that the PH8 is still powered on).

The front panel controls are duplicated on the included remote control, which also has buttons for controlling the display's brightness, and a nifty feature

that shows how many hours the tubes have been in use. I'm obliged to mention that I think the plastic remote control, while perfectly serviceable, feels a bit cheap for a product in this price category and quality aspiration. It's not a big deal, but something that should be pointed out. And, I hasten to add, it does *not* reflect on the excellent build quality of the PH8 itself: the PH8's fit 'n' finish are up to the high standards we've

come to expect from Audio Research.

Inside the case is a single large circuit board. The phono circuitry, which is derived from the Reference Phono 2, uses a dual-mono configuration and benefits from a number of circuit and parts improvements over its

predecessor, the PH7. More than half the case is dedicated to the power supply, which is implemented using a huge new R-core transformer (I've seen smaller transformers in some integrated amplifiers!), a large capacitor energy reservoir, and tube regulation (both a 6550 and a 6H30 are used in the power supply). The latter are the same as used in the Reference Phono 2 and Reference 5 line stage (but presumably not with quite the same finesse).

Also inherited from the Reference Phono 2 are the capacitor types used in the audio circuitry, including the same coupling and Teflon capacitors used in the RIAA stage and as bypass capacitors. Two 6H30 dual triode tubes and low-noise FETs are used in the gain stage (providing 58 dB of gain), and the PCB is made from the same material as those in the Reference series.

### Setup and Listening

The first thing one must do when setting up the PH8 is install the four tubes, which are safely packed in foam for shipping. After removing the top cover (and its attendant 14 screws), the tubes are inserted into their sockets; thankfully, both tubes and sockets are clearly labelled. After some careful

listening, I decided that an input loading of 100 Ohms most suited the Lyra Atlas I used for this review.

I usually have all my audio gear connected to the mains via my Furman 15PFI power conditioner, so that's how I performed the burn in and early evaluations. However, the note accompanying the review samples requested that a power conditioner not be used, at least not without a careful listening first. Once the burn in was complete, I compared the performance



of the PH8 both direct and via the Furman (using each of the Furman's set of power outlets). Much to my surprise, the direct connect was audibly superior—especially in the sense of detail and dynamics—so that is how I conducted all subsequent listening. The 15PFI's high current amplifier output sounded the least compromised, but even it was a small but noticeable step down in quality.

The good news is that the PH8 sounds pretty damn good out of the box; the

bad news is that Audio Research recommends 600 hours of break-in time! This is primarily due to the Teflon capacitors, whose dielectric takes a notoriously long time to form. During the break-in period the sound quality is bit of a roller coaster ride, in that it is up and down. At times the sound was good, at other times not so much: the sound became darker at times, and less involving. The key point is if you're evaluating a PH8 and considering a purchase, use the tube hour meter to ensure that it is fully broken in. To help

speed up the break-in process, I used Granite Audio's excellent burn-in CD. Note that Audio Research caution against leaving the PH8 permanently powered on, so I used the burn-in CD when not

actually listening to music until I went to bed for the night.

I evaluated the PH8 in two phases: the first by inserting it into my system in place of my usual phono stage and using my SP9, and the second by using it in conjunction with the LS17 SE.

### Listening

One of my first impressions of the PH8 was its bass, which is deep, powerful, and authoritative. By this I mean that the bass doesn't necessarily go much

deeper than other phono stages I've used, but it plumbs the depths with a greater sense of ease. A motoring analogy that springs to mind is this: both an everyday car and a sports car are capable of high speeds, but the sports car will get there with much less apparent effort than the less powerful one. The PH8 is as at ease reproducing relatively complicated bass lines (for example, those in Jean-Michel Jarre's *Equinoxe* [MFSL/Disques Dreyfus

1-227]) as it is simpler ones, like those in Mike Oldfield's *Tubular Bells* [Virgin Records V2001].

Grain is vanishingly low: the tinkling of *Tubular Bells*' opening piano and tintinnabulation of the bells are free from grit, haze, hash, and other nasties that besiege lesser units. Sometimes the time-worn analogies are the best: inserting the PH8 into my system really had the aural equivalent of removing a

pane of glass. This lack of grain makes it that much easier to not only hear the air around the instruments, but to hear the sounds of the acoustic space in which the music was recorded. It also has a way of ruthlessly revealing details about the recording to which we, as listeners, probably aren't supposed to be privy. Take, for example, part of Peter Gabriel's *Sledgehammer*, from *So* [Classic Records/Real World Records PG 7-45]. Listen carefully, and you will



clearly hear that a different take was used part way through the phrase, “You could have a big dipper/Going up and down, all around the bends”.

On the right gear, *Tubular Bells* has a very wide soundstage, extending far beyond the speakers. I pleased to report that the PH8 doesn't disappoint here either, presenting a soundstage that is as wide and as deep as the recording (and ancillary gear of course!) permits. As cavernous as the soundstage is, however, imaging isn't quite as holographic as it could be. One of my acid tests for pinpoint 3D imaging is the Nasal Choir from *Tubular Bells*. On systems with laser-like focus, I can identify the location of each pair of nostrils that make up the choir more readily than I could with the PH8 (I freely admit that my SP9 may be at least partially the culprit here).

Moving onto some classical music, I played Prokofiev's *Lieutenant Kije* [Classic Records/RCA Victor LSC-2150]; when evaluating equipment I usually just listen to the first two movements, but felt compelled to listen to the whole piece this time around. The dynamic swings are breathtaking—I almost jumped out of my skin when the bass drum whacks played during the first and third movements, even though I was expecting them! The wall of sound from the bass drum whacks and gong in *The Great Gate of Kiev* from Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* on *The Power of the Orchestra*

[Analogue Productions/RCA Victor AAPC 2659-45] are another example of the PH8's ability to recreate space.

Again, the PH8 presents a spacious and detailed soundstage. I could clearly hear the sound of the snare drum reflecting off the rear right wall slightly after the initial sound came from the rear left. Similarly, the off-stage opening trumpet solo.

Sticking with *Lieutenant Kije*, the air around the bells in *Troika* and the celeste in *Romance* was palpable, and again, there wasn't a hint of any grain that I could hear.

Switching genres once more, I listened to a couple of tracks with a very intimate sound: Bill Henderson's *Send in the Clowns* [Jazz Planet JP 0779-12] and Dusty Springfield's *The Look of Love* from the *Casino Royale* soundtrack [Classic Records/Colgems COSO 5005-45]. Accompanied by just a piano, I was almost persuaded that Bill Henderson was performing just for me in my music room. No, scratch that: Henderson wasn't in my room, I was transported to the restaurant in which this was recorded! The occasional chink of wine glasses and other subtle aural clues reminded me that this was, in fact, just a recording. Similarly, on *The Look of Love*, Dusty was right there, albeit a little larger than life.

Much of the gear to which I have the pleasure of listening and reviewing

sounds pretty good, especially in the hi-fi sense, but in my opinion it takes more than filling in a few check boxes on an aural checklist before a component can be considered as great. Not only must a great component cover all the usual hi-fi bases, it must connect listeners emotionally to the music. Kate Bush's *Wuthering Heights* from her debut album, *The Kick Inside* [EMI EMC 3223], is a particular litmus test for me when I want to assess a component's ability to convey emotion. Through the PH8, the emotion in Bush's voice, the searing, mournful guitars, and the beautiful strings and piano literally sent shivers down my spine!

All of the preceding describes my experience with the PH8 when partnered with my SP9. When I had finished evaluating the LS17 SE on its own, I substituted it for my SP9 and verified my findings.

As impressive as it was when I listened to it with the PH8 and my SP9, listening to *Equinoxe* on the PH8/LS17 SE combo was an audio treat! The opening track of the second side, *Part 5*, has a huge, immersive sound stage, with the sound of the electronic instruments whizzing back and forth from left to right, and lots of little incidental sounds and effects to delight the listener. Details buried deep in the mix are easily revealed—mercilessly revealed might be a more apt way of putting for lesser recordings.

Listening to the *Gate of Kiev* again, the bass drum whacks had a touch more weight and authority than when using my SP9. Ditto for when listening to *Lieutenant Kije*.

It's not just the bass that improved when I substituted the LS17 SE for the SP9 in my system: treble clarity and sweetness, midrange bloom, air around the instruments, the palpability of the recording venue, the imaging, and the soundstage width and depth were all taken up a notch or two.

On Sheffield Lab's direct-to-disc recording of Wagner's *Ride of the Valkyries* [Sheffield Lab 7], the rasping from the brass instruments was particularly realistic, and the tintinnabulation from the triangle was crystal clear without any hint of being over etched or too bright.

For a change of pace I spun some jazz records next. First up was Analogue Productions' excellent 45-RPM edition of The Oscar Peterson Trio's *We Get Requests* [Analogue Productions V/V6-8606], specifically the opening track on side three, *You Look Good to Me*. The PH8/LS17 SE combo revealed numerous details, for example, when the music picks up the tempo after the beautiful intro you can really tell the bassist, Ray Brown, is enjoying himself by the sound of his humming which accompanies his playing!

As I listened to record after record, it became all too easy to forget that I was supposed to be listening critically rather than enjoying myself, so engrossed in the music as I was. In fact, for a few hours before sitting down to finish writing this review, I cranked up the volume and listened to a few of my old faves, including several 12" singles from synth-pop groups like ABC, the Human League, New Order, Trans-X, and Yazoo. Audiophile tendencies be damned, I was having *fun*, and at the end of the day, that is what this hobby of ours is all about, right?!

### **Verdict**

The Audio Research PH8 phono stage is very good sounding, very well made phono stage, and will be at home in systems comprised of the finest of ancillary components. The fact that it has easily adjustable input loading, a nifty tube hour meter (both available from your listening position via remote control, no less), and sufficient gain for all but the lowest output moving coil cartridges is icing on the cake. Yes, another input or two would've been nice, as would the addition of balanced outputs—but that's where the PH8's bigger brother, the Reference Phono 2 SE, comes in and I can't wait to get my hands on one (and its matching line stage).

The PH8 earns my highest recommendation; if you're considering

a phono stage at or anywhere near this price level, the gentleman in the Doug Brady advert I mentioned in the opening paragraph of this review said it best: "You really must hear this". As for me, I'll be hanging on to the PH8 and LS17 SE for use as my references for as long as Audio Research will let me keep them!

## Specifications

**Description** Tube phono stage.

**Frequency response**  $\pm 0.2$  dB of RIAA, 10 to 60 kHz; 3 dB points below 0.3 Hz and above 400 kHz.

**Gain** 58 dB at 1 kHz.

**Distortion**  $< 0.005\%$  at 0.5 V RMS 1 kHz output.

**Noise** 0.2  $\mu$ V equivalent input noise, IHF weighted, shorted input (74 dB below 1 mV 1 kHz input).

**Input impedance** 100, 200, 500, 1000 and 47K Ohms.

**Input capacitance** 200 pF.

**Phono equalisation** RIAA.

**Output polarity** Non-inverting.

**Maximum input voltage** 70 mV RMS @ 1 kHz (180 mV RMS at 10,000 Hz).

**Tube complement** Two 6H30s in the gain stage, 6550 and 6H30 as HV regulators.

**Dimensions (whd)** 470 mm x 132 mm x 305 mm.

**Weight** 6.8 kg.

**Finishes** Natural and black anodised aluminum.

**Serial number of unit reviewed** 31405802.

**Price** \$6,995.

**Warranty** Three years non-transferable (90 days for tubes).

## Manufacturer

Audio Research Corporation

3900 Annapolis Lane North

Plymouth, MN 55447-5447

USA

(763) 577-9700

www.audioresearch.com

## Associated Equipment

**Analogue source** Forsell Air Reference Mk 2 turntable and arm.

**Phono cartridge** Lyra Atlas.

**Phono stage** Allnic Audio Labs H-1200.

**Preamp** Audio Research SP-9 Mk 2, Audio Research LS17 SE.

**Power amplifiers** PrimaLuna ProLogue Sevens.

**Speakers** MartinLogan Spires.

**Cables** Phono: Nordost Frey. Interconnects: Nordost Frey. Speaker: Nordost Frey. AC: stock.

**Accessories** Target and SolidSteel equipment stands; Mission Isoplat; Furman Elite 15-PFi power conditioner; Audio Physic cartridge demagnetiser; Acoustech carbon fibre brush; Last record and stylus cleaning products; Audio Additives digital stylus force gauge; Spin Clean Record Washer Mk II.

# Audio Research LS17 SE

## Line Stage

By Rich Teer



One of the decisions a vinyl-spinning audiophile must make when contemplating a new preamplifier is that of an integrated preamp (complete with phono stage) vs separate phono and line stages. The integrated approach certainly has its benefits, namely less space requirements and a (usually) smaller price tag (especially if one includes the sometimes not inconsiderable expense of an extra power cable and an extra pair of interconnects). It was partially the latter of these that drew me to choose an Audio Research SP9 as my reference preamp a few years ago.

Assuming space is not an issue, one can always add an external phono stage later as funds allow (this is what I have done). Space and cost considerations aside, though, there's no denying that if sound quality is one's highest priority, separate phono and line stages are arguably the way to go.

As I recount in my review of the Audio Research PH8 phono stage elsewhere in this issue, my receipt of the LS17 SE review sample was a happy side benefit of reviewing the PH8. Simply put, I didn't want my SP9 to compromise the PH8's abilities. As good as it is, at the end of

the day the SP9 was Audio Research's entry level integrated preamp, and cost about one-third the PH8 does now (excluding the effects of inflation).

### Technical Details

The LS17 SE is the entry-level model in Audio Research's quartet of line stages, its bigger brothers being the LS27, the Reference 5 SE, and the recently introduced two-chassis Reference 10. It has two pairs of balanced inputs and four pairs of single-ended inputs, and two pairs of balanced outputs and one pair of single-ended outputs (there are also a set of single-ended record and

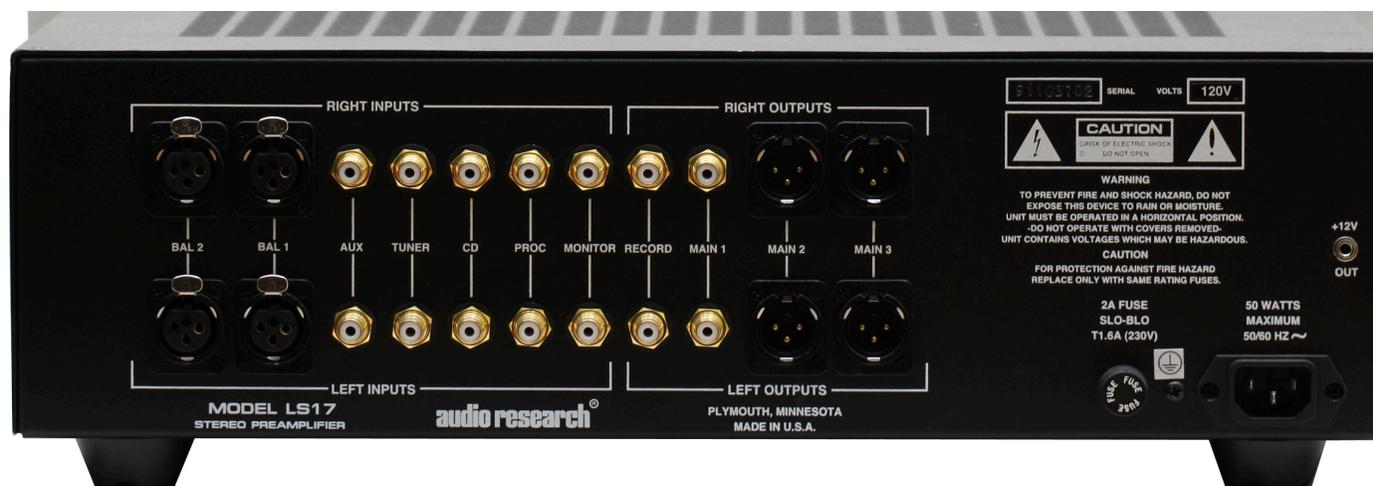
monitor inputs and outputs). One pair of single-ended inputs is a unity gain home theatre bypass, labelled Proc. This allows the LS17 SE to be used in systems that are both stereo and multichannel; in the latter, the front left and right channel outputs from one's surround sound processor would be connected to the LS17 SE's Proc inputs with the former controlling the volume level.

The back panel houses the plethora of gold-plated RCA and XLR input and output sockets, and a 15A IEC mains socket. There is also a 12V trigger output for controlling other components.

Like other ARC gear, the front panel (which is made from a 6 mm thick sheet of machined aluminum) is available with either a natural or black anodised finish; the purchaser can also specify the finish of the front handles (natural or black anodised). The default is for the handles to match the front panel, but I find black handles with a natural faceplate rather fetching (this is probably a holdover from my appreciation of the older Audio Research aesthetic). In addition to the handles, the front panel is also home to a display which uses LEDs to display the current input source and volume

setting (there are also LEDs for mute, processor, and monitor).

Flanking the display on either side are a pair of control knobs. The left knob adjusts the volume (in 104 steps), whereas the one on the right selects the input. Below the display are four round aluminum buttons which control the power, monitor, processor, and mute functions. Although the buttons are perfectly serviceable and make sense in the context of a remote-controllable device, I really missed the silky feel of



my SP9's clunky toggle switches when operating the LS17 SE's buttons. Ah, such is the price of progress, I guess!

The front panel controls are duplicated on the included remote control, although each input has its own button rather than mimicking the sequential nature of the front panel's input selector. I'm obliged to mention that I think the plastic remote control, like that which comes with the PH8, feels a bit cheap for a product in this price category and quality aspiration. Fortunately, this

feeling doesn't extend to the LS17 SE itself, which exhibits a very fine build quality.

Inside the case we find a single large circuit board. About one third of the circuit board implements the power supply, the remainder being used for the audio circuitry. The solid state power supply features a custom transformer, multiple stages of regulation, and a fairly generous capacitor bank. Each channel of the non-inverting Class A audio circuit is built around a JFET-

based front end and a 6H30P dual triode, and high quality components – including Teflon coupling capacitors – are used throughout.

The differences between the SE and non-SE editions of the LS17 are essentially the updated cosmetics to the front panel (bringing it in line with other contemporary Audio Research models), and upgraded coupling and Teflon bypass capacitors. Non-SE LS17s may be factory upgraded to the SE; interested owners should contact their Audio Research dealer for more details and pricing information.

## Setup and Listening

The first thing one must do when setting up the LS17 SE is install the two tubes,

which are safely packed in foam for shipping. After removing the top cover (and its attendant 14 screws), the tubes are inserted into their sockets. The tubes and sockets are clearly marked, so this is an easy task for even the most wary tube neophyte.

What Audio Research giveth with one hand, they take away with the other: although the LS17 SE sounds fine out of the box, it doesn't sound its best until it is fully broken in. There's nothing unusual with this (pretty much all gear doesn't sound its best until it has been broken in), but Audio Research

recommends a full 600 hours of break in time! This is primarily due to the Teflon capacitors, whose dielectric takes a notoriously long time to form. The sound quality during the break-in period is bit up and down. At times the sound was good, at other times not so much: the sound became darker at times, and less involving. The key point is if you're evaluating a LS17 SE and considering a purchase, make sure that it is fully broken in. To help speed up the break-in process, I used Granite Audio's excellent burn-in CD. Note that Audio Research caution against leaving the LS17 SE permanently powered on,

so I only used the burn-in CD when not actually listening to music until I went to bed for the night.

As with the PH8, I evaluated the LS17 SE in two phases: the first by inserting it into my system in place of my SP9 using my usual Allnic H-1200 phono stage, and the second by using it in conjunction with the PH8.

Like the PH8, the LS17 SE is sensitive to power conditioning. After careful evaluation, my observations matched Audio Research's recommendations: i.e., the LS17 SE is best used without



a power conditioner (or, perhaps more precisely, without the Furman 15PFi; YMMV with other power conditioners).

## Listening

My first impression of the LS17 SE was that it was not spectacular, in that it doesn't shout "Here I am!" in a hi-fi sense. Lest I be misunderstood, let me be clear: this comment is *not* a slight against the LS17 SE, rather it is a compliment. The LS17 SE is polite, unobtrusive, and gets out of the music's way.

It's noise floor is very low, allowing instruments and voices to fully form out of the blackness. The decay of bells and the like is longer, by which I mean that they're audible for longer because they're not being truncated by noise and other artifacts. This was something which I noticed not by the sound of noise from my SP9, but from its absence with the LS17 SE.

The LS17 SE's transparency to the source means that little details, the likes of which I hadn't heard before, are revealed as if for the first time. An example of this is can be heard in Mike Oldfield's *Tubular Bells* [Virgin Records V2001]: just before he starts playing the acoustic guitar after the gongs prior to the finale's intro, you can hear his fingers on the guitar's fret board as he gets ready to play. Remember that I've listened to *Tubular Bells* countless dozens of times—it has been one of my references for years—so I find

new details being revealed to be very impressive.

After *Tubular Bells* I switched to another (relatively new) favourite of mine: Prokofiev's *Lieutenant Kije* [Classic Records/RCA Victor LSC-2150]. This is one of the records I use to test how well a component images, and in this department the LS17 SE is no slouch. The opening trumpet is clearly off stage to the left, but the reverb from both it and the opening snare drum (which is also stage left) can be heard from the rear right of the stage. This gives the listener an insight into the recording venue's acoustic envelope.

Sticking with imaging, it was easy to locate the various instruments in the sound field: violins in an arc near the front, brasses to the right and behind the strings, woodwinds towards the centre, and so on.

Another audio attribute I test for using *Lieutenant Kije* is bass weight and dynamics. The drum whacks in the first and third movements should have a visceral, almost palpable, quality to them, but they didn't have quite the weight and didn't engender a "jump out of your skin" reaction with my usual phono stage. I'm inclined to attribute this more to the phono stage than the LS17 SE: the H-1200 is a good phono stage, but not a *great* one.

Thinking that I had identified a trend, I put Kate Bush's *The Kick Inside* [EMI

EMC 3223] on the platter and listened to *Wuthering Heights*. The tell-tale goosebumps I get when everything is just so were hinted at, but didn't appear. Again, I'm disinclined to blame the LS17 SE, which was just reproducing what it was fed from further up in the audio chain. It was time to up the ante, so I replaced my usual phono stage with the PH8. Coupled with the PH8, the LS17 SE's strengths were (if you excuse the pun) amplified, but rather than repeat myself here, please read my PH8 review elsewhere in this issue for my description of how the two components sounded together.

## Verdict

The Audio Research LS17 SE is a fine-sounding, moderately-priced tube line stage which benefits from being used with the finest ancillary components. Its excellent build quality, enough inputs and outputs for all but the most complex of systems, and nifty features such as remote control, and a pair of balanced inputs and outputs only add to its value proposition. I have no hesitation in recommending the LS17 SE to prospective purchasers, and can only imagine what its bigger brothers can accomplish!

## Specifications

**Description** Tube line stage.

**Frequency response** + 0, -3 dB 0.5 to 200 kHz.

**Gain** 12 dB (balanced), 6 dB (single-ended) main outputs, 0 dB for tape output and processor input.

**Distortion** < 0.01% at 2 V RMS balanced output.

**Noise** 1.7  $\mu$ V RMS residual IHF weighted balanced equivalent input noise with volume at 1 (109 dB below 2 V RMS output).

**Input impedance** 120K Ohms balanced, 60K Ohms single-ended.

**Output impedance** 600 Ohms balanced, 300 Ohms single-ended.

**Output polarity** Non-inverting.

**Maximum input voltage** 20 V RMS balanced, 10 V RMS single-ended.

**Crosstalk** -80 dB or better at 1K Hz and 10K Hz.

**Tube complement** Two 6H30s in the gain stage.

**Dimensions (whd)** 470 mm x 132 mm x 305 mm.

**Weight** 5.9 kg.

**Finishes** Natural and black anodised aluminum.

**Serial number of unit reviewed** 91103702.

**Price** \$3,995.

**Warranty** Three years non-transferable (90 days for tubes).

## Manufacturer

Audio Research Corporation

3900 Annapolis Lane North

Plymouth, MN 55447-5447

USA

(763) 577-9700

www.audioresearch.com

## Associated Equipment

**Analogue source** Forsell Air Reference Mk 2 turntable and arm.

**Phono cartridge** Lyra Atlas.

**Phono stage** Allnic Audio Labs H-1200, Audio Research PH8.

**Preamp** Audio Research SP-9 Mk 2.

**Power amplifiers** PrimaLuna ProLogue Sevens.

**Speakers** MartinLogan Spires.

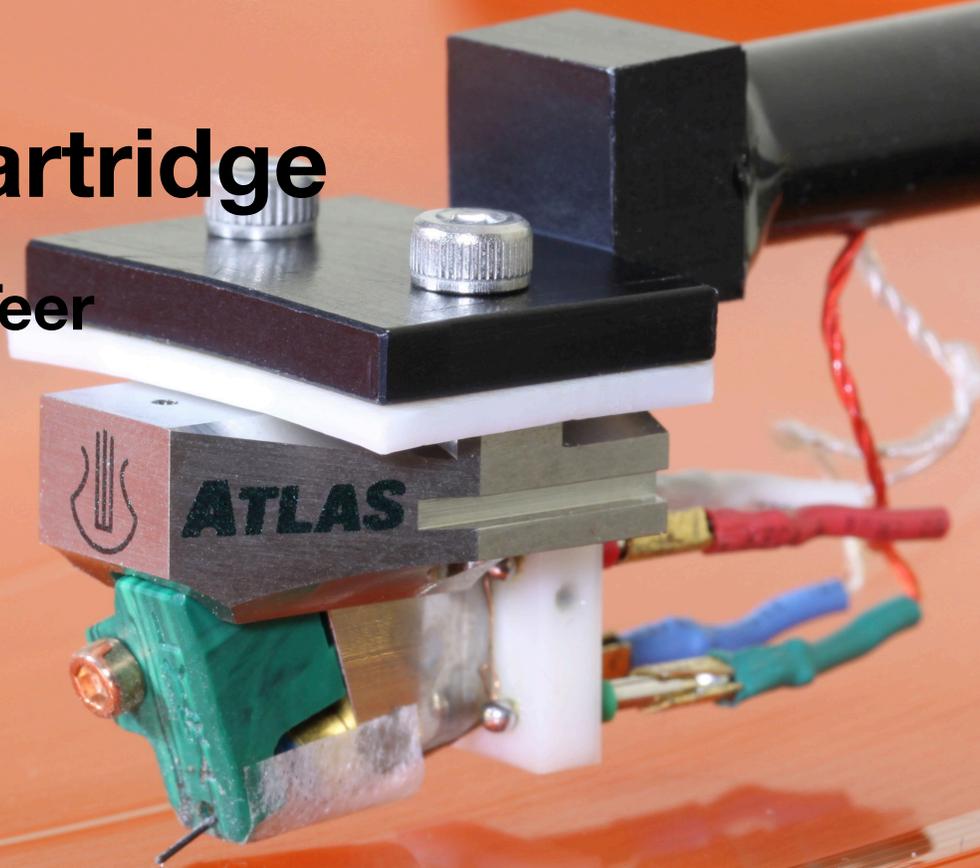
**Cables** Phono: Nordost Frey. Interconnects: Nordost Frey. Speaker: Nordost Frey. AC: stock.

**Accessories** Target and SolidSteel equipment stands; Mission Isoplat; Furman Elite 15-PFi power conditioner; Audio Physic cartridge demagnetiser; Acoustech carbon fibre brush; Last record and stylus cleaning products; Audio Additives digital stylus force gauge; Spin Clean Record Washer Mk II.

# Lyra Atlas

## MC Cartridge

By Rich Teer



There's an old adage from the IT world (that is usually expressed as the acronym GIGO), which is, "garbage in, garbage out". The idea behind this phrase is straight forward: if the data you feed into your program have errors, the output will be similarly errornous. Although not everyone subscribes to it, I think this mindset is particularly applicable to audio because even the best amp and speakers in the world can't reproduce information that

the front end (be it analogue or digital) doesn't retrieve from the source (or messes up after it has been retrieved). In other words, the theoretically perfect speaker and amplifiers can do no more than faithfully reproduce an (at best) inaccurate signal. Ergo, GIGO.

If you subscribe to the notion that the source is the most important part of the audio reproduction chain under our control (after all, most of us have no input

into the care that goes into the actual recording, mastering, or pressing of a record), the next logical question would be, "what are the relative importance of the turntable, tone arm, and cartridge?". I'm inclined to think that they're more or less equally important, but if pressed I would probably agree that the turntable itself is the most important—with the proviso that the arm and cartridge are very close behind.

As a transducer, the cartridge's job is deceptively simple: it just has to extract all the information encoded within the record's groove, without adding any signal of its own. Of course, if the task were that easy in practice all cartridges would be perfect!

Through a happy quirk of fate quite a few years ago, I was in the position of being able to purchase an example of the then recently released Lyra Parnassus. Understandably held in very high esteem by the hi-fi press at the time (both on this side of the Atlantic and in the UK, where I lived at the time), the Parnassus was the successor to the Clavis as Lyra's top-of-the-line cartridge. Mounted on my Forsell Air Reference air bearing turntable and arm, I enjoyed my Parnassus for a very long period of time, until about 18 months ago when the suspension on my beloved Parnassus failed and I had to investigate a replacement. I strongly considered acquiring a Lyra Olympos SL, but their extreme rarity led me to look at Lyra's new flagship model, the Atlas, instead. Rather than replacing the then-current flagship Titan *i*, the Atlas fits into Lyra's model lineup above the Titan *i*.

## Technical Details

Designed by Jonathan Carr, the Atlas is claimed to be the world's first asymmetric MC cartridge. This asymmetry manifests itself in two important ways. The first is that standing waves inside the cartridge body are suppressed by

the use of differently-shaped internal structures. This reduction in standing waves is said to create a cartridge body that is less resonant and more neutral than would otherwise be possible. The second way the asymmetry manifests itself is that the front magnet carrier and its associated mounting system is not in line with the cantilever assembly. Lyra claims that this opens up a direct path between latter and the tonearm so that vibrations from the cantilever can be quickly drained away once they've been converted into electrical signals, further suppressing resonances.

Lyra is still the only cartridge manufacturer to mount the cantilever assembly directly into the body. In this manner, they are able to achieve a seamless, rigid connection between the cantilever assembly and the tonearm, the effectiveness of which is claimed to have been improved by the Atlas' asymmetric structure. Spurious resonances are further controlled by the use of a narrow mounting area, which engenders a tighter coupling to the headshell and facilitates the transfer of vibrational energy into the tonearm.

The Atlas inherits several design features from the Titan *i*, specifically the latter's yokeless dual-magnet system, diamond-coated boron rod cantilever, and its variable-radius line-contact stylus. On the other hand, the Atlas' double knife-edge cantilever assembly mounting structure has been revised for greater rigidity, and the

signal coil system is all-new. Where the Titan *i* uses a square coil former, the Atlas uses an X-shaped one. This allows each channel to operate with greater independence from the other, which engenders better tracking, tighter channel matching, improved separation, and lower distortion due to crosstalk.

At 0.56 mV, the Atlas' output is 12% higher than that of the Titan *i*, despite the amount of wire in the coils being reduced by 22% (which further improves tracking performance). This is attributed to generator coils' increased performance and efficiency.

One of the problems with most MC cartridges is that the coils are aligned such that they are in the neutral position with respect to the magnets when the cartridge is not being used. The trouble with this approach is that the alignment will stray from neutral the minute pressure is applied to the stylus—for example, when playing a record. Lyra solved this problem when they introduced their New Angle technology with the Delos a few years ago. This New Angle technology, which is also used in the Atlas, mechanically pre-biases the coils so that they are perfectly aligned to the front and rear magnets when a record is being played. This is claimed to equalise out discrepancies in vertical and horizontal compliances, and enable the coils to move with equal ease in all directions.

Like the Titan *i* and Olympos, the Atlas' body is hewn from a solid billet of titanium, a meticulous process that uses both contact and non-contact machining. Unlike the Titan *i* and Olympos, however, most of the Atlas' body surfaces are not parallel, avoiding dimensions that are multiples of others, and by adding a pre-stressed phase-interference resonance-controlling system, resonances have been further inhibited.

From the X-shaped coil former, the signal wires connect to the four platinum-plated output pins.

### Setup and Listening

Setting up a cartridge is not necessarily a difficult task, but *is* an exacting, and often time-consuming one. One must also consider their fragility: you certainly need a clear head and a calm and relaxed mindset when handling a delicate item that's smaller than your thumb, especially when said item is worth in the region of \$10,000! A word to the wise: find a local analogue expert to set your cartridge up for you; if you feel able to do it yourself, make sure you wear short sleeves! I've heard too many stories of cantilevers being broken off and being sent flying across the room because they became snagged on long sleeves (although I have personally managed to avoid this malady so far, fortunately)...

A quick word on packaging, if I may: my Parnassus came mounted on a little

slab of granite, in a carved wooden box. I was hoping that the Atlas would be similarly packaged, as befits a \$9,500 flagship cartridge, but it was not. Instead the cartridge is mounted in a sheet of foam and placed in a cardboard box. Don't get me wrong: the packaging is obviously up to the task for which it was designed, but I think a product this special deserves equally special packaging.

Talking of packaging, in addition to the cartridge itself, the Atlas comes with several sets of mounting screws, a stylus guard, a cleaning brush, and a bottle of Stylus Performance Treatment (SPT), Lyra's water-based, non-alcoholic stylus cleaning fluid.

I installed the Atlas in my Forsell's air bearing arm, double checked the overhang, VTA, and tracking weight, and started listening to some tunes. After allowing the cartridge to burn in (and, perhaps more importantly, giving the suspension time to loosen up) for 50 hours or so, I re-checked all the settings, and settled on a VTF 1.72 g (the amount recommended by Lyra).

My early listening to the Atlas was performed using the Allnic H-1200 and Simaudio 110LP phono stages. While they are both competent performers, neither of these is sufficient to let the Atlas shine. I was rather fortunate to have Audio Research's PH8 phono stage and LS17 SE line stage arrive early in the review process; both of

these pieces were used for all of my serious listening, with the PH8's loading set to 100 Ohms.

### Listening

Rather than reiterate how the Atlas fared with some of my usual test records (e.g., Mike Oldfield's *Tubular Bells*), descriptions of which can be found in my review of the ARC PH8 elsewhere in this issue, I thought I'd play some other favourite records of mine, starting with Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* [Fonè 87 F 04].

Recorded live in the presence of an audience (a fact that is clearly audible due to the number of muffled coughs and other related slight audio intrusions associated with live audiences), the Atlas allows the acoustics of the recording venue to shine through. Of course, being written for a small ensemble, the soundstage isn't vast, but the instrument positioning is precise. For something on a grander scale, I listened to the first two movements of Herbert von Karajan's (conducting the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra) reading of Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony* [Deutsche Grammophon 104301/8]. Here the scale was much bigger (as one would expect!).

To get an idea of how well the Atlas handled the lower frequencies, I listened to Jean-Michel Jarre's *Revolutions* [Disques Dreyfus 837 098-1]), which features some great subterranean bass that gives the impression of a behemoth-sized steam engine that is

grinding to a standstill. As I had hoped, the Atlas managed to handily surpass the Parnassus in this respect, and the Parnassus is no slouch! With the volume cranked up, I could literally feel the bass' vibration in my music room floor. This in itself wouldn't be that impressive were it not for the fact that my music room is in my basement: I live on the side of a mountain, so not only is the floor made from a giant slab of reinforced concrete, but the bedrock itself had to be blasted out for the foundation!

As gratifying as the bass was, I couldn't help but think that the Atlas was delivering more than the rest of my system—specifically my amps and speakers—could take advantage of. The PrimaLuna ProLogue Seven monoblocks that are my current references are no slouches, but I'm starting perceive them as the weak point in my system. Contributing to this is the fact that I don't have subwoofers in my system, and there's only so much air one pair of 10" woofers can move. (You could be forgiven—not to mention, not wrong!—for reading the start of my next upgrade justification between those lines!)

Deep bass per se is of no use if it can't carry a tune, so I listened to *Arena* from Colourbox's eponymous debut LP [4AD CAD508]. The tablas and synthesised bass are very satisfyingly musical when the Atlas is near the beginning of the playback chain.

Moving on, the next track I played was *Scarborough Fair/Canticle* from Simon and Garfunkel's original sound track recording for *The Graduate* [Columbia Records OS 3180]. What an audio smorgasbord! The tintinnabulation of bells off to the left, a jangling harpsichord to the right, and layer upon layer of texture: all were laid bare with the Atlas.

Although they are an important—not to mention, fun—part of the musical experience, bass and thunderous dynamics do not music make. Sure, bass provides the music's foundation, but just as important (if not more so) are the mids and the highs, the former especially so. Not only is this the range where our hearing acuity is at its best, but it is also where most of the music will be found. With this in mind, the next record I played was Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade* [Classic Records/RCA Victor LSC-2446], as interpreted by Fritz Reiner conducting the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. Even though it is not without its share of dynamic contrasts, there are parts where just a violin and harp are playing. The Atlas handled these with aplomb. Just as it can be like a sledgehammer when the music demands it, the Atlas is also capable of a feather light touch when necessary.

In terms of overall balance, I'd place the Atlas firmly in the neutral camp. To some people, the word neutral is used as a polite euphemism for "slightly

lean" or "thin", but let me assure you that this is emphatically not the case here: lovers of euphonic colouration should look elsewhere!

One of my favourite albums is Dire Straits' *Love Over Gold* [Vertigo 25PP-60], especially the first side. Although it is well recorded—the atmospherics on *Private Investigations* are hair-raisingly eerie when using the Atlas—I can't use it as one of my formal evaluation records because I find the music just too involving, especially *Telegraph Road*'s five-minute climactic coda! Listening to the album via the Atlas was even more involving, and more fun, than I expected: I see quite a few more evenings spinning this record in my future!

I could wax lyrical about the Atlas for countless more paragraphs, citing numerous more musical references, but I think you get the picture. The Atlas is capable of resolving deep bass, sweet midranges, and delicate highs, with consummate ease. It is capable of reproducing thunderous dynamics as well as the smallest whisper, and has laser-like imaging. More importantly, it communicates with the listener, imparting all the emotion captured by the recording.

## Verdict

I've tried to describe the sound of the Lyra Atlas, but if the truth be told I'm not sure I've heard it at its best, despite using the excellent PH8 and

# ALLNIC AUDIO

LISTEN DEEPLY INTO THE MUSIC

[hammertoneaudio.com](http://hammertoneaudio.com)



LS17 SE preamps from Audio Research. Not only can cartridges of the Atlas' level of achievement benefit from the use of exemplary ancillary components, they *demand* them. I'm sure that with the Audio Research Reference Phono 2 SE (or their newly-announced Reference Phono 10), or any other upper-echelon amplification, even more performance can be wrought from the Atlas.

If you can afford a cartridge in this elevated price range, and if the rest of your system is up to the task, you really must add the Atlas to your shortlist. I'm not particularly wealthy, so the Atlas' asking price represents a *significant* investment for me. But at the end of the day the requisite sacrifices were made and I put my money where my mouth is: I bought the review sample, and I can't think of any stronger recommendation than that.

## Specifications

**Description** Medium weight, medium compliance, low-impedance MC cartridge.

**Frequency response** 10 Hz to 50 kHz.

**Output voltage** 0.56 mV.

**Channel separation** 35 dB or better at 1 kHz.

**Compliance** 12 x 10<sup>-6</sup> cm/dyne at 100 Hz.

**Stylus size** 3 x 70 µm.

**Tracking force** 1.65 to 1.75 g.

**Recommended tracking force** 1.72 g.

**Recommended loading** 104 Ohms to 887 Ohms into an MC input, 5 Ohms to 15 Ohms via step-up transformer.

**Weight** 11.6 g, excluding stylus guard.

**Serial number of unit reviewed** AT0042.

**Price** \$9,500.

**Warranty** One year non-transferable.

## Manufacturer

Lyra Co. Ltd

Tokyo

Japan

[www.lyraconnoisseur.com](http://www.lyraconnoisseur.com)

## North American Distributor

AudioQuest

2621 White Road

Irvine, CA 92614

USA

(949) 585-0111

[www.lyraaudio.com](http://www.lyraaudio.com)

## Associated Equipment

**Analogue source** Forsell Air Reference Mk 2 turntable and arm.

**Phono cartridge** Lyra Atlas.

**Phono stage** Audio Research PH8, Allnic Audio Labs H-1200.

**Preamp** Audio Research SP-9 Mk 2, Audio Research LS17 SE.

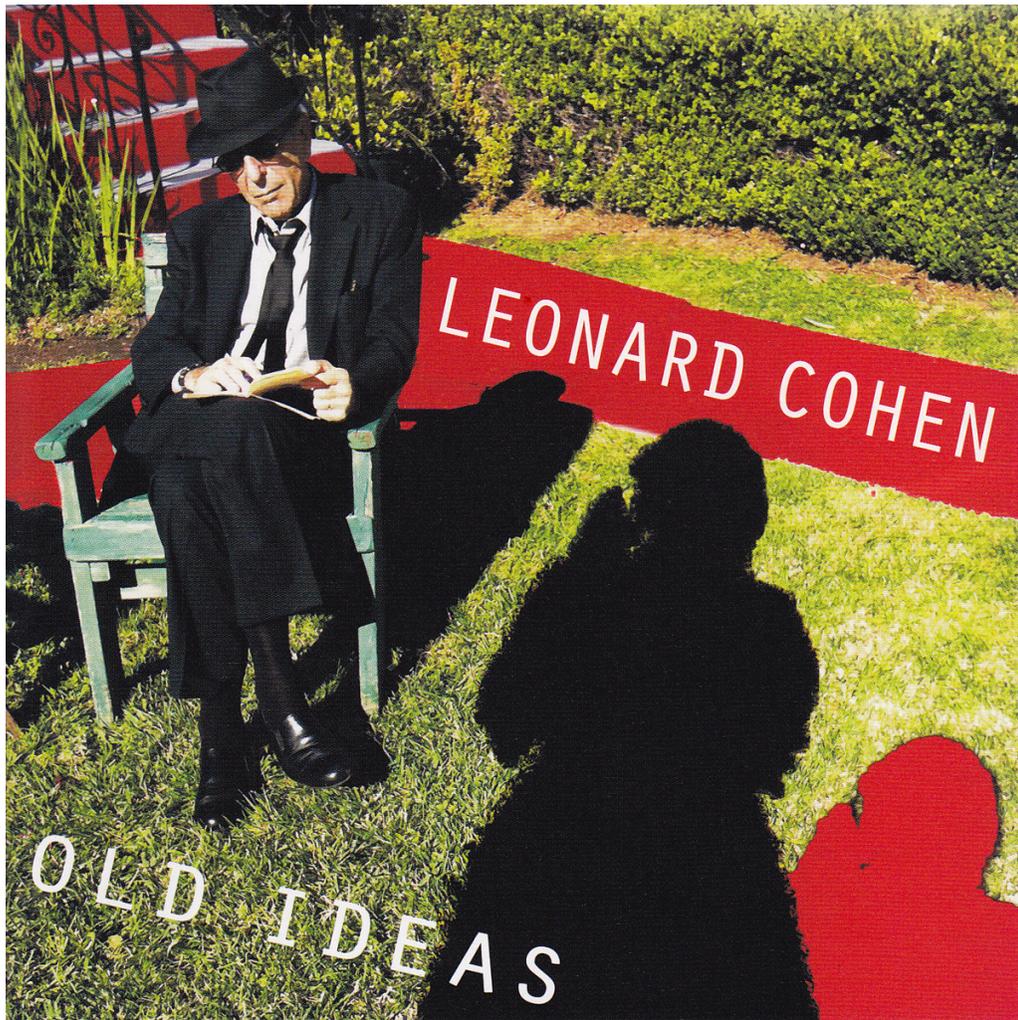
**Power amplifiers** PrimaLuna ProLogue Sevens.

**Speakers** MartinLogan Spires.

**Cables** Phono: Nordost Frey. Interconnects: Nordost Frey. Speaker: Nordost Frey. AC: stock.

**Accessories** Target and SolidSteel equipment stands; Mission Isoplat; Furman Elite 15-PFi power conditioner; Audio Physic cartridge demagnetiser; Acoustech carbon fibre brush; Last record and stylus cleaning products; Audio Additives digital stylus force gauge; Spin Clean Record Washer Mk II.

# Featured Record Review



## Leonard Cohen

*Old Ideas*

Columbia Records (33-RPM 180g LP)

88697986711

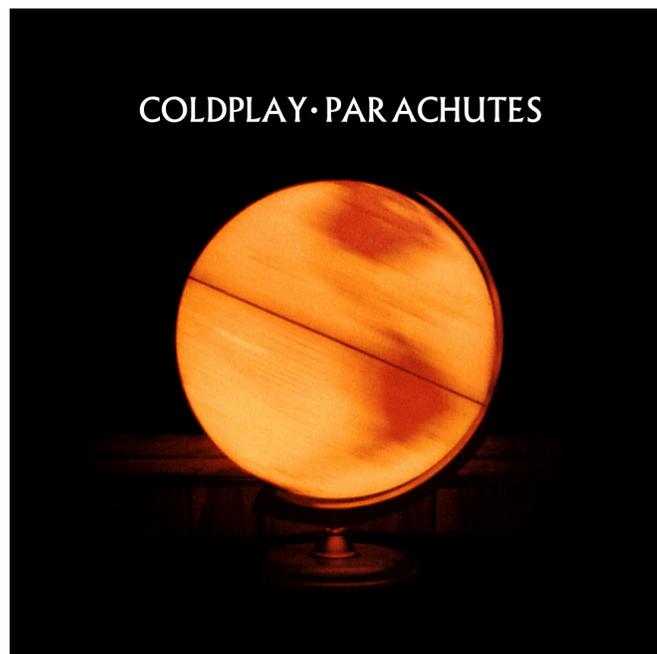
*Old Ideas* is Cohen's twelfth studio album. It consists of ten tracks, including (the self-referential?) *Going Home*, *Amen*, and *Show Me the Place*, the latter of which includes guest lyrics from long-time Cohen friend and collaborator, Jennifer Warnes.

The sound quality is very good, suiting the simple musical arrangements and Cohen's raspy, almost spoken, singing.

The album includes a copy of the CD, something I wholeheartedly endorse and prefer to the more usual MP3

download codes. Having a CD enables listeners to rip the music to whatever quality they prefer (I, of course, rip only to uncompressed AIFF files!). **Rich Teer**

# Rock Record Reviews



**Coldplay**

*Parachutes*

Capitol Records (33-RPM 180g LP)

724352778317

Originally released in 2000, *Parachutes* is Coldplay's debut LP. The album contains ten tracks, including their first top-five hit, *Yellow*.

The music can be described as a combination between alternate rock and Britpop, and many of the songs have a slower, almost melancholy, tempo. In an interesting contrast to the music, many of the tracks feature lyrics that are positive or happy in feel, a combination which is somewhat reminiscent (to this listener, anyway) of the late Lou Reed's *Perfect Day*.

The sound quality is good (but not exceptionally so), with reasonable

dynamics. As is to be expected for music of this genre, image is pretty flat in terms of depth, but left-to-right panning is used to good effect. **RT**



**Lee "Scratch" Perry**

*Masterpiece*

Born Free Records (33-RPM 180g EP)

603408400412

This eight-track EP of reggae-style songs contains several mixes of a track called *Mr. Upsetter*, and several other songs. Although reggae isn't really my cup of tea the music is quite enjoyable, especially the opening track, *Soul Man*.

As for sound quality, it's actually pretty good! One thing's for sure: your system's bass will get a good workout!

**RT**

## Advertisers Index

Audioscape Canada.....	8
<i>www.audioscape.ca</i>	
Hammertone Audio .....	29
<i>www.hammertoneaudio.com</i>	
THE Show.....	2
<i>www.theshowlasvegas.com</i>	

