

IN THE TEST

Accustic Arts
Preamp III

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Referenzklasse

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Accustic Arts Preamp III

EFFECTIVE POWER
IN PERFECTION

HAPTIC
DELIGHT

Generous line-up
of outputs including
headphone jacket



The Accoustic Arts Preamp III: Like all audio devices from the manufacturer from Lauffen, this audio preamplifier is a beauty made from aluminium and chrome. Optical highlights are the case with a noble finish, striking knobs in shiny chrome along with artistic engravings and millings next to the new display in OLED technology.



Accoustic Arts Preamp III

Effective power in perfection

A tidbit from Lauffen: The high-end manufacturer Accoustic Arts from Southern Germany comes with a brand-new, breathtaking Preamp III belonging to the top end of the reference class. Along with audiophile excellence, it offers variety and flexibility of connections, delicate features, including a modern and noble presence, by adding the new display in high-resolution. That adds up to the list of highlights and is a pleasure to the viewer. We experienced the artistic acoustic performance of the Accoustic Arts Preamp III in our lite listening room. In our lite listening room, we took the chance to experience the art and acoustic achievements of the Accoustic Arts Preamp III.

Nurturing this claim is mandatory: For almost a quarter of a century, Accoustic Arts put great efforts and meticulousness into the manual producing their components. The name of the company is short for „Accurate Acoustic Arts“. For this kind of accurate arts in sound, the high-end manufacturer earned an excellent reputation worldwide. Also, Preamp III is committed to this claim. Regarding appearance, quality of materials, and craftsmanship, they fully accomplished their mission: We already had the Player II and the combination Tube Preamp II MK2/Mono II in our testing facility. And like them, this stereo preamplifier is as well a dream in aluminium and chrome. But this time, Accoustic Arts tops the self-imposed standard with an impressive, almost reli-

ef-like multilayer structure of the cabinet. A massive effort - and a perfect finish! That also applies to the polishing: The perfectly micro-polished and anodised surfaces of the thick-walled body show a softly noble shimmer along with a refined line pattern.

Haptic delight

Of course, the Preamp III also features the attractive company emblem prominently: The symbol is graved on both side panels and milled into the upper enclosure. The logo is fitted with a perforated grille to allow the underneath electronics to breathe. In the front, we find the next typical Accoustic Arts IDs: rotary knobs made from massive brass coated in chrome. Using those heavy selectors is an absolute haptic delight: The „Input Select“ on the left is wonderfully easy to turn and offers a slight bouncing and perfectly precise raftering. With each tiny turn of the knob, we can listen to the switching relays inside as a satisfying calming response: The signal way gets perfectly opened and closed mechanically. On the right, the volume knob works as refined. Here we can adjust the volume in tiny steps from zero to 115. behind the front panel, a new digital four-channel adjustment takes place. It grants perfect precision and optimal synchronisation. Nevertheless, the control delivers a satisfying analogue feeling to the system.



On the top, the nicely milled logo also serves to ventilate the electronics. You can snap a slight glimpse of it from the blue glow emitted through the dotted grille underneath.



The massive „Input Select“ knob selects the input through a slight turn. Pushing it will navigate into the „Settings“. The „Phones On“ button activates the headphones jack while muting the outputs of the Preamp III.

Highlight in high-resolution: the OLED-Display

The display is the new eye-catching feature of the Pre-amp III: A high-resolution OLED display replaces the former used small blue bar segmented LED display. Brilliant white and fine pixels, crisp sharpness of the display, bright contrast and low reflection of the glass now delivers much higher readability. Thanks to letters and cyphers in much higher resolution, it offers much more elegance. Also attractive is the change of settings, visualised by sliding letters. You can instantly realise this feature when waking up the preamplifier. The Accustic Arts logo rises from the darkness to shine on the screen. This new display helps the Preamp III to feature a modern visual. On top of that, it is highly versatile: You can adjust display brightness and how long information shows with a five-step-timeout.



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Model:	Accustic Arts Preamp III
Category:	Pre-Amp (Stereo)
Price:	19.800,00 Euro
Warranty:	2 Jahre
Finishes:	Silver, Black
Distribution:	Accustic Arts, Lauffen Telefon +49 7133 97477-0 www.accusticarts.de

Equipment

Dimensions:	128 x 482 x 379 mm
Weight:	13,6 kg
Inputs:	3 x Line balanced (XLR) 2 x Line unbalanced (Cinch) 1 x Line unbalanced (Cinch)
Outputs:	1 x balanced (XLR), AC-coupled 1 x balanced (XLR), DC-coupled 1 x unbalanced (XLR), AC-coupled 1 x unbalanced (XLR), DC-coupled (switchable to AC-coupled) 1 x Headphone (6,35 mm) 1 x Fixed Out (balanced/unbalanced) to external Headphone-Amp
S/N-ratio:	-96 dB (unrated) / -100 dB (A-rated)
Signal diff. (left/right):	<0,2 dB (up from 0 to -60 dB)

Grading

Sound (60%):	99/100
Usability (20%):	97/100
Equipment (20%):	99/100
Total:	99/100
Class:	Reference class
Price/Performance:	suitable



The new display shines with sharpness and contrast. It offers good readability and grants the preamplifier optically a boost to modern times.



The headphone jack becomes visible after removing the metal cover, which looks like the „Phones On“ switch.

Extensive offer of balanced and unbalanced inputs

So how are the connection options? Regarding inputs, the Preamp III offers six of them. Easily recognisable are three XLR sockets for balanced inputs. A "balanced signal" consists of a standard plus an inverted signal to omit interference like humming sounds. That is one reason why this transport is standard for recording studios. It is also characteristic of the highest quality audio equipment. So whenever available, you should prefer this kind of connection. Unbalanced signals are more popular, so you will also find RCA sockets on the device. The Preamp III also offers three in a high-level version. Thus, the preamplifier offers both connection options. The uttermost input, set next to the sockets, allows the bypass-configuration for a surround stage. This way, looping through the signal of a surround processor or receiver can be performed without the Preamp III changing its shape or level. Adding home cinema equipment is also an option via the preamplifier.



Generous input section: The Preamp III accepts six sources with line-level - three per balanced XLR input, three via unbalance RCA sockets. „In 6“ can be operated in „Surround Bypass“ to loop through the signal of a surround receiver.

Generous Line-up of outputs including headphone jacket

Also vast is the output landscape. Friends of headphone listening will be excited about the two different options here. Using the „Fixed Out“ option enables attaching an external headphone amp. Of course, the Preamp III offers a balanced as well as an unbalanced connector. That is marvellous! On the other hand, the Preamp III shines with a well-assembled built-in headphone amplifier. The connection hides behind a removable, magnetic metal knob. The Preamp III comes with a 6.3-millimetre socket which is the preferred option as it is much more robust than the smaller socket. Taking a closer look, combining The Preamp III with a power amplifier offers the maximum bandwidth of options again. We find two balanced outputs along with two unbalanced ones. So bi-amping is feasible with both connection choices. That means you can use two different amplifiers. One for the high/midrange and one for the bass section leading to the attached speaker set.

Connection speciality: DC and AC coupling

Furthermore, Accustic Arts ships with a special delicacy: You can use the balanced and the unbalanced output in DC coupling or AC coupling. AC coupling adds a resistor and a capacitor to the outlet circuit. This way, unavoidable but unwanted DC currents in the signal are eliminated and do not cause any harm to your tube amplifier or loudspeaker system. Although not suitable for all power amplifiers, DC coupling removes this capacitor circuit from the signal way. In theory, this direct coupling results in a better sound as fewer components could influence the signal and the emitted frequency range is not restricted. Practically speaking, the experience is highly dependant on the design of the power amplifier. AC coupling can also offer sonic benefits such as greater three-dimensionality or a more filigree character. It is a matter of taste, what you prefer. At least you have the freedom of choice which coupling you like better. The Player III at least offers both.



On the output panel, the Preamp III offers two balanced and two unbalanced outputs. They act in AC coupling and DC coupling. As far as the connected power amplifier allows, you can choose between two different sound characteristics. The „OUT DC“ can be configured to AC coupling.

Formidable features including remote control

To put the cherry on the cake, you can program the DC-coupled outputs to AC coupling. That said, we arrive at the settings available by pushing the “Input Select” button shortly. They start in the audio menu, where you can adjust the balance in 45 subtle steps for each side. The “Volume Offset” adjusts the chosen input device level by up to six decibels up or downwards. This way, you can put different players to the same level, so switching inputs does not change in volume. “Startup Volume” defines the power-up volume of the Preamp III. “Output Phase” allows for inverting the signal phase by 180 degrees which is welcome for some recordings. Here we also find the previously mentioned display settings. Resting on your couch, you can alter all options. Its massive brushed aluminium corpus lives in perfect harmony with the preamplifier.



The “Settings” offer a “Volume Offset” for each of the inputs to adjust the level accordingly. So setting the volume levels of different players is an easy task.



The aluminium body of the remote control for the Preamp III lives in perfect harmony with the amplifier. The system remote does not use all buttons, and the relevant ones are not always labelled. So in the group of four buttons around “Volume”, the upper and lower change the actual volume while the left and right ones select the input device or help to navigate in the menus. For using the remote with the Preamp III you have to push Select until the right one of the LEDs on the top lights up.

Amplification technology at its best

Even the non-visual technical part of the Preamp III is top-notch. The transistor amplifier circuit conception follows a balanced schematic from the input stage to the output sockets. This clear separation avoids the influence between the different channels. In particular, the underlying Class A circuitry of the output stages ensures clean amplification. This kind of amplifier allows for a precise linear amplification with a low level of distortion. A disadvantage of Class A circuitry is the low efficiency: Most of the consumed energy transforms to heat instead of amplification. For a preamplifier, a Class A circuit is nevertheless a must: High power output is not a premise for a preamplifier, but sound quality. So mandatory as well are selected components of the highest quality with narrow tolerances. Taking a look under the hood of the device, we see Accoustic Arts chose from the very best. The power supply consists of a 50-volt ampere toroidal transformer of the highest quality. Looking even closer, we discover only golden contact points on the board. Excellent.

Accoustic Arts Preamp III in daily use

We played in the Preamp III for a while now, but we grant him another day to acclimatise. In combination with Accoustic Arts Player I and the power amplifier Accoustic Arts Amp V, we listen during the warm-up to his harmonic and effortless playback. So the tension towards the upcoming listening session rises. This anticipation is not disappointed the following day. We chose „On The Beach“ from Neil Young, covered by American Singer and guitar player Boz Scaggs. This well-produced recording starts unspectacular: a drum beat, a sound from the bass. The prelude delivers an astonishing power with the Preamp III: We flinch involuntarily, even though the amplifier is on a low, very neighbour-friendly volume. It is the dynamic and the prompt presence of the instruments which put us instantly on the stage.



The setting "Startup Volume" determines the volume after turning on the Preamp III.

Fantastic physicality and presence of the musicians

We stay on the drum set, where the bass drum kicked by the excellent session drummer Jum Keltner does not make a dull, undefined sound. Instead, we listen to the felt-covered mallet touching the hide of the bass drum. The snare delivers a nice punch and a lot of attack. We can hear the snare wires below the bottom drum head with all details. A festival of resolution and transparency! That is also true for the hi-hat: Often, you only hear a hissing sound from those mostly closed double cymbals. The Preamp III gives us the taste of the stick hitting the upper cymbal. We listen to the impact of wood on metal. Incredible! We can detect this fantastic physicality and presence across all musicians and their instruments. Even the keyboard, which mostly delivers broad aerial sound layers following the song, can be heard with all the little added chordal adjuncts.



The Accoustic Arts Amp V is an optically and visually fitting extension to the Preamp III. This stereo power amplifier in a dual-mono setup works perfectly fine with the CD coupling of the Preamp III.

Outstanding clarity, transparency and openness

We often listened to this recording, but we never experienced such clarity, transparency and openness in stage imaging and instrumental representation! The acoustic guitar to the right from which you often only hear some occasionally slides is now present with its pickings and stroked accord play. At the same time, the brilliant solo accents from the guitar on the left are much clearer. In front of this band, we listen to blues legend Boz Scaggs, which still shows immense vitality. Scaggs sings with a delicious intensity, leaving out any false pathos in our listening room. The realism in his appearance is just breathtaking! In the reproduction of voices, the Preamp III also shows his full potential. That renders especially true using the balanced input: Switching between this and the unbalanced input again highlights that the balanced connection sounds louder, which can be equalised and also shows the benefits of the Preamp III, the outstanding clarity, transparency and openness much better.



The engraved Accoustic Arts logo in the aluminium application decorates each side of the body like a metal band.

DC- or AC-coupling: An extremely pleasant agony of choice

So what happens when we switch from our currently used AC coupling to DC coupling? Of course, the following power amplifier has to allow for this, which is the case with our Accoustic Arts Amp V. Especially with the unbalanced connection, the difference is clear: The AC coupling makes the sound somewhat more appealing, slightly more gripping in the bass segment, less analytical, but also a little more restrained. Using DC coupling acting on the stage receives more focus, concentration and the sound is more robust. You can realise this in the live recording of "Trouble's What You're In" where the singer/songwriter strikes his guitar in a very percussive way. These beats receive more accentuation in DC coupling. In AC coupling, the London Union Chapel is more lively. It is a hard choice to take, but the Preamp offers the freedom of choice here. We can change the "Output Coupling" in the Preamp III audio section of the menu for the unbalanced input within seconds, depending on the song and our mood.



DC coupling or AC coupling? The Der Preamp III is capable of both - furthermore, we can switch his unbalanced DC output in the "Output Coupling" menu between both coupling modes.

Headphone use: Keeping the culture of sound

Now we drive our sound chain with a different preamplifier - here with the separately usable preamplifier of the Hegel H360. Here we see clearly, which excellent audio delicacy the Preamp III delivers: While the Hegel already serves an exquisite dish, the Preamp III adds even more refinement and transparency. The image appears more vivid and lifelike - and even more relaxed. Regarding the value of the preamplifier, we can even expect this behaviour to be honest. Finally, we start testing the headphone connection, so we chose the Focal Utopia.

Here as well, the Preamp III keeps true to his impressive sound characteristics. Some details like the soft stroked acoustic guitar at Boz Scaggs pop out a little more. The immersion is even more impressive with stereo effects and reverb rooms like in Flink's performance in the Union Chapel. We hear an articulated bass reproduction without any overemphasis, but with the appropriate depth - and again with smooth relaxation.

Conclusion

The new Accoustic Arts Preamp III in every aspect is an excellent preamplifier in the reference class. Design, manufacturing and processing quality are at the finest. Even the complex composition of the noble aluminium body is simply impressive. The new high-resolution OLED display, which provides a modern and fresh ambience, is breathtaking. With countless inputs and outputs, the Preamp III allows for balanced and unbalanced connection. On the output side, the preamplifier offers an additional audiophile treat with optional AC or DC coupling to the subsequent power amplifier. Above all, however, the sonic excellence of this Class A amplifier stands out. We proudly repeat ourselves here: We did not yet experience this clarity, transparency and openness in the playback of voices and instruments on the stage within our listening room! The combination of excellent dynamics, calmness and relaxation unfolds a perfect power balance of the Preamp III. The art of sound comes with its price tag - but those who want to experience High End at this reference level will willingly pay it.

*Test & Editor: Volker Frech
Photo: Philipp Thielen*



Noble Chain of Sound: The Accoustic Arts Preamp III combined with the CD player/DAC Accoustic Arts Player I as the source and the Accoustic Arts Amp V as a stereo power amplifier. Attached to it, two KEF Blade Two for sound reproduction. The Focal Utopia serves as a headphone. If you want to connect your turntable (like the Transrotor Dark Star here) also needs an external phono preamplifier. Accoustic Arts list the Tube Phono II, but we used the SteinMusic Stateline Phono 2 Signature with tube stages.