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AUDIO MUSIC R-T1 PREAMP

by Paul Messenger

It had to happen: China has definitely caught the audiophile bug. And since Chinese manufacturing costs are much lower than those in the West, it's starting to become possible to find genuine audiophile products that cost much less than those made in the UK or the US. A typical example is the Audio Music R-T1, a two-box valve preamplifier that weighs an extremely hefty 38kg, due in no small part to its extensive use of transformers.

Visual inspection and internet browsing provide quite a number of clues to the background, purpose, and heritage of this preamp and its Chinese audiophile protagonist. The company began in the 1990s, so is a relative newcomer, which is no great surprise in view of China's recent history. As I understand things (and the situation seems to be murky at best), the company's products were initially sold under the StereoKnight brand, but a subsequent parting of the ways led to the recent founding of Audio Music, to market the products designed by Am Fang of Guangzhou in South China (a very large city some 120km north of Hong Kong). UK distribution is being handled by Iain Borthwick of LW Audio, and the copper-wired R-T1 is currently being sold at £5,500. Two more costly variations on the R-T theme are also available: the silver-wired R-T2 costs £7,500, while a silver-wired three-box R-T3, with a completely separate power supply unit for each channel, is priced at £10,000.

The R-T1 was actually developed to improve upon the StereoKnight Enigma preamps, and is clearly a component with serious audiophile aspirations, as borne out by the unit's double-mono construction and minimalist features set. Designer Am Fang used reference capacitors such as Audio



Note, V-Cap, and Jensen in developing the U-Caps that are made in his Mexican factory, while the power supply and volume control transformers are all built in-house by Audio Music.

The three knobs on the front consist of two volume controls (one for each channel), based on discreet-step transformers, plus a central triangular switch that selects one of just three line inputs. (Remote control? Don't be silly!) The only other decoration consists of three tiny green lights: one indicates 'on' (whether or not the valves have been inserted); the other two show (rather faintly) the settings of the volume controls.

The R-T1 is therefore not big on convenience features, provided of course that three inputs are sufficient to suit one's lifestyle. I might be a little weird, but I find that I need at least five, for FM tuner, CD player, vinyl disc, server and TV, though a switchable DAC could combine the last two. The three inputs use single-ended RCA phono sockets in parallel with balanced XLR sockets, so at least this is an option, as are the similarly flexible output socket pair. However, it is big on audiophile appeal: besides using transformers to adjust volume here, two valves are used in each channel – 6H30s as drivers and 6922s for voltage gain – and out of preference the desing uses single-ended circuitry throughout. The valves do mean that the unit runs slightly warm to the touch, but quoted power consumption is just 45W.

Assessing the R-T1 proved an unexpected challenge. When I initially powered it up, the little green light came on, so I left it for a few days to run in, and was then surprised to get



▶ a null result. Downloading the on-line manual revealed that I needed to open up the preamp unit and install the four valves, which had been carefully wrapped for transportation. Once inserted, running in could begin again!

The other incident was rather more dramatic, but – we have been reliably informed – unique to the test sample. One of the volume knobs became jammed at the extreme bottom end of its range. When I attempted to free it (using BFI – brute force and ignorance) it suddenly put maximum volume through my amp and speakers. Fortunately no damage occurred, either to the Naim NAP500 power amplifier or the PMC iB2 SE speakers. After I'd opened the unit up, the knob seemed to free itself, though it was now several steps ahead of the other. No matter, as I wasn't likely to get anywhere near maximum volume, and the sound quality was unaffected; figuring out the low level resolution notwithstanding.

Switched transformer volume controls do lack the fine discrimination of continuous potentiometers, and this is particularly important when listening at very low, late-at-night levels. That 'jamming' problem and its consequences made it impossible to assess accurately the discrimination of the 33-step transformers used here, but ad hoc estimates (using just the left channel) suggest that things are likely to prove generally satisfactory with typical sources, amplification, and speakers. Although switched transformer steps do inevitably limit discrimination, low level results did seem acceptable.

Despite those early misadventures, by the time I'd managed to locate the R-T1 within 'hands on' reach, and figured out how to cope with just three inputs, I got down to some serious listening and was immediately and profoundly impressed by its sound quality. Where to start? Perhaps by stating that it sounded clearly superior to my usual NAC552 (complete with Discreet Regulator power supply) in most respects. Superb transparency was one immediate observation.



The R-T1 has the sort of transparency I've come to associate with the simplicity of valve-based circuitry, made all the more impressive here because background noise was invariably totally absent. Stereo imaging is another major plus, keeping individual instruments well separated in their own spaces, and delivering them with fine focus and excellent impressions of depth and surrounding space.

Leading edges seemed particularly well defined, helping to deliver the contributions of specific musicians – and indeed the musicianship – with great clarity, and this was further enhanced by the fine timing and dynamic expression which are all inherent elements in the overall package.

I soon found myself re-exploring my treasured vinyl collection, and discovering subtleties that had previously been obscured. Vocalists' accents and inflections were that much more obvious, sometimes even bringing fresh layers of meaning to lyrics, and individual instruments seemed to be highlighted to the point where they became not only much more obviously identifiable, but also that



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▶ much more communicative, too. Even the inevitable noise floors associated with vinyl seemed significantly lower than expected, perhaps because of the very impressive overall dynamic range that this preamp invariably seems to deliver.

A colleague recently reviewed Audio Music's single-box and much less costly (£1,950) R-S passive controller (which also uses transformer-coupled volume controls), and reported excellent results. Past experience has found that passive controllers are impressively neutral and transparent but also lack a little dynamic vigour, which was also reported in the aforementioned review, so this is likely to be the essential sonic advantage of the R-T1 over the R-S. Certainly there's no way one can criticise the R-T1 for any shortfall in dynamic drama and expression, while the extra physical content of this active and powered valve-equipped preamplifier more than justifies its higher price.

I was intrigued to find that this preamp even made it possible to distinguish between three different versions of the BBC's 2014 Glastonbury TV coverage: truly live (albeit rare) transmissions; recorded performances that were being broadcast live; and transmissions that I'd recorded onto a Humax hard drive recorder. (I didn't investigate the numerous website feeds.) The overall sound quality I get from TV is well below that available from other sources, but it was still possible to detect the distinctions between these three transmission and recording modes, even though the differences were decidedly subtle.

TV sound is all very well, but the best pleasure invariably came through listening to the best sources, especially the many vinyl discs that I dug out from a copious collection. Many hadn't been played for a number of years, and these often proved a source of rediscovery and mostly delight (though I can't deny that there was also some disappointment).

Despite a pricetag that is well below today's high end norm, the R-T1 sets a remarkably impressive sound quality benchmark (and presumably the R-T2 and R-T3 do so too), so on these grounds alone Am Fang deserves the heartiest congratulations. However, against a basic sound quality that betters anything else this reviewer has yet tried must be set a lack of flexibility that some may well consider too inconvenient. For those happy to live without remote control, with a choice of just three inputs, and limited low level volume discrimination, the R-T1 is simply a no-brainer. +



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Inputs: three pairs RCA single-ended inputs; three pairs balanced XLR inputs

Tube complement: two 6H30 line drivers, two 6922 in gain stage

Frequency response: 20 Hz-100kHz

Gain: Input 0.5V, output 2.5V

S/N ratio: >98dB

Distortion: 0.5%/5V

Input Impedance: 47k ohms variable (depending on source)

Volume control: 33-step attenuator volume control

Output Impedance: 600 ohms (RCA/XLR)

Power consumption: 45 watts

Dimensions (WxDxH): 38x34x11cm

Weight: 38kg

Price: £5,500

Manufacturer: Audio Music

URL: www.am-hiend.com

UK distributor: LW Audio

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