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Perreaux Audiant VP3 MM/MC Phono Preamp REVIEW

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5 Stars

Andy Baker finds Perreaux's new phono preamp is something to crow about, and uses many complementary words to describe this exceptional product for the "now" generation. The vinyl generation, that is.

MY KIDS WANT a turntable for their bedroom. This request was as much a pleasure to hear as when they tell me they love me. The two of them, boys aged nine and 10, are developing quite a good and varied taste in music, which thus far they've been collecting on their respective iPods. They love Damon Albarn's Gorillaz project, and the other day my oldest asked if I could put some more John Grant and Kurt Vile on his device, while the nine year old wanted some more Richard Thompson. Then he asked if I could set up a "proper" stereo in their room with a turntable, and his eyes lit up when I suggested they could save their pocket money and start a record collection of their own (you've got *thousands*, Dad!) To be fair, they also wanted a flat-screen television, DVD player and PlayStation in their room, but that part of the request was greeted with a swift and firm "nope".



The point is, vinyl is here to stay, and any interest among the young should be encouraged and nurtured rather than dismissed as a mere passing fad for hipsters, as some ignorant commentators have tried to do. There's a stunning array of vinyl playback equipment out there, and it isn't just about companies cashing in and trying to make a quick buck while they can – this is serious stuff. Why else would New Zealand's Perreaux invest so much time, effort and money into their new Audiant VP3 phono stage?

Build And Features

A big step up from Perreaux's last phonostage, the discontinued SXV2, the VP3 sits in nicely with the rest of the Audiant range, namely the 80i integrated amplifier, the DP32 DAC/pre-amp and the 100p power amp, and shares similar dimensions along with the same two-tone chassis, distinguished by the lovely silver sandblasted aluminium top that folds down over the front, incorporating the black perspex touch button display panel.

Here you can turn the unit in and out of standby and select between moving magnet, moving coil and mono settings. The VP3 features two separate inputs for MM and MC cartridges arranged for lowest possible noise and total channel separation, while the outputs – one set balanced, one unbalanced – use separate buffer stages. This means you can have two turntables or tonearms, with two different cartridges, connected at the same time with the ability to safely switch between the two without disturbing the signal. And by two cartridges, I mean of course one MM and one low output MC *or* a low output MC and a high output MC, not to forget that at least one of these could of course be a mono cart.

This all seems very audiophile-friendly but perhaps even more so are the 36 dip switches with which you can adjust gain, loading and capacitance settings for individual cartridge – and listener – requirements. The capacitance can be adjusted for moving magnet users either to help reject radio frequency interference or, perhaps more importantly for the tweekers, to cater for the capacitance of their tonearm cable in order to tweak the frequency response to their systems. Capacitance is usually incorporated into a phono circuit but user-adjustability is a feature not often seen on phonostages, let alone affordable models, though I have seen it used



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specifically as a kind of RF filter. The addition of the mono output is a nice touch for those who own mono records and cartridges and want to get the best out of that format. Mono is slowly gaining a bit of a following and although I have several mono records myself, I have yet to seriously pursue the matter.

Users can also switch from standard RIAA to the somewhat divisive 'IEC' RIAA equalisation if they feel the need to reduce subsonic noise generated by a warped record or noisy turntable/tonerarm.

All of this is explained, with the assistance of tables and examples, within the excellent owner's manual, though I have to admit, the casual user may get a little confused with all the different setting options. This is no plug'n'play phonostage, so I suspect a little prior experience might make things a bit easier. Having a friendly dealer (or mate) who can help is a good idea too.

Perreux, with the aid of several worldwide test subjects, have tested an impressive range of cartridges before finalising the VP3 design. Low and high output moving coils including Benz, Ortofon, Dynavector and Koetsu were employed along with moving magnets from Clearaudio, Linn, Audio Technica; a Shure M97XE was used and even a humble, but no less worthy, Ortofon OM5e. Several mono cartridges were also trialled, naturally.

Inside, the circuits are mounted upside-down from the top of the chassis, arranged in a mirror layout and kept separate from the shielded toroidal power transformer, resulting in low noise and completely separate channels. A good quality power supply is a must, particularly where phonostages are concerned, because it can be so easy to degrade the quality of sound with noise and filth emanating from a poorly suited design. Thus, Perreux claim to have achieved an ultra low-noise solution. Thin film surface mount resistors are used in the signal path and polyester metal capacitors are used for their longevity and stability.

First impressions were very good indeed. The build quality inside and out is exceptional – solid, flawless and attractive. The VP3 should slot into your system with no trouble, though I do suggest you get all your gain and loading settings correct before putting it into a rack or shelf, because it's a bit of a pain in the ass having to reach in to unplug all the cables before huffing it out again for a tweak. At least the dip switches aren't inside. Incidentally, if you just can't match the dip switches to your particular cartridge, there are extra internal adjustments that can be made, though I'd recommend returning your unit to Perreux or your dealer to get this done.

Serious Listening

Perreux aimed to design a phono pre-amplifier that could be used with all types of cartridges, negating the need to upgrade your phonostage in conjunction with a cartridge upgrade, while reproducing your records as faithfully and accurately as possible and without adding or taking anything away from the original recording. It was my mission, which I chose to accept, to see if they'd achieved this goal. I roped in my good friend James from Analog Instruments – designer and maker of particularly fine and much respected bespoke tonearms – for a few listening sessions to get his thoughts on the matter.



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The VP3 was pitted against the well-reviewed Primare R32 phonostage, along with my charming Fi Yph valve MM phonostage which is aided by an Auditorium 23 SUT (step up transformer) to help boost the signal from my low output cartridge.

Turntables used were a Well Tempered record

player with Denon DL 103 cartridge, a fully customised Lenco L75 in a hardwood plinth complete with audiophile tweaks – which include a new "super bearing" – and a beautiful Garrard 301 in a swamp kauri plinth, also with audiophile modifications. The Lenco is mounted with an Analog Instruments 'Apparition 12' 12-inch cocobolo tonearm with an EMT TSD 15n low output MC cartridge, while the Garrard has an Analog Instruments 'Siggwan' 12-inch with an EMT JSD-6 low output MC. Amplification was provided by a Leben CS-600 all-valve integrated and a Unison Research 'Unico SE' valve hybrid, driving Yamaha Soavo 3 speakers, with modified crossovers and Reference 3A Veenas, respectively. It may be considered unfair to put the solid state VP3 up against all that valve gear but I know it all intimately; I know all its strengths and weaknesses. Most listening was done with the VP3s MC stage as I didn't have a moving magnet or even a high output moving coil to hand, but this is where the A23 SUT came in useful for at least giving the MM section a listen.

The sound produced by the VP3 is undoubtedly natural. At least, it is as natural as it can be when you consider the rest of the chain. Cartridge, tonearm, amplifiers, speakers and the various connecting cables – they all must potentially add their own colourings to the sound before it reaches your ears. What's more, it is a quiet phonostage. Extremely quiet, which is pretty important when we're dealing with such sensitive equipment. As a result, musicians appear to come out of a deep dark abyss where you can detect plenty of air and atmosphere

and the smaller details and effects have more prominence. When I spun the glorious Mavis Staples' 2013 album *One True Vine*, I was mighty impressed with the width and depth of the sonic picture because it was huge – more so than a lot of phonostages manage – and in fact reminded me of how a good CD player renders a soundstage.

I asked Perreux's Managing Director Martin van Rooyen how they achieved this, and he admitted it was something of a fluke. He also said designer Jon Nielson was extremely modest about his achievement. This is where any similarities between digital and analogue sources end as far as I'm concerned, for there was no compression to be heard and the sound was rich and organic in that way only vinyl can be. The music I heard coming off the *One True Vine* LP was wonderfully, delicately layered. Staple's voice, big, powerful and full of colour, was delightfully complimented by the female backing singers while the VP3 allowed the musicians to help build and create the tension and emotion. The drumming was particularly tuneful and rhythmic and I liked the way the strummed guitar strings sounded metallic and rich of tone. The sound was wall to wall and it bulged out into the room in a most enjoyable and involving way.

I would have to say – and James picked up on this before me – that there seems to be a slight lift in the midrange, resulting in more midrange detail and a slightly reduced bottom end. Both the Primare and the Fi/A23 presented a slightly deeper bass response in their respective ways. However, the VP3 still let it come through with a decent level of harmony and definition to ensure the music had good structure and body. When I tried the VP3 in MM mode with the A23, the SUT helped push *everything* out further, expanding the scale and soundstage along with the sense of "being there" and giving basslines slightly more prominence. I'll concede this may not be entirely fair in that I was essentially adding another grand's worth of device into the mix, but I found the straight MC section so good in its own right that I didn't miss the SUT particularly.

I found no small amusement in the fact that while Perreux are based in Dunedin, so is my good buddy Andrew McGregor who is almost single-handedly responsible for one corner of my house sagging from the weight of my ever-expanding vinyl collection. He sells an eclectic range of new and re-issued vinyl under the moniker NOISE Worth Hearing, he's an absolute gentleman and you can find him on Facebook. Not only that but some of my favourite music comes out of Dunedin – the 3Ds, The Verlaines, HDU, The Chills to name a few – and while much of it isn't known for its "audiophile sound quality" (poos to that anyway) it's all so much fun to listen to.

One of my favourite albums is *The Venus Trail* by the 3Ds which is a frenzied, often dissonant attack of twin-guitar genius. The VP3 articulated all the carnage and unsettling imagery but also managed to find the beauty and melody within. This stuff could easily be offensive to some people's sensibilities – and probably is – but it is certainly not offensive to mine and nor is it to my ears, at least not in the way it was presented here by the Perreux, and it is refreshingly free and uncompressed sounding when compared to the CD version. Some tracks, like 'Ice', the title track, or the toxic 'Man On The Verge Of A Nervous Breakdown' with their swirling feedback and distortion, conjure up impressions of crawling along a black and white tiled path spiralling into hell while suffering a drug-induced panic attack (we've all been there, right?) but the VP3 somehow made it a worthwhile experience while the fragile 'Spooky' was pure beauty to behold with resonating guitar and wavering vocals pushing right into the room. It could have come across as harsh and fatiguing but it really didn't and what this suggests to me is that the VP3 is a good all-rounder, with plenty to keep audiophiles happy while music lovers will happily sit back and soak up the new life being distilled from their records, no matter the level of sonic quality.

With The Count Basie Trio's 1974 album *For The First Time*, the VP3 again spread the soundstage wide, with the three musicians nicely placed and holographic. Basie's unmistakably expressive, albeit somewhat restrained playing style was a delight to hear and his piano sounded richly sweet with accurate timbres to the point where I could almost feel the love the big Count was putting into every note. His playing was accentuated by Ray Brown's deep tuneful double bass while Louie Bellson punched out snappy rhythms on drums. A jazz record featuring Louie Bellson but without a Louie Bellson drum solo is a tragedy, and the legendary drummer finally gets his chance at the very end of the record, though its brevity had me gasping for more. His bass drum thumped, the snares cracked and the skins sounded taut and tuneful. I could just see the smile on his face. I actually could see it – he's smiling in the photo on the album cover. The VP3 did a marvellous job. This phonostage lets music flow freely and exhibits a superb dynamic range, which helps add to the feeling of realism and enjoyment. The tempo, realistic tones and scale make it easy to imagine the musicians having a blast in the studio.

While not exactly making 'Red Right Hand' from Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds' 1994 album *Let Love In* sound like a live event, the VP3 helped replicate the studio recorded version in a most splendid fashion. The low rumbling bassline was great; normally I can feel it rattling the contents of my chest but this was just fine. Cave's glowering voice was intimidating but intoxicating and explicitly illuminated, giving the notion of him being a palpable presence in the room. Rich thunderous peels of timpani boomed portentously and the bell, firmly struck to herald the end of each passage, rang off and decayed as one would expect a bell to do in real life. The swirling cloudbursts of organ didn't reach right into the room like they do on the CD version – in a good CD player or through a DAC – but this was entirely forgivable considering the sheer amount of extra detail and enjoyment rendered by this vinyl set up. Throughout this and many other albums I could perceive even the minutest sounds emanating from their own spaces rather than blurring into the whole wall of sound, even during

the more raucous numbers. Given such a clear and dead silent background/noise floor, this was no real surprise. Another round of fervent applause for Perreaux.

I tested a wide range of music – jazz and classical, reggae and dub, hypnotic Krautrock and stoner metal – and almost everything sounded superb. The VP3 appeared to be quite faithful to each recording whether it was high energy, intimate or dissonant. True, material which featured heavier bass could sound a touch lean, *when compared to the Primare R32 and Fi/A23*, but not to an extent where it feels too much like you're missing out.

Conclusion

Perreaux's VP3 phonostage is a marvelous piece of engineering. It really gets you involved in the music and the energy, punchy rhythm and excitement it unveils gives credence to Perreaux's claim that the VP3 has an "exceptional dynamic range". By providing a product with top notch circuitry and plugs and inputs as well as the ability to accommodate such a huge range of cartridges, Perreaux have ensured that owners will have many, many years, if not a lifetime, of use from the VP3. The fact that this phonostage is so relatively cheap is truly astonishing given its outstanding performance, and both James and I agreed that they could easily put this in a more upmarket chassis. That's not to say its current chassis isn't already classy, but if they did so, they could charge three times the price and fully expect to get away with it. But they won't. Perreaux is another example of a company that loves what they do and who clearly value their customers.

I couldn't allow myself to be parted with my Fi for the time being but it is so tempting to get one of these to have as well – they're just too good to not have one. Goal achieved. **AW BAKER**

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