

pre/power amplifier

PRISMA OF LOVE

Perreaux SM6P pre-amplifier

Perreaux 350P power amplifier



There are few names on the Kiwi hi-fi map more iconic than Perreaux. The Auckland manufacturer was formed by Peter Perreaux in 1974 and rose to prominence in the early 80s with the landmark PMF 2150, a power amp that found favour in hi-fi systems from Matamata to Manhattan and gave Perreaux an international profile with the hi-fi cognoscenti. The 1990s were harder times for Perreaux, but with a slew of new products, favourable reviews in such august journals as *The Absolute Sound* and *Stereophile*, and a distribution network that now spans the globe, the company is clearly back with a vengeance.

The SM6P preamp and 350P power amp are Perreaux's flagship stereo amplification products. The original SM6 and 350 were introduced in 1997 and over the intervening years the products have undergone several internal modifications. Now a cosmetic overhaul has taken place, with the introduction of the new Prisma model (hence the P suffix). The old-style fascias with their large gull-wing handles have gone, replaced by a new minimalist look based on the casting created for the Radiance R200i integrated amp (see review >>FFWD Feb/Mar 03). The new look certainly gives the products cleaner, more sophisticated lines in keeping with Perreaux's "form follows function" design ideals.

VERDICT

Perreaux SM6P pre-amplifier

PROS: Fantastic value; New Zealand-made pre-amp that's good enough to play with the big boys; delivers a superb, even-handed performance right across the frequency spectrum

CONS: Looks and fit'n'finish are nothing special; below-average remote; lengthy break-in required to achieve optimal performance

Sound	★★★★½
Features	★★★★
Build	★★★
Value	★★★★★
OVERALL	★★★★½

CONTACT: Perreaux Industries, 09-815 5452, www.perreaux.com

BLACK BOX, WHITE HOUSE

The SM6P is a full-function remote-controllable pre-amp featuring a balanced circuit design from input to output. The rear panel offers a single pair of balanced inputs (for suitably equipped CD players) as well as six standard RCA line inputs. It also includes balanced outputs and four RCA outputs (two pre-amp-level main outputs and two line-level outputs).

Curiously, one of the inputs is labelled "LD" (for Laser Disc), a format that fell by the wayside when Bill Clinton was making whoopee in the White House. It's a small point, but one I feel should be noted. It seems daft that Perreaux has gone to the trouble of revising the SM6 without attending to the small detail of changing the labelling on the rear input and front-panel LED to say "DVD". Get with the programme, Perreaux! Do you actually want your customers to think the SM6P is a refugee from the mid-90s? And while I'm in the mood for a gripe, the plasticky, touch-membrane remote control is not a patch on the gorgeous sculpted-aluminium, 36-button back-lit affair that comes standard with Perreaux's Radiance R200i integrated amp. It's a pity Perreaux couldn't co-opt the remote from the Radiance for the SM6P, but as an RF (radio frequency) device, it's not compatible with the infrared-based pre-amp.

The front panel features Perreaux's familiar ovoid cutout,

SOMETIMES THERE'S NO SUBSTITUTE FOR RAW POWER; THE CONTROL EXERTED BY THE 350-WATT PERREAUX POWER AMP IS CAPABLE OF TURNING EVEN THE MOST RECALCITRANT, ROTTWEILER OF A SPEAKER INTO AN OBEDIENT LAPDOG.

which has a largish alphanumeric display at its centre. Tucked sneakily away to either side of the display are four small buttons for controlling volume (up/down) and source select (up/down). Volume is adjusted by two digitally controlled resistor-ladder volume controls, allowing the positive and negative parts of the signal to be handled separately in a true balanced topology.

BEAST FOOT FORWARD

The matching 350P power amp is, well, a beast. It's big (nearly half-a-metre wide and half-a-metre deep), it's heavy (30kg in its stockinged feet) and it delivers a staggering 350 watts into an 8 ohm load (increasing to 600 watts into a 4 ohm load). With its inherent ability to deal with large voltage swings, a maximum current output of 80A per channel and high damping factor, the 350P should be capable of driving pretty much any loudspeaker on the planet.

The front panel is a brooding slab of marine-grade aluminium finished in an electrostatically applied textured black coating, featureless save for a milled "PERREAUX" logo and an LED indicator that glows red when the amplifier is on and ready to be used. The rear panel sports two pairs of high-quality speaker binding posts to allow for easy bi-wiring (or running a second pair of speakers), a pair of balanced inputs, a pair of standard RCA phono (unbalanced) inputs, an earth lift switch (if hum is a problem in your system), remote trigger inputs and outputs, and the ubiquitous IEC input socket.

Perreux supplies a generic AC lead that worked fine, but I also experimented with a Tice Solo AV power conditioner and an after-market power lead from AFA (the Zeus Series II, as reviewed in >>FFWD Dec 02/Jan 03). Used together, they had a positive influence on the sound of the 350P, increasing instrumental separation and opening up the soundstage, as well as providing an improved sense of solidity and timbral nuance.

GOOD THINGS TAKE TIME

You know how some products just have an indefinable

"rightness" about them from the first moment you connect them to your system and power them up? The SM6P and 350P are not these sorts of products. Straight from the box they were unimpressive, with diffuse imaging and a constricted soundstage, while an artificial hardness and sheen in the upper mid-range and treble was also noticeable. But good things take time. After a couple of weeks of continued use, the mid-range and treble had smoothed out appreciably, taking on a far more natural perspective. The bass had improved too, displaying increased definition, tightness, control and extension. Imaging and soundstaging were also better, although they still fell short of what I'd expect from products at this price point.

I'd experienced a similarly extended break-in period with Perreux's Radiance R200i integrated amp, so figured that perseverance would pay off in the long run — and so it proved to be. Over subsequent weeks the soundstaging and imaging continued to improve. After six weeks it was approaching "very good", and I suspect its performance in this regard would have continued to improve, had I not had to return the products to Perreux. How long would it have taken to reach optimum performance? Who knows, but Perreux retailer David Chan from NZ Made Audio reckons it can take as long as three months. My observations on sound quality below are based on what I heard after approximately five weeks of "running in".

GO LOW, TACKLE HARD

What strikes you immediately with this combination is the pair's phenomenal bass performance — dynamic, articulate and tectonic-plate deep. The 350P can take much of the credit for this, although I was to discover that the SM6P also had an important part to play.

I've never before heard a power amp that goes this low, with this much control. While many will equate "big" with "sluggish", the 350P matches a featherweight's hand speed to a heavyweight build and Herculean power delivery. It's a fearsome combination: light on its feet when it needs to be



VERDICT	
Perreux 350P power amplifier	
PROS: Bass to die for; solid, palpable music-making abilities; able to drive even the most difficult loudspeaker loads	
CONS: Slight lack of transparency in treble region; lengthy break-in required to achieve optimal performance	
Sound	★★★★½
Features	★★★★
Build	★★★★
Value	★★★★
OVERALL	★★★★½
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pre/power amplifier



TECH SPECS

Perreaux SM6P pre-amplifier

Frequency response: 10Hz–60kHz (+0dB–0.15dB)

Distortion: <0.004% THD (20Hz–20kHz) at rated output

Input sensitivity: 215mV (balanced and unbalanced)

Rated output: 1.5V RMS

Inputs: 6 x unbalanced line inputs (RCA), 1 x balanced line input (XLR)

Outputs: 2 x unbalanced pre-amp level (RCA), 2 x unbalanced line level (RCA), 1 x balanced pre-amp level (XLR)

Dimensions (w/h/d): 482 x 88 x 315mm

Weight: 7.7kg

but with a solid punch that delivers stunning transient attacks and lifelike heft, body and scale to instruments and voices. Sometimes there's no substitute for raw power; the control exerted by the 350-watt Perreaux power amp is capable of turning even the most recalcitrant, Rottweiler of a speaker into an obedient lapdog.

But even more than the prodigious quantity, it was the supreme quality of the bass that impressed. Where the majority of power amps allow you to hear that a bottom E is being played on a bass guitar — and are quite happy to leave it at that — the combination of SM6P and 350P allows you to hear the complete texture of the note being played. From the sharp twang as plectrum strikes string, through to the reverberation of wire on fretboard and the final slow decay of the note, the pair's ability to resolve the subtlest micro-dynamics and tonal nuances of low-frequency performance was astonishing. As Josh Haden's bass snaked its way languidly through 'Untitled #1' from Spain's *The Blue Moods of Spain* (Restless), it was possible to discern the subtle changes in how hard he hits the strings over the course of the song. That's impressive.

While staggering bass performance is their most immediately obvious attribute, the pair proved themselves to be far more than a one-trick pony.

Overall, the sound of the Perreaux combo is extremely revealing. It's easy to tell the good 'uns that impart little of their own sonic signature on the sound; they're the components that allow changes in components elsewhere in the audio chain to be readily heard and identified. So it is with the SM6P and 350P.

The combo's transparent nature made obvious any changes in cabling (incidentally, these are products that deserve to be used with high-quality cables — you will hear the difference), while swapping between my regular CAL Delta/Alpha transport/DAC and a Pioneer DV-S969AVi universal disc player (see "System Virtue", page 32) clearly demonstrated the differences between the two disc spinners.

In truth, the SM6P and 350P weren't entirely transparent to the signal (no component can be) and occasionally a slight, almost imperceptible veiling was noticeable in the

treble. While it never felt like anything was "missing" (both the overall smoothness of the treble and the amount of detail on offer were commendable), swapping back to my reference Sachem monoblocks revealed that the 350P lacked that last iota of sparkle and air in the treble region.

MAY THE FORCE BE WITH YOU

The fascinating aspect of listening to (and reviewing) a company's flagship product is that it allows you to hear the fullest flowering of a designer's art and the pinnacle of their audio-engineering achievements. The SM6P and 350P represent the state of Perreaux's art and, in terms of sound quality, get damn near to the state of the art, period. If they fall down anywhere it's in the physical package, which can't hold a candle to the beautiful casework of the Mark Levinsons, Jeff Rowlands, Krells or Musical Fidelity Tri-Vistas of this world. But don't let the Perreaux's Darth-Vader ugly-ducking looks put you off — if you're in the market for a pre/power amplifier combo up to NZ\$20,000 (and maybe even beyond), then ignore the SM6P and 350P at your peril. Just make sure it's well run-in before you audition it — and then spend the rest of your budget on new music. You'll thank me later.

Martin Bell

TECH SPECS

Perreaux 350P Power amplifier

Frequency response: 5Hz–40kHz (+/-0.25dB)

Distortion: 0.02% THD (20Hz–20kHz)

Power: 350W into 8 ohms

Input sensitivity: 1.5V RMS (unbalanced), +/-0.78V RMS (balanced)

Inputs: 1 x pair unbalanced (RCA), 1 x pair balanced (XLR), 1 x remote trigger

Outputs: 2 pairs speaker binding posts, 1 x remote trigger

Dimensions (w/h/d): 482 x 176 x 460mm

Weight: 30kg

