

HIFI CRITIC

**AUDIO REVIEW
MAGAZINE**

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HIGH END 2016

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A PURR OF PRE-AMPS

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dCS ROSSINI PLAYER + CLOCK

Chris Binns assesses dCS's Rossini CD player/DAC and its associated Master Clock

WHY DO WAV AND FLAC FILES SOUND DIFFERENT?

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WILSON AUDIO SABRINA

Martin Colloms tries out an accomplished floorstanding, three-way moving-coil loudspeaker with ample power handling

ROGUE AUDIO SPHINX V2

Paul Messenger auditions an affordable hybrid integrated amplifier that combines valves with digital amp modules

MUSIC & MORE

REVIEWED THIS ISSUE

MFA Baby Classic
Cambridge Audio Azur 851N
Benchmark AHB2
Thorens TD124
Focal Sopra No2
First Watt M2
Naim NAP 500 DR
Townshend Allegri
Bespoke Audio
Gamut D3i
XTZ Tune 4
NVA The Second Statement
Exposure 3010 S2
Rogue Audio Sphinx V2
Glasshouse Passive #1
Vincent SV-700
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Little British Monitor
Roksan Caspian RPP
dCS Rossini Player+Clock
Glasshouse TVC
MFA Classic 632 Phono Amp
Rothwell Headspace
Rothwell Simplex
Lounge Audio Copla
Lounge Audio LCR MkIII
MFA 632
MFA Classic Step Up





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As we rush headlong into the future, let us not forget that hi-fi has been around for most of our lifetimes, and that most of what the music business considers as progress has been about improving access and convenience rather than quality, through such initiatives as the widespread popularity of MP3-encoded files.

I'm currently feeling somewhat exasperated, as my computer, *iPad* and smartphone have decided to stop communicating with my Naim *UnitiServe*, and I've not the slightest idea why. I've tried restarting various bits and pieces, so far without success, and the control Apps simply refuse to make the connection.

This may well be because I have no real enthusiasm for wrestling with computers, but suspicion inevitably falls on the 'software updates' that seem to have become an inevitable and regular part of life these days. Nobody seems interested in explaining why software engineers don't get it right in the first place, but I suspect that one reason behind the continual 'updating' is simply that it's possible to do so. By their very nature, home computers and their ilk are foxy little devices that are well able to change their spots almost on a whim.

Fortunately I still have access to my music *via* plenty of 'oldfashioned' CDs and vinyl – and indeed the numerous tracks that are stored on my laptop. But you'll probably have to wait until the next issue to find out about access to my server.

Towards the Future?

In the meantime it may well be high time I got into streaming. It's something I've not really bothered with to date, largely because I've spent more than fifty years collecting enough discs (vinyl and compact) to keep my CD and vinyl players busy for years. (Indeed, simply because I've already got plenty of material, my disc collecting seems to have tailed off somewhat in recent years.)

However, I've recently been staying for a few days with my younger brother in Sweden, who streams his music *via* a Spotify subscription. While this may not particularly appeal to my hi-fi sensibilities, I have started to appreciate the easy access to all manner of tracks that it brings. And although I've always regarded my music collection as reasonably comprehensive, it does inevitably have some gaps (usually around the time that progeny are arriving), so a streaming service does therefore have some advantages (especially since contact with my server has temporarily been lost).

I should have got streaming up and running by the next issue too, so will be able to report on any of the practical difficulties this computer phobic encounters along the way. As a parting shot, however, it seems to me that the advantages of streaming may well depend on the size of one's music collection, which is likely to be a function of one's age.

Paul Messenger

Editor

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Roksan RPP Reference Phono Amplifier

REVIEWED BY ARTHUR BARTON, ROKSAN'S REFERENCE PHONO AMPLIFIER (RPP) IS PART OF THE COMPANY'S VINYL SYSTEM CONTROL INITIATIVE

ARTHUR BARTON



Roksan's *Reference Phono Amplifier (RPP)* is mounted in *Caspian M2* style casework of standard 44cm width, and is part of a *VSC* package, where *VSC* is an abbreviation for Vinyl System Control. The review sample supplied was actually designated a *VSC 2S*, and combined a £1,900 *RPP* phono pre-amplifier with a £1,450 *RPM* speed control for a *Xerxes-20* turntable, each section with its own independent internal *DSCI.5* power supply and the combination together costing some £3,000. In point of fact the two items are actually available separately or together, and with separate or shared power supplies. Even though a complete *VSC 2S* was actually delivered because of limited product availability, a shared supply *VSC* version is also available. In practice we only requested and have reviewed the phono stage.

Available in black or silver finish, our combination *VSC 2S* was a quite heavy unit. A basic *RPP* with just one *DSCI.5* power supply should be somewhat lighter, though it's still a substantial piece of kit and requires a solid support. Each channel has eight DIP switch settings, providing three gain settings to match different cartridge outputs (high, medium and low) plus four settings for resistance and one for capacitance.

Sound Quality

I hadn't initially considered the practical issues of inserting the Roksan RPP into a system that normally has its phono amplifier and power supply in separate boxes. After making some physical alterations to my set-up in order to accommodate the unit, I started listening, and two major themes initially came to mind. First was the sheer drive and power that the music possessed and delivered; secondly was the impressive sense of scale that imbued large orchestral classical works. Those first

records I played (Brahms *Second Symphony*, Karajan/BPO on DG, and Beethoven's *Fifth Piano Concerto*, Michelangeli/VPO on DG), created a fine rendering of the true scale of the orchestras, and the tone of the piano in the *Emperor* concerto.

Pentangle's *Basket of Light* provided a complete contrast. Jacqui McShee's female voice was delightfully clear and strong, and Bert Jansch's guitar sounded quite correct and as 'reedy' as ever. I was a little concerned about the strength of the treble and some surface noise, and so referred to the information sheet that Lyra provides with its *Delos* cartridge, and changed the DIP switch settings under the Roksan. Increasing the resistance a little seemed to sweeten the treble and cut surface noise just a touch. System matching does seem to be important, although I changed things around twice during my listening to confirm the improvement, as the changes were subtle.

Listening to Little Feat's *Hoy Hoy*, I was again impressed by the drive and energy. Then, worrying that I might be missing a sense of rhythm on some records, on went *Bertha* from the Grateful Dead's live 'Skeleton and Roses' album. Almost immediately my right foot was tapping and my fingers drumming; if rhythm is there in the music, you certainly feel it.

Back to classical material, the Beethoven *Violin Concerto* on HMV (Suk/Boult/New Philharmonia) sounded excellent, even though the violin seemed to have been recorded a bit too close. The Roksan *RPP* invariably deals faithfully with whatever is on the record, and it does so with both power and subtlety, marrying some of the 'brighter' qualities of digital with analogue into an excellent amalgam. It might not have the lightest of touches, but violin just sounded so 'right', whether bowed delicately or powerfully.

Its abilities led to an interesting observation. I

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Manufacturer's Specifications

Gain settings	MM 40.6dB @ 1kHz MC1 56dB @ 1kHz MC2 65.5dB @ 1kHz
S/N Ratio	MM >89dB AWTD (ref. 5.0 mV) MC1 >79dB AWTD (ref. 5.0 mV) MC2 >70dB AWTD (ref. 5.0mV)
Overload Margin	26dB
THD +N	<0.01%
Output impedance	<50ohms
Size (WxHxD)	44x8.5x30cm
Weight	9.6kg
Price	£1,900

have a boxed-set of the mature Mozart symphonies by Josef Krips and the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, recorded by Philips in the early 70s. I also have that set on CD, which I have ripped to my NAS drive and have been listening to it recently through a Logitech streamer and Audiolab *M-DAC*. I put on my vinyl version of Symphony 39, and was immediately taken by the attributes described before: power, drive, scale and tonal accuracy – violins really sounding like violins with just the right level of bite.

However, when it came to the third movement, I suddenly sat up: “where on earth did all that come from?” (Actually the words were a bit stronger than that, but some editing was deemed desirable.) The ‘all that’ was the lower end of the strings – the cellos and basses – laid out so perfectly that I really heard the interaction between them and the violins, probably for the first time. I couldn’t remember hearing those bass lines so distinctly with my digital sources, and had to check. First I listened through the streamer, and the bass lines were there, but as a rather confused mix, not as groups of instruments heard clearly and distinctly. The native CD (played on a Cyrus *CD t* CD drive mechanism through an Audiolab *M-DAC*) was perhaps very slightly better, but not by much.

Checking further, I replaced the Roksan with a much less costly iFi *iPhono*, which has a reputation as great value-for-money, and beats many phono stages at far higher prices according to some reviewers. I could now hear the distinct bass-lines again, but without the clarity and certainly without the strength that the Roksan had delivered. A good result, but for the Roksan’s more money you do get more music, and certainly more than is to be heard from this CD transfer.

Conscious that I had hitherto been listening exclusively to purely analogue recordings, I pulled out Steve Winwood’s *Back In The High Life*, and R.E.M.’s *New Adventures in Hi-Fi*. The rim-shots in *Higher Love* (on *High Life*), were truly cracking and sharp, with great attack, but I was concerned that the cymbals sounded a bit ‘splasy’ and Winwood’s voice was also rather ‘edgy’. However, with vinyl’s natural dulling towards end-of-side, things seemed to have changed in later tracks: there was now no false edginess to his voice, and the cymbals sounded natural on *Back in the High Life Again*. The R.E.M. tracks delivered immense power in the bass, alongside clean, clear vocals, and excellent soundstaging on the track *How The West Was Won*. Meanwhile, Paul Simon’s *Rhythm of the Saints* illustrated perfectly the timing and rhythmic drive that this phono stage is clearly capable of delivering. And the first Laura Marling album, *Alas I Cannot*

Swim (on a 180g pressing), confirmed the high quality of female vocals and acoustic instruments, so this Roksan obviously works just fine with digitally recorded and mastered vinyl.

But, as stated above, this phono stage does need careful system matching to deliver its best performance. One should try to avoid any cartridge that sounds at all ‘bright’ or ‘forward’ (especially with similarly-voiced speakers), and also avoid any ‘looseness’ in the bass. Adjusting the settings helped address any early worries about an over-strong treble, and once adjusted this was first-class. This was patently clear when listening to female voices, especially in Bach’s *Mass in B Minor* (DG/Karajan/BPO 1974), and Verdi’s *Requiem* (Decca/Solti/VPO 1967, Japanese Super Analogue pressing). The voices, including the treble, were sublime. Oh, and that big drum in the *Dies Irae* was entirely convincing too.

I spent a whole evening digging out classic jazz records, some of which had not been out for at least 20 years. Brubeck, Davis, Coltrane and Mingus. The last track of Davis’ *In Person, Saturday Night at the Blackhawk, San Francisco, Volume II* (180gm re-mastered and done well), *Neo*, had both my feet tapping and my torso going back and forth – this Roksan certainly does timing and rhythm properly, and does not need the power it has to do so. And as I started to realise later that evening, the *RPP* was just getting better and better, and was sounding really satisfying with every type of music I threw at it.

Conclusions

It seems to me that the Roksan *RPP* might have been developed with at least half an ear on the sound of digital equipment and recordings in mind, as with many currently available analogue components. The company might feel that it needs a coherent set of products for the digital music oriented customer, and in this its *RPP* reference phono pre-amp does very well. But in addition to providing the drive and solidity required by the most modern music and recordings, this phono stage still faithfully manages to reproduce some of the best qualities of purely analogue material – sometimes rather better than digital transcriptions of high quality old recordings.

The unit’s not inconsiderable size and weight will not suit everyone, but if it fits in physically (and most people will have no problem), and if due attention is paid to the abovementioned system matching, this Roksan can deliver some truly outstanding music reproduction. It really does develop the information that a good cartridge digs out of the grooves, and lays it out with power, scale, and not a little finesse when required. I shall certainly miss it when it’s gone.

Subjective Sounds

PAUL MESSENGER

HIFICRITIC

AUDIO AND MUSIC JOURNAL

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Martin Colloms, Publisher

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Three issues ago (*HIFICRITIC Vol9 No3*) I wrote about a very practical, sensible and inexpensive *irDAC* from Arcam. At a typical price of £425, it naturally made no attempt to set the sort of high standards one might encounter from brands like dCS or MSB. But it proved most effective at doing the very basic job of extending the analogue inputs of my system pre-amplifier into the digital domain, with full remote control over input selection too – a vital feature in my view.

Not long after that review had gone to press, however, I received an e-mail about a new *MkII* version. The differences seem quite minor, but are the reason for covering the new version here. For examples, the replacement does include a price rise to £495, which is still quite inexpensive in my opinion, but also seems to have addressed a couple of irritations that snuck up on me after I'd already written the original review.

Although I was happy enough with the original, a couple of minor niggles that emerged included a tendency to 'click' when changing either sources or TV channels. This was only mildly irritating, but the DAC also showed an occasional tendency to 'crash' (as all computers seem wont to do), which was certainly rather more exasperating. The good news is that the 'click' seems to have completely disappeared from the latest version, and (after a couple of weeks) it hasn't yet crashed (he says, carefully touching wood).

I normally use one of the two optical (Toslink S/PDIF) inputs for the TV, a USB type II input for my laptop (which only started working after I restarted it and went to a sub-menu), and one of the two electrical S/PDIFs for the Naim *UnitiServe* (when it's working, which it isn't right now – see *Editorial*). That leaves three inputs that are currently unused – one optical, one electrical, and one other. On the original *irDAC* this 'other' was labelled '*iPod*' on the handset, and appeared to add an extra USB type I on the unit, but the new *irDAC-II* has replaced that input with a Bluetooth capability, which is why a stubby little aerial now attaches to a screw terminal on the back. Another difference between the old and the new models is that the 'digital out' socket has been replaced by a pair of variable analogue outputs (which I naturally ignored).

The new handset is the same intelligently small and light plastic affair as its predecessor, though it actually has three fewer buttons, eliminating an unnecessary on/off and others labelled 'AES' and 'filter', neither of which I used previously (or indeed knew what they did!)

Since CD now seems to be in decline, I reckon I'll stick with vinyl as my prime source. Although the arrival of downloads, servers and streaming might have made digital stuff more musically interesting, it has also become much more complicated too, as computers, networks and the internet have effectively taken over from the much more straightforward (and reliable) CD player. This might be no problem for those who enjoy interacting with computers and computer technology, but digital audio seems better avoided by people like yrs trly that consider them useful but also a pain in the proverbial.

I'm perfectly happy for others to follow a digital audio future, but I myself will continue to regard it as a secondary source: certainly worth having, but hardly meriting the sort of expenditure I'll happily lavish on the analogue gear. Simply as a remote-controllable switch-box for digital sources, Arcam's £495 *irDAC-II* is clearly exceptional value for money, so the no-frills Best Buy rating of its predecessor definitely deserves to continue.