

## THE SW1X AUDIO DESIGN LPU I MM PHONO PREAMPLIFIER

Lotus Group's Joe Cohen contacted me about reviewing this handmade-in-England, vacuum tube-based moving magnet phono preamplifier. Joe is a relatively calm fellow, but he was quite excited about this piece, so I said I'd give it a listen. I'm glad I did.

According to the company's website (see Contacts, p.28), Dr. Slawa Roschkow is SW1X's founder, managing director, and chief audio engineer. ("SW" refers to the first and last letters of his name.) His PhD is in economics, and

like so many in this field, his journey to the audio business began as a young hobbyist (though he says that in school he was always good in physics, chemistry, and biology). Based on what I read on the website, Dr. Roschkow is still involved in the financial/investment world, so one can hopefully assume this is a well-funded, economically sound hobbyist/idealist company. I like that combination.

On the website, Roschkow says he was drawn to Kondo, Audio Note, and other classic tube designs and that his creations, including the LPU I phono

stage, are inspired by them.

SW1X products—there's also a DAC, a transport, and a preamp—come in five levels (I-V) and four models (Standard, Special, Balanced, and Signature). All differ in parts and materials quality, output-stage topology, power-supply circuitry, and the "degree of harmonic matching." Not all versions are available for every component type.

The chief differentiating factor between Standard, Special, and Balanced is the "in" and "out" anode configuration of the signal output tube. "In the case of standard you have a resistor

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going in and a capacitor going out," Cohen wrote in an email. "In the case of the Special, you have a choke going in and a capacitor going out. By far the most transparent ... is Balanced, which has transformer coupling in and out." (Despite the appellation, it is not a balanced design in the more familiar sense.) The phono preamp doesn't come in a Signature version.

The standard version uses one EF86 pentode tube per channel for the input stage and one 6N6P dual-triode for the output stage running in a pure class-A. There's no negative feedback, and RIAA EQ is passive RC (resistive loading/capacitive decoupling). 6X5 tube rectification is standard. Gain ranges from 40–46dB depending upon tube choice. Input impedance is the standard 47k ohms, while output impedance is under 1k ohms.

The basic version sells for a very reasonable (in my world at least) \$3150. Options include Audio Note copper foil, Mylar-in-oil interstage and output-decoupling caps, and Audio Note 2W copper, nonmagnetic, tantalum-film resistors on the output tube plates.

The standard version can be ordered with either American-made 5687/E182CC, Soviet-era ('60s) 6N6P, or premium vintage NOS black plate Tung Sol 5687/182CC. You can also get directly heated 5Y3/GZ34 rectifier tubes in place of 6X5s.

The Special version features 5Y3 rectification, Audio Note copper-foil-in-oil caps, M6 EI grain-oriented-core power transformers, and a choke-filtered power supply, for \$4295.

To further complicate matters, the version I was sent for review is the Special version but *without* the 5687 dual-triode, which lowers the price to \$4195. I'm not sure why Dr. Roschkow chose a "just short of Special" unit to send for review, but *whatever!* Maybe he figures I like things a bit edgy rather than supersmooth?

I began with the Miyajima Labs 0.3mV Infinity mono cartridge running into the Ypsilon MC-16 step-up transformer (SUT). One of the great things about vinyl (vs digital) is that you can more easily tailor the sound to a particular era. I know many audio-



philes who have "old school" tube phono preamps for mono playback and solid state ones for more modern stereo-era playback (although only a handful of those tube-based phono preamps offer equalization curves appropriate to those older mono records).

The pairs of rear-panel RCA jacks are relatively close together, so I was barely able to fit in the oversized TARA Labs Evolution Zero RCA plugs, but I managed to shoehorn them in. I quickly reverted to the MC-10 SUT because of the LPU I's generous 46dB of gain. The preamp wasn't overloaded; it was just loud.

First up was a Record Store Day Black Friday *mono* edition of *Chet Baker Sings* (CR00243), a warm recording of a warm voice—but the LPU I did *not* sink into *excessive* warmth. Baker's voice had ideal timbral balance, floating gracefully and believably between

the speakers. Vocal sibilants were delicately but cleanly expressed. More enjoyable still was the LPU I's expression of microdynamic vocal shifts, which made it feel as if I was listening from the other side of the microphone.

On "My Heart Stood Still," Philly Joe Jones's somewhat distantly recorded drum kit sat well behind the vocals, the cymbals ringing cleanly well back in the mix. The rim shots after Baker's muted trumpet solo had a rich, woody, tactile finish. All this added up to a fully satisfying rendering of this record.

The recent Verve/Acoustic Sounds reissue of Sarah Vaughan's eponymous 1955 EmArcy release (MG 36004/B00324113-01) backed by a small combo featuring Clifford Brown, Paul Quinichette, Jimmy Jones, and Herbie Mann features a more spacious mix and more frequency extension on top, which the LPU I fully captured with no hint of high-frequency excess—especially on Vaughan's vocals. If she actually sang into the RCA R44C ribbon microphone as shown in the inner gatefold jacket, there *should* be a slight but smooth and graceful high-frequency lift.

The LPU I/Infinity combo *nailed* her vocals on this record, unlike my usual solid state preamp (which was better on rock but produced an annoying edge).

It also presented Herbie Mann's flute three-dimensionally, surrounded by copious air that brought the flute to life, floating in space between the speakers.

Vaughan's vocals on "April In Paris" were presented with exceptional effortlessness and palpability in front of the instrumental backdrop; the small studio space in which the group played was well-expressed by the drum-kit ricochets. I've been enjoying this record for weeks, and I enjoyed it more through the LPU I than I had with any other preamp.

Stereo listening was with the Lyra Atlas λ Lambda SL. On the excellent Analogue Productions reissue of *Rubinstein at Carnegie Hall* (LSC-2605), I preferred the slightly drier solid state presentation to the LPU I's wetter, upper-midrange-rich delivery, which bathed the piano in a bit too much hall space. However, it was still a very en-

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joyable listen at a fraction of the solid state preamp's price.

"Why not try a more appropriately priced SUT?" I thought to myself. The Ypsilon costs \$3300. I switched in the \$1375 Bob's Devices CineMag Sky 20; its somewhat drier and darker character proved a perfect match for the LPU I—at least in my system and to my tastes. While the Rubinstein record lost some attack delicacy and nuance, the rest of the presentation benefited.

*Wild Is the Wind* (Slea Head Records KR 236), a new double 45rpm record by vocalist Kari Kirkland, skirts the Diana Krall template musically—she looks the part, too, though with darker hair. I'm sure this will be all over the

next audio show, whenever that happens, because it's musically excellent, features great covers (Steely Dan's "Do It Again," Labrinth's "Jealous," Tears For Fears' "Everybody Wants to Rule the World") and great players (Roy Hargrove, Dean Parks, and others). Plus, it's well recorded at United Recorders and, oh, Ms. Kirkland can sing, and despite the musical similarities her voice does not *sound* like Diana Krall's.

The Bob's Devices/LPU I combo did justice to this easy-to-listen-to studio recording. It was also good through the Ypsilon.

If I had to sum up the SW1X LPU I—and I do—it's a high value, smartly designed, classic, "purist," vacuum

tube-based MM phono preamp that achieves all of the positive things such circuits can offer—especially timbral and textural generosity and transient delicacy—at a very reasonable price, while avoiding pitfalls such as noise, limited bandwidth, soggy bass, and constricted dynamic range. It's a sweet-sounding phono preamp, great for jazz, classical, and acoustic music. If you're mostly a rocker, you're better off with silicon. That's just the way it is.

Please, Dr. Roschkow, produce a mono version, ideally with multiple EQ curves. Meanwhile, the LPU I is a great, cost-effective way to go, even in the costliest of systems. Sassy Sarah told me so.