

FOLLOW-UP

BY JIM AUSTIN

THIS ISSUE: Jim Austin revisits the Audio Research Reference 6SE preamplifier.

Audio Research Reference 6SE preamplifier

Lately, I've been thinking again about a concept I've thought about off and on for years: first impressions of a component versus lingering, meaningful differences.

We've all had the experience: Replace a familiar component with a new one, let it warm up, then listen. You hear differences, often dramatic ones. (Not always, though: A couple of years ago, I compared two DACs of similar price and design, switching back and forth between them, and could hear no difference at all.)

What's interesting is that some of the differences that seem obvious and important at first—that at first are impossible to overlook—become less important with time.

I'm not talking about component burn-in, although I do believe that it's a real phenomenon—that components do change their sound as materials relax with heat and motion into their final, lowest energy states. The changes I'm referring to occur even with equipment that's been in use for many hours. I'm talking about how our ear-brains adjust to differences in the sound. Some differences it adapts to; others remain important. It's those persistent differences that matter.

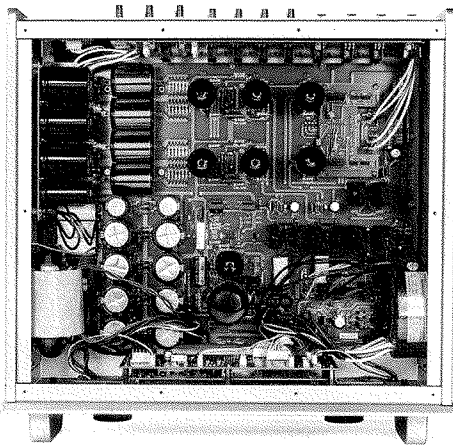
It was with these thoughts in mind that I switched out the solid state Pass Labs XP-32 preamplifier for the tubed Audio Research Reference 6SE.¹ I wanted to experience the differences in the short term and then take note of how those differences panned out over time. I anticipated listening over weeks, but I didn't have to.

These are both premium preamps, at similar prices (a \$375 price difference), from two great American hi-fi companies. The XP-32 is very much a solid state preamp, but, while I'd never describe it as tubey, it does share some virtues with tubed designs. And while the Audio Research is a tube preamp, Audio Research's designers have never gone in for that ultra-tubey sound, and they do not do so here. For ARC, it's all about using the best available gain devices—to them, that's tubes—to achieve the most accurate and natural sound. These two preamps are zeroing in on the same sound from opposite directions.

I put this broken-in Reference 6SE in my system and allowed it to warm up for about an hour. I put on the first track, "Empty Hands," from pianist Julia Hülsmann's new CD *The Next Door* (ECM 2759), which I had just listened to with the Pass Labs after receiving a new batch of ECM CDs. With the ARC, the soundstage was a bit larger, including taller, and imaging was quite precise—not diffuse. Instruments were ever so slightly backlit—a bit more than they had been with the solid

state preamp but not as much as with old-school tube amplifiers.

Of greatest, initial subjective importance: The presentation with the ARC had an overall softer feel, especially noticeable on transients. On the top third of Hülsmann's keyboard, I heard more sustained string tone and less initial impact. Marc Muellbauer's double bass had more tone and less pluck.



I could live quite happily with the Audio Research Reference 6SE.

I took a phone call and muted the preamp. I talked for about 10 minutes then returned to listening. Now, on the same CD, with the same engineer (Gérard de Haro, with mastering by Nicolas Baillard), that softness was less noticeable. Already, I was hearing plenty of wood and finger-string on double bass, and those high piano notes seemed plenty impact-pingy. Was it differently recorded on this track? No, my brain was adjusting. I went back and listened to "Empty Hands"; now it sounded different than it did before. I was hearing more transient information.

I went looking for some music with

more transient bite than this soft-jazz ECM CD has. (Don't think "soft jazz" is an insult; I really enjoy Hülsmann and her Trio, especially the poignant *The End of a Summer*, ECM 2079.) I tried the jazz-funk track "Eddie Harris" by the Kahil El'Zabar Quartet, from their album *Eddie Harris* (16/44.1 FLAC, Spiritmuse/Tidal)—not what I was looking for in terms of transient bite, but I liked it! Good funk, good depth, good front-to-back separation. Plenty of black space between instruments.

I found some of those tasty transients I was looking for on "Unonkanyamba" from Nduduzo Makhathini's *In the Spirit of Ntu* (24/48 MQA, Universal/Tidal) courtesy of percussionist Gontse Makhene. I also got gorgeous, backlit tone from Jaleel Shaw's saxophone and what must be Robin Fassie Kock's flugelhorn (sounding rather trumpetlike). As for Makhathini's piano, the left-hand figure he opens with sounded very much like a real piano, and the simple, staccato right-hand pattern he plays starting around 7:40 had plenty of percussive edge—sufficiently sharp transients, in other words. And when I listened to Son House's guitar on "Forever on My Mind," from the album of the same name (24/96 MQA, Easy Eye Sound/Tidal), there was no dearth of snap, and that voice was in the room.

I had intended to continue this experiment for weeks, but there was no need; the point was made. After many months of listening to the Pass Labs XP-32 preamplifier, it took me about an hour to acclimate to the different (but not vastly different) sonic viewpoint of the Audio Research Reference 6SE. Of the differences I noted when I first introduced the Audio Research preamp into the system, only one remains relevant to daily listening: that slight softening of transients. But is that a musically important defect? Surprisingly, no. It's a mere difference, neither virtue nor vice. Still, it persisted, which means that it's one aspect of the Ref 6SE's sound that's worth noting, even if it doesn't matter very much.

I have very much enjoyed the Pass Labs XP-32 preamplifier, and I expect to continue to, but I could live quite happily with the Audio Research Reference 6SE. ■

¹ The Ref 6SE costs \$18,000. Audio Research Corp., 6655 Wedgwood Rd. N, Suite 115, Maple Grove, MN 55311. Tel: (763) 577-9700. Web: audioresearch.com. See JVS's original review and JA's follow-up at bit.ly/3bu1IZg.