

The AudioValve Sunilda joins a growing band of 'full-size' phono stages yet manages to embody the best of them while offering a helping of extra flexibility, to boot. *Ken Kessler* plays host to this vinyl tweeker's dream

Hi-Fi News  
EXCLUSIVE

# Groove

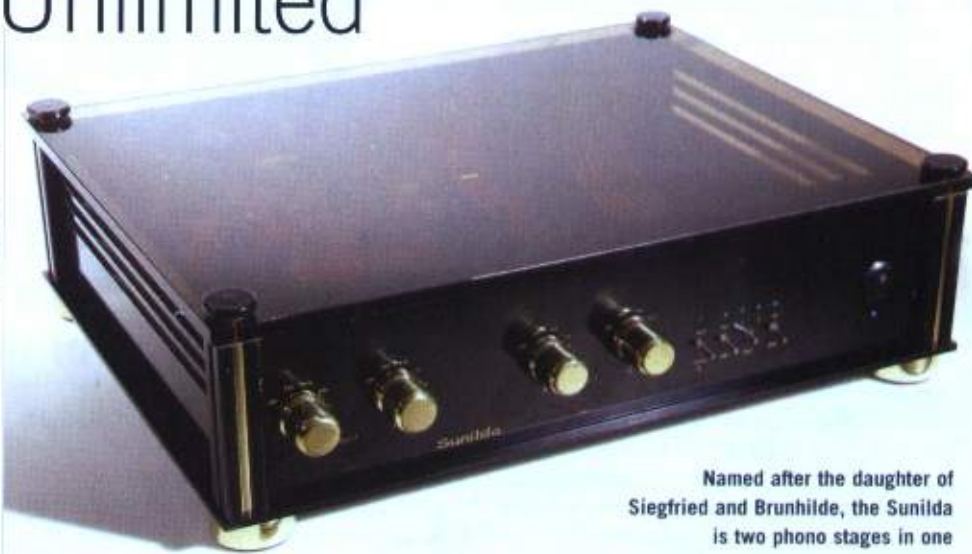
# Unlimited

## AudioValve Sunilda

PRICE £1950

One of audio's best-kept secrets is the AudioValve Eklipse pre-amplifier. All-valve, remote controlled, built to standards that you'd expect of Germans and – above all – a true bargain at £2100, it lacks only one thing: a phono section. OK, it's toe-curlingly ugly with its black-and-gold, steam-punk-Jules-Verne-reject styling, but the sound is so good and the price so low that you can overlook the aesthetics. For those with a taste by-pass, the good news is that the Sunilda phono stage is built into the same chassis.

It is, therefore, physically impressive for a phono stage in terms of bulk and heft, more in keeping with the Audio Research PH5 and other 'full size' units. Blessedly, it eschews minimalism because the Sunilda is clearly aimed at the vinyl



Named after the daughter of Siegfried and Brunhilde, the Sunilda is two phono stages in one

**The Sunilda is aimed at the vinyl addict, the sort with more than one turntable and a coven/school/flock of cartridges**

addict, the sort with more than one turntable and a coven/school/flock of cartridges. For this alone, it raised the hairs on my neck. However much I worship the PH5, there are times when I find its lack of facilities limiting.

The guts of the Sunilda rest on a double-sided PC board, laid out in a dual-mono topology. It's described as a 'three-stage phono-pre-amp, based

on 6922 or ECC88 and 12AX7 or ECC83 frame grid tubes' and accommodates both m-m and m-c cartridges. What inveterate fiddlers will love is that the Sunilda is two complete phono stages in one, with *both* sets of inputs enjoying the full complement of settings. The opportunities this provides for A/B'ing arms, turntables, cartridges and even different LP pressing are endless. Thus,

you have, independently for the two inputs, adjustable impedance and capacitive load, which you can do 'on-the-fly' while listening. As for those four rotaries and four toggle switches across the front, see 'Sunilda stats' panel over.

Other niceties include an outboard power supply, housed in a separate aluminium case. The main case itself is laser-cut, 4mm-thick steel and beside offering the Sunilda in both silver and black, you can also specify silver or gilt knobs, again depending on your stomach for bling-bling. Alas, Sunilda sunglasses are not supplied.

### OVERACTIVE ANALOGUE

This unit arrived in the midst of my most overactive analogue phase in years. In addition to SME 10



### Sunilda stats

Across the front of the Sunilda are four rotaries and four toggle switches. The rotaries, two per input, set capacitance of 0, 100, 220 or 470pF and impedance of 47, 100, 220, 470, 1k and 47k ohms. In moving magnet mode, the gain is 20dB lower than in m-c mode, at a fixed input-impedance of 47k. This means that users who like their m-cs at 47k ohms can employ that value with some added gain. Koetsu users: rejoice!

As for the four toggles, they activate, left to right, mute/operate/standby, m-m/m-c select for input 1, input selector for input 1 or 2, and lastly m-m/m-c select for input 2. Around the back are the two sets of RCA phono inputs with separate earths and a single pair of RCA phono outputs. The unit weighs 20kg and measures 420 x 320 x 140mm (whd).

and SME 30 turntables, I've recently added a Trio L-07D, and I have a fistful of cartridges to play with: London Gold and Maroon (the latter mono), Koetsu Black Urushi, Shure V15 V, Lyra (mono) Dorian, Transfiguration Temper V and a few others. With this mix, I was able to assess most of the settings, comparing m-m vs m-c, impedances and other characteristics. First, some observations:

If you are using a complex system, and a couple of turntables, you must pay attention to earthing to avoid a loop. You may find yourself opening AC plugs to disconnect earths. Moreover, the Sunilda responds well to quality mains leads, a solid mounting surface and a good set of phono cables to the pre-amp, which in this case was a line input on the McIntosh C2200. I used Transparent Reference, and did not earth the Sunilda to the Mac. The rest of the system included the McIntosh MC2102 and Wilson WATT Puppy System 7.

The Sunilda treats m-m and m-c cartridges equally. Where it shines is in its ability to let the user extract the most from either. I know, there are phono stages that provide even more settings, but AudioValve struck a nice balance. The only thing I would have added were oddball impedances for m-m so I could tweak the Deccas, but then I've only ever found these on the EAR 324.

Provided you address the cabling properly, the Sunilda is eerily quiet, if not quite on a par with the Sutherland PhD. And yet you never forget that it's all-valve, with a warmth that separates it from the solid-state EAR 324. The latter is hardly 'cold', but it is so precise that it approaches 'laboratory equipment' in its presentation. The Sunilda is fatter, more *zaftig*. Intriguingly, transparency is on a par with solid-state phono stages, while the warmth was kept in check so that it didn't overwhelm the listener with a hyper-analogue sound. It's easy to dial in so much euphonic artifice that you can make any LP sound more inviting than most intrinsically harsh digital sources, but that means throwing away super-quick transients, or bass slap. The Sunilda sacrifices nothing: it pours forth the detail, the air, the sense of a three-dimensional space and



Toggle switches are accompanied by coloured LEDs [above] while valves [left] are Electro-Harmonix

**The Sunilda pours forth the detail, the air, the sense of a 3-D space and the kind of control that's hard to fault**

the kind of control that's hard to fault. If, on the other hand, you need a vice-like grip over the entire affair, you simply have to turn to EAR.

What made me fall in love with the Sunilda were big band mono LPs, which possess a sheen and shimmer that exists nowhere else. Trust me: Billy May LPs have to be heard in true mono. With both the Decca Maroon and the Lyra Dorian, I was able to summon up room-filling, ear-caressing sounds that can only be described as 'silky'. If you have any doubts about the worth of vinyl in 2005, this phono stage will help dispel them.

### CONCLUSION

As you can imagine, competition in this sector is tough: really, really tough. I recently bought the Audio Research PH5, and – love it though I truly do – I have to admit that it's shy of adjustability, and lacks the facility for a second turntable; this makes it a pain in the arse if you like to fiddle about with cartridges and decks. Conversely, it's the choice if you *don't* fiddle around.

EAR's phono offerings are always magical, from

the least expensive to the sublimely dear; Quad's new valve phono amp is even more of a bargain than the Sunilda; Sutherland's PhD is the quietest phono stage I've ever heard. As any show-goer will tell you, there are countless other superb phono amps to consider as well. The Sunilda, however, is genuinely special: it manages to combine the best balance of all of the above phono amps' virtues, sonically and practically, then doubles them up and sells them to you for a sane price.

But take a 'top tip' from KK – do order yours in silver rather than black. ■

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### Hi-FiNews verdict

While there's no shortage of superb phono amps at this price point the Sunilda manages to embody the best balance of its rivals' strengths with a hefty helping of extra flexibility. A tweaker's delight.