

AudioValve Sunilda phono preamplifier

The AudioValve Sunilda (\$4995), a tubed phono preamp from Germany, offers a lot of setup convenience and flexibility, all controlled from its front panel. There are two independently configurable single-ended inputs selectable for MM or MC and adjustable for resistive (47, 100, 220, 470, 1k, and 47k ohms) and five choices of capacitive loading.

The outboard transformer for the solid-state power supply connects to the main chassis via a computer-type ribbon cable and multipin connector. The dual-mono circuit uses pairs of 6922 and 12AX7 tubes in a threestage configuration, with passive RIAA equalization split between the first and second stages. Interestingly, while the manual specifies 20dB of gain with the MC stage switched in, total gain is not specified. The specifications page of the manual lists MM and MC gain "@1kHz" but neglects to give numbers, though it says elsewhere that the MC stage adds 20dB, so it's a good bet the total gain is 55 or 60dB.

The Sunilda's claimed RIAA accuracy is ± 0.25 dB, with noise 76dB below signal in MC mode, which is fairly typical for tubed phono preamps. High-quality parts are used throughout, and the signal paths are kept short, all but eliminating any point-to-point wiring. While the rotary knobs for loading and capacitance have a rubbery feel due to the long acrylic shafts that connect them to the switches mounted on the rear board, that's a worthwhile sacrifice in the interest of frontpanel convenience and short signal paths. Use is straightforward and easy, but be sure to select Mute before changing inputs, or you'll hear a loud *pop*. Otherwise, the Sunilda was glitch-free during the review period.

Sound: The AudioValve Sunilda was quiet, even with relatively lowoutput MCs, and produced a sonic panorama with a rich, lush midband that definitely let me know that tubes were involved. But thanks to a wellcontrolled bottom end and pleasing high-frequency extension, the sound never sank into the overly tubey mire.

Though the Sunilda's bass extension was only moderately deep (your system would need to plumb the 20Hz depths for you to hear what was missing), bass control was very good—a combination preferable to more extension and less control. While the better solid-state phono preamps will deliver more extension

and more muscular control, tube fans will revel in the Sunilda's palpable bass textures. Drum skins and plucked bass strings had a supple elasticity that solid-state phono preamps tend to gloss over, just as the Sunilda tended to somewhat soften the visceral punch of the electric bass. Kick drums were more about the skin reverberation and less about the transient attack, pianos were more about sounding boards and wood than about hammer strokes, and so on.

When this balance goes overboard in one direction or the other, I hear either skeletal "runway model" sound, or the overstuffed kind that sounds the way Midwesterners at a state fair look. The best solid-state designs avoid the former, while the better tube designs avoid the latter. And the Sunilda is a better tube design.

Its pleasingly rich midrange and full-bodied harmonic palette can be described as Dockers expansive rather than unpleasingly plump. Combine its midband generosity (which includes that special 12AX7 golden glow) with clean, reasonably fast, grain-free, topend extension, nimble yet warm midand lower midbass, and reasonably decent bottomend extension, and you have a supremely listenable and enjoyable phono preamplifier.

Could you get more muscular bottom-end extension? Yes. Greater macrodynamic slam? Yes. And probably blacker blacks, too, which usually leads to more low-level microresolution, which you can also get elsewhere in solid-state designs. But there's a particular magic to the all-tube experience, particularly in how tubes resolve and three-dimensionalize certain instruments. I'm again playing Sundazed's new reissue of Simon and Garfunkel's *Bridge Over Troubled Water*, and the Sunilda's rendering of "So Long, Frank Lloyd Wright" is truly special. The strings are feathery, the acoustic guitar a perfect blend of string and body, the flute juicy and airy, the bongos have lots of skin, and the whole picture floats ethereally in three-dimensional space with great deliccy.

As with the Benz-Micro LP S cartridge, if you mostly listen to modern electric rock, the Sunilda might not be for you—but well-recorded acoustic music of all genres, as well as early rock and folk, sounded vivid and convincingly real, tonally, texturally, and spatially. What the Sunilda might lack in that last bit of slam it more than made up for in well-saturated harmonic

colors and three-dimensionality. Just don't use it with a cartridge that's already on the warm side, or you might end up with sound that's too slow and thick to get out of its own way. I enjoyed many months of listening with the Sunilda, particularly with the more analytical Lyra Titan *i* and Ortofon MC A90 cartridges. If the sound I've described is your type of sound, you'll love the Sunilda—and you can't beat the convenience of two independently configurable inputs and front-panel control of loading.

The AudioValve Sunilda is one of the most enjoyably balanced tube-based phono preamps I've heard. It might not be the last word in any particular performance parameter, but taken as a whole, it's one of those components that can be installed and enjoyed for a very long time without leaving you feeling you need or want more of anything.

AudioValve, Auf dem Steken 7, 32689 Kalletal, Germany. Tel: +49 (0)5264-7799. Fax: +49 (0)5264-654477. Web: www.audiovalve.info. US distributor: Lombardi Sales, Simi Valley, CA . Tel./Fax: (805) 522-0989. Web: www.rayofsound.com.