

## Audio Valve Conductor preamplifier

By [Robert J. Reina](#) • Posted: Jul 25, 2009

We audio writers have our niches. Mikey loves analog, Artie likes to play with horn speakers and assorted oddball British kit, and I really enjoy reviewing affordable speakers. There's something exciting about hearing the fruits of the labors of a creative designer who's applied his talents to meet a stringent price point and created a speaker that can entice into our hobby the financially challenged music lover.



But I have another passion: expensive tube gear. I so enjoyed my time reviewing the Audio Research Reference 110 amplifier that I bought the review sample (see [my review](#) in the August 2007 issue), and when ARC's [William Z. Johnson](#) insisted that I listen to the Reference 110 together with ARC's [Reference 3](#) line stage, I got a kick out of comparing the Ref 3 with my own reference line stage, the [Audio Valve Eclipse](#).

Although I was stunned by the refined level of musical realism of the Reference 3 (\$10,000), I was also surprised that the Eclipse (\$4200) held its own, despite being less than half the ARC's price. In fact, I was so surprised that, when the ARC went back home to Minnesota, I was quite happy to keep on listening to the Audio Valve. Still, I was scratching my head: *If the Eclipse is this good, what would a cost-no-object line stage from Audio Valve's Helmut Becker sound like?*

Turned out I'd be given an opportunity to find out. I later received a call from Audio Valve's US distributor, Ray Lombardi of Ray of Sound, who told me that AV had designed a "statement" line-stage preamplifier, the Conductor, which would cost \$13,995 in the US. Would I be interested in hearing it?

As I dashed off a quick e-mail to John Atkinson—"Please? Please!? Please!?"—my hands were trembling.

### The design is fascinating

A conversation with Heike Becker, Helmut's business partner, revealed the Conductor's origins. It seems that Audio Valve's German dealers and overseas distributors were clamoring for a line-stage preamp that could be paired with AV's top-of-the-line Baldur 300 and Challenger 400 monoblock amplifiers. Designer Becker began with a clean sheet of paper and three requirements: The new preamp needed to be a completely balanced design with fully symmetrical circuitry, to have an outboard power supply with massive storage, and to be completely dual-mono, even down to the power supply. Becker then proceeded to make the finest preamp he could.

The Conductor operates in full class-A with no feedback. Its balanced preamplification circuit, which provides 14dB of gain to all line inputs, uses four 6922 tubes to amplify each phase of each channel, followed by a motorized ALPS potentiometer, followed by four 6N6P (6H30) tubes in the second amplification stage. There are two outputs and six line-level inputs, each of which can be balanced or single-ended. The elegant but minimalist remote control enables switching of all but one of the inputs, as well as volume, mute, and power. One nice feature is that a microprocessor remembers the volume setting for each input, to minimize the risk of blasts of high-volume blasts when switching among sources with various output levels. There's also a usage meter, calibrated in hours, accessible only via the front panel.

The separate power supply provides 100,000 $\mu$ F of capacitance for the filament circuits, and an additional 10,000 $\mu$ F for the anode circuits. The large toroidal transformer is shielded from static and magnetic

effects and supplies eight separate conductor paths: four each for the filaments and anode circuits. The power supply also includes polypropylene capacitors as RF blockers, as well as eight low-resistance voltage regulators to remove ripple from the filament circuit and supply clean voltage.



All capacitors in preamp and power supply are proprietary designs made exclusively for Audio Valve. The units communicate via two umbilicals terminated with printer-style connectors. Although the preamp is designed to sit atop the power supply, Audio Valve and Ray of Sound will provide umbilicals of any length for those who want to separate them.

As the Conductor operates in class-A, which usually generates a lot of heat, Becker suggests that neither power supply nor preamp be placed on a thick carpet, and that the top of the preamp be given adequate ventilation. The units are each 20" wide, which will be too wide for many component racks.

I admire Helmut Becker for designing the best model he could with no concession to any expectations his customers might have had of how a preamp should look. Stacked atop its outboard power supply, the Conductor is unusually large and heavy—far more so than my ARC Reference 110 *power* amp. The preamp's physical appearance is striking, impressive, and eccentric. I think it's gorgeous, though not every visiting audiophile agreed.

Available in light gray with silver accents or black with gold accents, it sports a central window through which the tubes and circuit boards are visible. The volume pot is to the right; to the left, a color TFT screen displays various types of input, volume, and other data. The Conductor doesn't look mass-produced but handmade—akin to the product of a brilliant, wealthy, mad scientist who has spared no expense.

My only complaint about the Conductor's physical layout is that the display (about as large as a cell-phone's) wasn't easily read by this bifocals wearer unless I stood right in front of the preamp and bent

over to peer at it. Other than seeing which input is engaged and looking at the bargraph that shows the selected volume, it's not critical to be able to read the display, but it would be nice if it were a bit larger.

The turn-on procedure has four steps. Flipping on a switch on the preamp section's rear panel puts it into Sleep mode: "Conductor" appears in red on the power supply, while the word remains dark on the preamp itself. Hitting the On/Off button on the remote, one of the toggle switches on the front panel, or the center of the display puts the preamp in Mute mode. On both power supply and preamp, "Conductor" then turns from red to dark blue. The display shows a picture of a tube and a thermometer that changes from black to red to yellow as the filaments heat up. When the thermometer reaches 75%, the tubes' plate voltage of the tubes is applied. When the thermometer reaches 100%, the preamp switches itself to Operate mode and the screen displays the input selected. It sounds complicated, but it's simple, and cool to watch.

The Conductor operated flawlessly during its tenure here, as I would have expected: my Audio Valve Eclipse has proved to be the most reliable piece of audio electronics I've ever owned.

### **The hearing is believing**

As I fired up the Conductor for the first time, I had a thought. *Given this preamp's lofty price, it would be nice to be able to say that it was completely uncolored, and had no sonic shortcomings whatsoever.*

A few days of listening later, it had become clear that, without equivocation, I could say just that. Three *months* of listening later, having found no flaws whatsoever in the Conductor's sound, I thought I'd focus on what it did unusually well.

If you read my [Follow-Up](#) on the Audio Valve Eclipse preamp in the June 2008 issue, you might recall that I was very impressed with its quick, uncolored, kick-slammng, solid-state-like bass performance. The Conductor shared that trait in the bottom end, but seemed capable of even more. I have known every component in my reference system for many years, and it seemed that, with the Conductor in place, my system was capable of far deeper bass than I'd ever realized it was. I don't necessarily mean some technical lower-limit extension per se. It just seemed that with every well-engineered recording I played that had significant bass content, every instrument seemed to have a more authoritative presence below 60Hz that suggested live music.



I listened to Jon Hassell's latest album, *Last Night the Moon Came Dropping Its Clothes in the Street* (CD, ECM 2077), one week after I'd heard the entire CD performed by Hassell and his group at Carnegie Hall. This quintet, consisting of electronically manipulated trumpet, violin, and bass guitar, as well two musicians retrieving sampled sounds from laptops, create delicately atmospheric yet powerful soundscapes that are both intellectually challenging and accessible. On "Time and Place," the lower register of Peter Freeman's bass as it filled Carnegie Hall created an "air of thunder" more reminiscent of pipe-organ pedal notes in a great cathedral. The Conductor perfectly reproduced this effect from the CD, with a sound so arresting I held back a bit on the volume—I was worried about damaging the woofers of my [Alón Circe](#) speakers.

What you might expect from a preamp with such a massive—some might say overengineered—power supply is impressive dynamic range. This was indeed one of the Conductor's greatest strengths, best

illustrated by Helmuth Rilling and the Oregon Bach Festival's recording of Krzysztof Penderecki's *Credo*, a blockbuster work for chorus and orchestra (CD, Hänssler Classic 09.311). When, in the opening passage—very difficult to reproduce accurately—the full-throated chorus breaks out, there was no hint of congestion or coagulation, no trace of distortion. I flinched when the bass drum kicked me in the face, and lower-level passages were equally impressive. When bass Thomas Quasthoff entered in *Credo in Unum Deum*, his holographically reproduced body appeared midstage, and it was easy to "see" his vocal phrasing technique.

The Conductor brought out every little subtlety in the Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival performance of Tomiko Kohjiba's *The Transmigration of the Soul*, from [Festival](#) (CD, Stereophile STPH007-2). In the opening passage, I could hear clearly when the melodic lines of soprano Kendra Colton and flutist Carol Wincenc "de-linked." I could also clearly follow the slightly enhanced downstrokes of cellist Peter Wyrick's bowing. From my notes: "pinpoint staging, gobs of space and air, flawless timpani, shattering dynamics."

The Conductor's dynamic range was so wide that I sometimes had trouble deciding where to set the volume control. I began "Mansour's Gift," from my jazz quartet Attention Screen's [Live at Merkin Hall](#) (CD, Stereophile STPH018-2), at a level at which I could comfortably follow every subtle, low-level electronic effect in bassist Chris Jones's introduction, while marveling at the subtle dynamic envelope of Mark Flynn's Korean *tuk* drum. At this level, however, the crashing fortissimo in the descending passage for piano, bass, and drums near the end of the track was so loud that my wife demanded I turn the volume down.

That's not to say that the Conductor didn't excel at delicate jazz passages. "Tears Transforming," from the Tord Gustavsen Trio's [The Ground](#) (CD, ECM 1892), enveloped me in a warm, delicate bath of liquid piano sound. On "Original Faubus Fables," from *Charles Mingus Presents Charles Mingus* (LP, Candid 9005), the Conductor presented Mingus's warm bass lines as a clearly defined bedrock for trumpeter Ted Curson's biting, brassy, burnished solo.

I also cued up the great rockabilly version of Duke Ellington's "Caravan" from Santo and Johnny's eponymous first album (LP, Canadian American CALP 1001, footnote 1). As I noted how tightly and tunefully the uncredited studio bassist and drummer churned through this tune, I was able to study every lick of Santo Farina's (then a teenager) masterful upper-register lap-steel solo, as the Conductor reproduced every nuance with pristine splendor.

The Conductor's upper-register purity went hand in hand with its rapid and undistorted transient abilities to make it a spectacular showcase for percussion recordings. The wide, deep soundstage of Charles Wuorinen's recording of his *Ringling Changes for Percussion Ensemble* (LP, Nonesuch H71263) placed every instrument in its appropriate space, each on its own bed of air. The entrancing low-level pianissimos leading into "barking and crashing" fortissimos presented a similar challenge in volume control to what I'd faced when playing the Attention Screen disc.

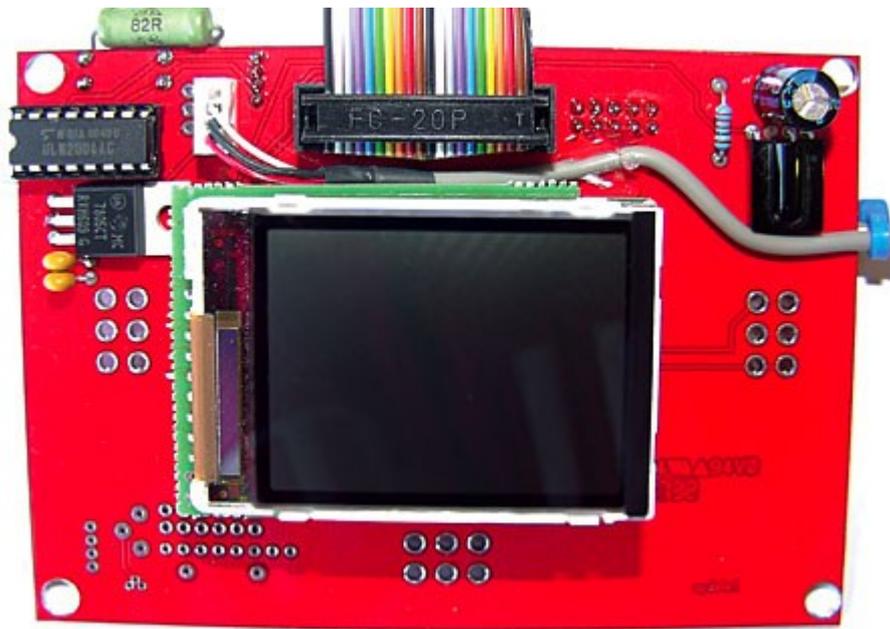
I won't go into detail about the countless familiar recordings with which the Conductor's resolution of inner detail let me hear, say, woodwind countermelodies under a dense orchestral passage, bassoons doubling choral baritones, or bass-synth countermelodies—none of which, at the risk of using an audiophile cliché, I'd ever heard before.

And don't let the Conductor's name fool you into thinking it's only for lovers of classical and jazz. Playing the title track of Hole's *Celebrity Skin* (CD, Geffen DGCD-25164) at about 97dB, as I twitched around the room to the slamming drum and kick-ass bass lines, I was still able to clearly follow the lyrics sung by the backing vocalists over the din of distorted guitar.

### **The comparing is revealing**

I had no other preamps on hand that were anywhere near the Conductor's price to do a fairer comparison, and it's been some time since the Reference 3 was sent back to Audio Research. However, readers can refer to my comparison of the ARC and the Audio Valve Eclipse in my [Follow-Up](#) on the latter in the June 2008 issue.

It was fascinating to compare the Conductor with the Eclipse with a wide range of recordings. The two preamps, clearly cut from the same sonic cloth, both had ultra-low levels of coloration. However, there was a slight difference in their midrange perspectives. The Eclipse seemed a bit more forward, the Conductor a tad laid-back. With the latter, it was as if I'd moved 10 rows back in the orchestra section of a concert hall. Although one of the Eclipse's greatest strengths was its tight, clean, deep, kick-ass bass, the Conductor, as mentioned above, seemed even better in this area. The high-frequency characteristics of the two preamps were virtually identical.



One area in which the Conductor bettered the Eclipse: No matter how densely modulated the music, the Conductor never sounded as if it was working hard to produce its effortless, pristine, crystal-clear sound. With some of the more demanding orchestral works and recordings, the Eclipse never sounded congealed or congested, but I sensed it was giving all it had to ensure a realistic reproduction of the music. By comparison, the Conductor always sounded effortless: for all it cared, it could have been reproducing a string quartet rather than an orchestra.

These characteristics were directly related to the preamps' reproductions of soundstages. While the Eclipse presented detailed, pinpoint images on a wide, deep soundstage, the Conductor's stage was even wider and deeper. But the differences went further than that. There was an openness to the Conductor's soundstaging that I hadn't heard before from a preamp. Although the Conductor's superb presentation of detail rendered ambience and hall cues perfectly, I never had the sense that it was reproducing music that had been recorded in a confined space, as I felt with the Eclipse. It was a paradox: The Conductor sounded so open that it seemed to almost make the walls of concert halls disappear, while simultaneously rendering ambience cues that made it easier to hear those walls.

The Eclipse's wide dynamic contrasts were bettered by the Conductor's. A case in point: With the Eclipse hooked up, I cued up Attention Screen's "Mansour's Gift" and began listening at the same volume level as I had with the Conductor. But this time, when the cacophonous fortissimo crash came near the end of the piece, my wife did *not* tell me to turn the volume down. I could say that, while the Eclipse is capable of *ppp/fff* dynamic contrasts, the Conductor is capable of *pppp/ffff*.

While this comparison clearly revealed the superiority of the Conductor over the Eclipse, it also reaffirmed what a rare bargain the Eclipse is.

### **Sadly, the Conductor is leaving the podium**

Without exception, the Audio Valve Conductor produced stunning, flawless sound during the three delightful months it spent in my house, and exceeded the performance of my Audio Valve Eclipse—no easy task. I unhesitatingly recommend its consideration to anyone able to spend \$13,995 on a line stage. Unfortunately, I am not a member of that club, so it's back to the Eclipse for me.

I also strongly recommend that, given the Conductor's unusual size and appearance, you see the preamp in the flesh before buying—and take your significant other with you. But still—at no time during the Conductor's tenure here did my wife comment on its appearance or the amount of space it occupied in our living room.

Well done, Herr Becker, and keep up the good work!