

THE LISTENING ROOM



MOON P-8 PREAMP

Does Simaudio know how to make a good preamplifier? Of course it does. Oh, at one time it didn't, but we actually praised one of the company's preamps back when it was still called Sima Audio (it was the P-3001, back in *UHF* No. 25). Since then the company has turned out even more creditable preamps, such as the P-5 and the Attraction (a preamp-processor, good enough that we own one). No, the preamps were okay, it was just that...

Truth is, for some years Simaudio has been making what we consider to be the best solid state power amplifiers in existence. They're a hard act to follow. What's more, the company outdid itself with the W-8 power amp (which was on the cover of *UHF* No. 75, and subsequently joined our Omega system), and it claimed to have done as well with the matching P-8. That would be a triumph, provided of course it was true.

We weren't sure what to think when we received our test unit. Huge as the W-8 is, the P-8 actually comes in a bigger box. And it's only a little less heavy, too, though at least it comes in two parts. Last but not least, it's much more expensive than even the costly W-8 power amp.

That might seem like madness, but there's method in the madness. Contrary to what we've read in publications we won't name unless they buy an ad, a preamp is actually tougher to get right than a power amp. It needs a lot more

connectors, too, plus volume and input controls, and none of these things come cheap if you're aiming for quality.

Like a number of other preamplifiers, the P-8 is a two-box affair. The conventional way to do a two-chassis preamp is to put the power supply in one box and the audio circuitry in the other. So have a look at the picture, and spot which is the power supply and which is the preamp. The preamp is the one with the volume control and the info screen, right?

Well, no.

The picture of the P-8's rear, shown on the next page, reveals the truth. The smaller box on the bottom has all the input and output jacks, and it contains the audio circuits. The larger box on top really *is* the power supply, but it's much more. It also contains a full-fledged computer, which controls the audio section digitally, without handling the audio signal itself. The big volume knob does not have a potentiometer behind

**It's the preamp
designed to go
with our own W-8
amplifier.
Can it keep up?**

it, needless to say. Rather, it controls an optical sensor, which sends signals to a switched resistor array in the smaller box. The audio circuits never “see” more than two of the resistors. That is a configuration Simaudio has used for years.

That is, then, why the red LED screen is on the larger box. It can show the selected input, the volume and the balance. Yes, the balance. The grey metal remote control will let you tilt the channels to favor one over the other. Oddly, there is no button to bring the balance back to normal, a minor omission.

There’s more, quite a lot more. Is your FM tuner louder than your CD player? You can alter the tuner input’s sensitivity so that it matches that of the CD input. Do you want one of the inputs to bypass the volume control, so that your cinema sound processor can handle the levels? You can set it up that way. Indeed, *any* of the inputs can be set up to bypass the volume control. Just don’t lose the instruction manual!

(Although, if you do, you can just download a new one from the Simaudio Web site.)

Since the larger box is more than just a power supply, it is linked to the preamp proper by more than one cable. There are in fact two power cables that go between the units. A third cable, allowing them to communicate, looks like a cross between an XLR connector and an Ethernet plug. It needs to be plugged into the right jack, but if you get it wrong the LED screen will gently warn you. There is an extra connector for future products, such as the new phono stage.

There are other nice touches. Volume levels are finally shown in decibels over minimum level, rather than decibels *below maximum*, as in earlier Simaudio preamps. That means a larger number on the screen indicates more volume, an arrangement which has the virtue of being intuitive. Below 30 dB the level jumps by a decibel at a time; *above* 30 dB, it goes up by 0.1 dB steps, unless you turn the volume knob quickly, at which point it gives you full decibel precision.

We liked the large display, which can be read from across the room, though we wondered why they had used a red screen that clashes with the blue pilot



LED. Then we discovered that a blue screen is actually an option you can order. Our bet is that blue costs extra, but if you’re looking seriously at the P-8 you’re probably not worrying about the source of your next meal. You can also shut off the screen with the remote, though after wishing we had a preamp whose screen we could see at a distance, we weren’t about to abandon it.

You can see from the photo above that the jacks at the rear are not made from pieces of rolled tin, unlike those found on a shocking proportion of gear, no matter the price. You will also have noticed that balanced XLR connectors are supplied for several inputs and all outputs.

When you first turn on the unit, you’ll see that the inputs have only letter names, such as B1 (for a balanced input) or S1 (for a coaxial input). With the help of the instruction manual, you can rename an input (CD instead of B2, for instance), you can offset its volume (boost the tuner input by 6 dB if your tuner has low output, for instance). You can have it bypass the volume control (as you might for the left-right feeds of a video sound processor). You can have an input trigger a 12 volt signal (to turn on the surround amps when you select the movie input for example). Finally, you can lock an unused input out of the rotation.

There is also a computer-style RS232 connector at the rear. Computers seldom come with that anymore, but home entertainment installers expect to find it.

There are reasons for the size and weight of the P-8 preamplifier. Virtually every circuit gets its own power supply, and that adds up to 40 separate supplies.

The circuit boards have four layers, to keep the size down (imagine if that *hadn’t* been done), with most components surface-mounted, for shorter signal paths.

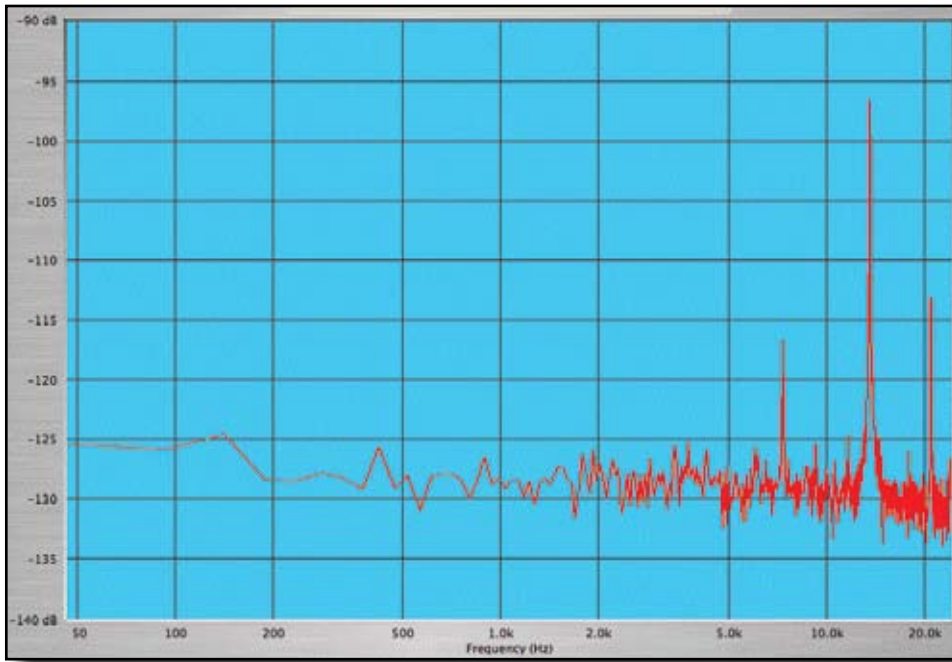
For some owners, the first problem will be where to put a preamp this big. Simaudio’s own pictures show the two units stacked, just as ours do, but unlike older Simaudio products they don’t have the little top “dimples” allowing the cones on one unit to drop onto another without major cosmetic damage. We stacked them using the little “dishes” supplied (you can see them under the top unit’s cones), but it took four steady hands to dock the two boxes without scratching anything. The next thing to worry about is whether your equipment shelf will put up with this much weight indefinitely, because the alternative doesn’t bear thinking about.

We carried the P-8 into the Alpha room, where it could work with one of its brandmates, our W-5LE power amplifier. We pulled out half a dozen recordings, all but two of them high definition, and did some critical listening.

We began the session with the sound of the violin, as exemplified by the Stradivarius of James Ehnes on his *Romantic Pieces* CD (Analekta FL 2 3191). We might explain that all of the Ehnes recordings for Analekta have sounded true to life, but none better than this one. We would see whether the tiny nuances of this fine recording could snake its way through the P-8 preamplifier.

They did.

The bow seemed to slide over the violin strings like a spoon through thick cream. There was nonetheless a small vibrato caused by the resin on the



strings, and we could detect it clearly (it wasn't exactly inaudible with our reference preamp, of course).

But what impressed us most was the virtually perfect balance of the recording. There was a wonderful equilibrium between violin and piano, and a symmetry between smoothness and detail. Reine found the emotional message of the music exquisite.

The tone was not quite the same as with our reference preamp, though, and Albert found it rather cooler. "It's neither a flaw nor a quality," he said. "It's just...different."

We thought our favorite choral recording might turn up some flaws in the P-8, if flaws there were, because we have heard it shame some designers who believed their gear was superb...or even listenable. That recording is, you will have guessed, *Now the Green Blade Riseth*, in its awesome SACD incarnation (Proprius PRSACD9093), played from our Linn Unidisk 1.1. What would happen?

What happened is that the P-8 made the music glow. Everything sounded right, with beautiful female and male voices, remaining realistic over the whole of the volume range, something that we can't always count on. The plucked bass was strong, communicating the rhythm convincingly, though without excess. The words were of exceptional clarity, with a tone that seemed downright

joyous. Gerard noticed that the male singers were clearly placed *behind* the women, something he had never heard before.

Albert chose the words *smoothness and serenity* to characterize the sound of the P-8. Reine selected only one word: *perfection*.

We had another tough recording on hand, Rachmaninov's *Piano Concerto No. 2* (PentaTone 5186 114) an SACD made right from an original Decca analog master tape. The concerto begins with deep chords from pianist Werner Haas's left hand, reproduced with power. Even more powerful was the orchestra once it joined in. The first movement is filled with rapid cascades of notes, and

the P-8 handled them deftly. "I was able to follow the melodic line better," said Reine, "and did you hear the timbre of that piano?" Added Albert, "It sounds majestic, but it never gets pompous."

Gerard was listening for the rhythm of the concerto. "Is it my imagination, or do the musicians seem to be playing faster? If so, all the better. This is like an evening at the symphony."

Those first three recordings sounded so good we felt we could easily have powered the preamp down and drawn the now obvious conclusions about the P-8, but we had three more recordings selected, and we *wanted* to hear them.

We were eager to hear what the P-8 would do with the pure soprano voice of Isabel Bayrakdarian in her recording of art songs by Pauline Viardot-Garcia (Analekta AN 2 9903). We selected one of the most attractive songs from what is a consistently attractive album, *Seize ans*.

Would it sound perfect, as the previous recordings had? Well, of *course* it would. None of us wrote much, Reine commenting only that "I've already said it all." Bayrakdarian's voice was exceptionally clear, the words easier to make out, something both Albert and Gerard noted. Such clarity is often a sign of something radically wrong with the way a component handles transients, and you can determine this if you listen carefully to what else is happening. In this case the clarity was real.

We had a similar experience with Eric Bibb's Gospel Blues song, *Needed Time* (from the *Spirit and the Blues* SACD, Opus 3 CD19411). Once again the sound field was filled with fine detail, but without a sign of exaggeration. Bibb's voice was clear and expressive, and the accompanying instruments — guitars, harmonica and percussion — were perfect. We couldn't reasonably have asked for more. "I know what I want to say," commented Reine finally, "but I don't want to talk just yet."

We ended with one more high definition recording, this time in 24/96 audio on a DVD: the Ray Brown Trio's *Sweet Georgia Brown* from the album *Trio* (Hi-Res HRM-2008). There's a lot to this recording, whose sound you would not mistake for that of a Red Book CD.

SUMMING IT UP...

Brand/model: Simaudio Moon P-8

Price: C\$12,900/US\$11,000

Size (WDH): 48 x 42.5 x 9.5 cm (preamp), 48 x 42.5 x 13.3 cm (power/control unit)

Number of inputs: 3 balanced, 4 unbalanced

Most liked: Outstanding musicality, great functionality

Least liked: Alas, size and price in line with the functionality and performance

Verdict: Simaudio finally hits the jackpot

And — by now this was hardly a surprise — the P-8 had little difficulty getting all the juice out of it. As with the other recordings, we were struck by the naturalness of tone of the bass, piano and drums, and by the tight coherence of their playing. The tempo was quick and light, the stereo image huge, the playing joyous and even humorous. “There’s a remarkable presence to the musicians,” said Albert. “We’re right there with them.”

It had been a long day, but we were actually sorry it was over...and that’s not something we say every day. Now it was time to turn the P-8 over to the instruments, to see whether they could tell us something we didn’t already know.

Simaudio claims that its use of multiple power supplies results in extraordinarily low noise. And indeed our measurement, shown on the previous page, at a reference level of 2 volts, is superb, with noise well below -125 dB

over nearly all of the range. The exception: three noise spikes, one of them at -97 dB. We believe this to be an artifact in the measurement setup rather than in the P-8 itself. Note that Simaudio claims an even better noise figure, and that could be right, because the curve we got was very close to what we would get with *nothing at all* connected to our test suite.

On the other hand, measured performance at any level above the noise was exemplary.

We like to measure crosstalk between adjacent inputs, since it indicates what you can expect if, for instance, you leave your FM tuner switched on while you’re listening to a CD on the next input. A typical crosstalk figure will be -70 dB at midband (meaning that bleedthrough from the channel “next door” will be 70 dB lower than the signal you are trying to listen to), and usually much worse at higher frequencies. The

P-8’s crosstalk was so low we could not read it reliably, which is a first in our experience.

It is a general, but not absolute, rule that, all else being equal, a simple audio product will sound better than a complex one. The Moon P-8 is exceptionally complex, and one might be tempted to hold its complexity against it. In this case the rule doesn’t hold, because the complications are all well out of the way of the audio signal, where they can’t do any harm. Our ears told us that much.

There’s an aspect of the P-8 we find disquieting, however. Its price is beyond the means of even our richer friends. The very *space* this beast takes up may be a problem in some homes. Couldn’t the P-8’s technology be combined with a simpler concept, to make it more affordable? Yes, according to Simaudio, that would be the P-7.

Can the P-7 compare with the P-8? It is a tough act to follow.



CROSSTALK

Here is my plan to buy an excellent preamp at a bargain price (assuming the P-8 is irremediably out of your price range).

First, you must find, if you can, an audiophile who thinks he is set for life (ha!). He now has everything he always wished for and has already tried everything *you* have wished for. His music flows transparently in his listening room, and he listens to it admiringly. No more upgrades in *this* lifetime, he says confidently, having found contentment at last.

Then, knock on his door, smile and hand him a P-8 (carefully, you’ll know what I mean when you do). Say you want to hear “what it can do,” and ask if he could play some of his favourite recordings. Then just wait and watch what happens.

First, I suspect, there will be denial. Then, most likely, disbelief. Then, frantic activity through his collection of CDs and LPs. *More* disbelief.

Say little, listen and wait.

And, much later, since you probably brought your checkbook along, you’ll likely leave with the excellent preamp he used to have.

—Albert Simon

This newborn scion of Simaudio’s Evolution series can only elicit admiration.

What emerges from it fills not only the ears but the heart with beauty and *joie de vivre*. It is as though, somehow, it had the power to inject into every piece of music an extra dose of the ingredients that can make a mere listening session into a joyful experience.

Indeed, listening to the human voice through the P-8 plunged me into a sort of reverie from which I awaken only with the greatest effort. Words are clear. Instrumental timbres are of great beauty: a silky violin, an expressive piano, sublime guitars, strings that are smooth but not too smooth, scintillating brass, a cello whose tone borders on carnality, a solid bass, an evocative harmonica. The full orchestra we listened to for this review followed a rhythm alternating between lively and moderate, overflowing with notes and diverse sounds, notable for difficulties. It all came through without distortion, with wonderful fusion and exemplary balance of the many musicians and their instruments.

Thanks to its remarkable clarity, the P-8 reproduces realistically a host of micro-information that is often lost with less talented products: a slight vibration in the strings of the violin, subtle modulations, nearly inaudible ends of syllables, percussive effects that take you by surprise, rav-

ishing counterpoints. The dynamic palette favors a vast range of emotions.

I really thought we had reached perfection with our reference preamplifier. But I now have to admit it: the P-8 can take us even higher.

—Reine Lessard

I had initial doubts about this preamplifier. For one thing, I’ve listened to lots of other Simaudio preamplifiers. Good as they often were, their power amps were even better. For another I looked at how *complex* this beast is, and I couldn’t imagine tiny bits of information making it intact through all that stuff.

Well, they do, with a natural musicality that can serve as a model. Or as a reference. This is a truly great preamplifier, entirely worthy of being played alongside the W-8 power amp...and you know the story with that.

The P-8’s complexity still bothers me for a different reason. This big a machine has to cost a lot of money, and it does. I wish I could recommend it to more people, because I would, but the price (and size too) may keep a lot of audiophiles from even listening to it.

But I’m glad I got the chance.

—Gerard Rejskind