

Hifi Hanger

Single Input Passive Preamplifier



BEING A PREAMPLIFIER is a thankless task. It's the hi-fi equivalent of a goalkeeper in football – if you screw up then you are rubbish and should be replaced, and if you don't then all the glory goes to the star striker instead! Whereas turntables, DACs and tuners mysteriously make sound from thin air – or so it seems – all a preamp can do is spoil whatever it is given, however good it was in the first place. It's not the greatest job in hi-fi, and certainly one of the hardest – and like goalkeepers, a good one is hard to find.

Experience has taught me that even £10,000 preamps can do a surprisingly poor job. Despite being massive behemoths with beautiful fascias resplendent with snazzy switchgear, they are often humbled when you contrast them with no preamplifier at all. Indeed, even compared with some highly affordable passive designs, such as Creek's late lamented OBH-22, many expensive preamps do badly. Indeed, the giant-killing antics of the aforementioned Creek, plus the Townshend Allegri and MF Audio Passive Pre, have put the cat among the pigeons in the past five years.

Getting it right

A simple passive preamp like the aforementioned Creek and this new Hifi Hanger design is, of course, an attenuator, a variable resistor that is placed in a small box and wired to two pairs of RCA phono sockets. You would think that with so little to go wrong, how could such a thing not sound great? Well, actually, anyone who's tried to make their own soon realises that even with something as elementary as this, it's perfectly possible to jigger it all up. Just choose a low-quality volume pot, poor socketry and cheap wiring and you'll be going back to active preamps in a trice!

The PSA-01 single-input passive stepped attenuator uses a 20kohm, 21-step potentiometer with gold-plated contacts treated with switch lubricant. It sports surface-mount resistors wired to twisted



pairs of 7-strand silver-plated copper cable sleeved in PTFE. The shortest manageable lengths have been used, says the manufacturer, for the purest signal path, and the RCA terminals are high-quality gold-plated Neutrik. All in all, this package seems very good value for £155, especially considering how well presented the unit is. It looks superb in its own minimalist way and the volume knob is a classy item; most passive preamps have a distinctly downmarket feel, but this does not. Better still, it has been hand assembled in Hampshire by a qualified electronics engineer, rather than being an imported device from an anonymous OEM.

You might think that with virtually no parts, passive preamplifiers should all sound great, but this isn't the case; many are done poorly and can come across as dull and uninvolved – opposite to the edgy, forward sound of most active designs. The Hifi Hanger Passive Preamp is a good compromise, and at the price proves a very strong performer indeed. It isn't quite the solution to the world's preamp problems, because it does have a sound of its own, but it is in no way bad – and once again, for the money it is superb.

In essence, it very slightly becalms the sound, and takes the last few percent of dynamics out of the

equation. At the same time, it seems to slow it down very slightly, adding a little 'drag' to transients. The result is something that sounds just a few percentage points away from the original. Spatially, it flattens the stereo soundstage ever so slightly, pulling some rear-ground information forward, while dropping the very quietest detail away into the noise floor.

Keeping it real

Tonally it's pretty neutral, retaining the power of a well played bass guitar, and keeping the sparkle of ride cymbals. It introduces just a touch of grain to the upper midband, so close-miked female vocals, for example, can sound a fraction more edgy than before, but there's relatively little in it. The overall effect is of a source very close to the original line-level source, but the better your system is the more you will notice the differences. No preamp ever gets it right, and this tiny and remarkably inexpensive unit does surprisingly little wrong at the price – making it ideal for budget and mid-price systems. It won't dent sales of high-end designs, but is superb value and lets those who don't need a profusion of sources spend more money elsewhere. Highly recommended. **DP**

DETAILS

PRICE
£155
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OUR VERDICT

