

# hi-fi+

Issue 35  
£3.95

REPRODUCING THE RECORDED ARTS

## Genius in the making

### ▷ Singing Out

*Eliza Gilkyson*

*Mobile Fidelity*

*Concord Jazz Re-Issues*

*The Great Mercury Shoot-Out*

### ▷ Loud and Clear

*Focal-JMLabs Chorus 707s*

*Eben X-Baby*

*Thiel CS1.6*

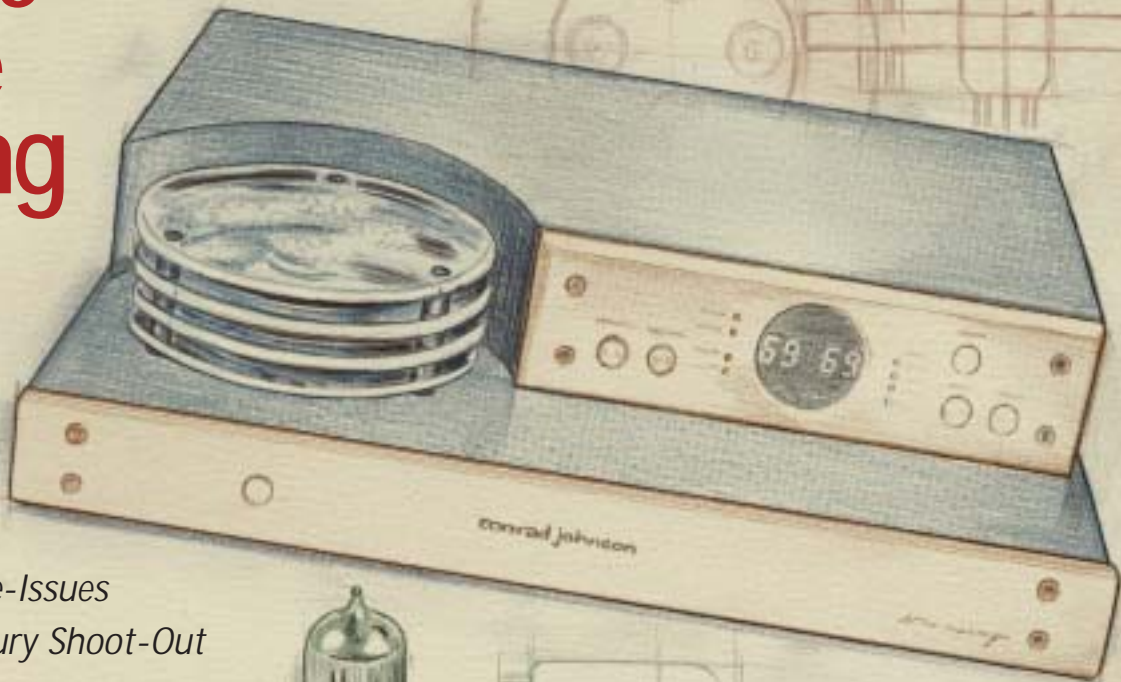
### ▷ Hot and Glowing

*conrad-johnson ACT 2*

*Audio Research PH5*

*PrimaLuna Prologue 2*

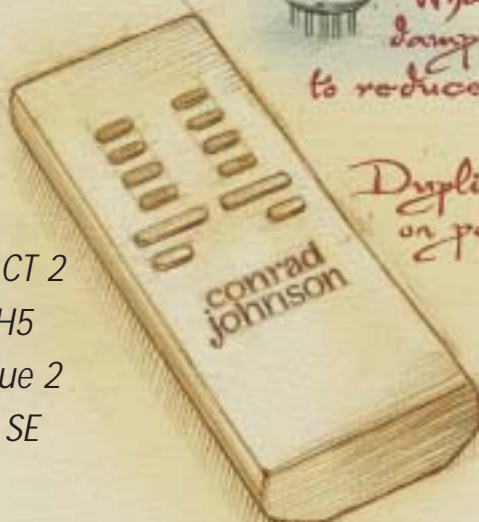
*Border Patrol S20 SE*



6N 30F Valves -  
What about  
damping rings  
to reduce resonance?



Duplicate all functions  
on portable controller.





AUDIOPAX  
model five

TUN DVD DVD RECORD  
CD RECORD

TUN DVD DVD RECORD  
CD RECORD  
INPUT AUX OFF

# Audiopax Model 5 Line-Stage

by Roy Gregory

Anybody who develops more than a passing interest in audio reproduction realises pretty soon that there's very little that's genuinely new under the hi-fi sun. Enter then, the Audiopax Model 88 mono-blocks, reviewed back in Issue 28, an amplifier that succeeded in being satisfying, intriguing and intellectually frustrating in pretty much equal measure. Weird as weird does, and there was little if anything straightforward about the 88. Solid-state regulated, it used KT88s in a parallel single-ended arrangement that is about as close to a technological personality disorder as it's possible to get. But it worked. Oh boy did it work, easily setting aside preconceptions and prejudice with equal disdain. And central to that success? The Timbre-Lock controls, only external evidence of a genuinely novel circuit designed to optimise the amplifier's interface with its load. What's more, not only is this circuit new enough to tax established critical understanding and practice, but it's both readily demonstrable and (even more importantly) reliably repeatable.

And the point is? Well, any further discussion of the detail is beyond the scope of this article (you can always read the original review) but it does serve to establish two things: Audiopax designer Eduardo de Lima is a man who is not afraid to think outside the box, and when he considers something to be more important than it might at first seem, it's as well to take him seriously.

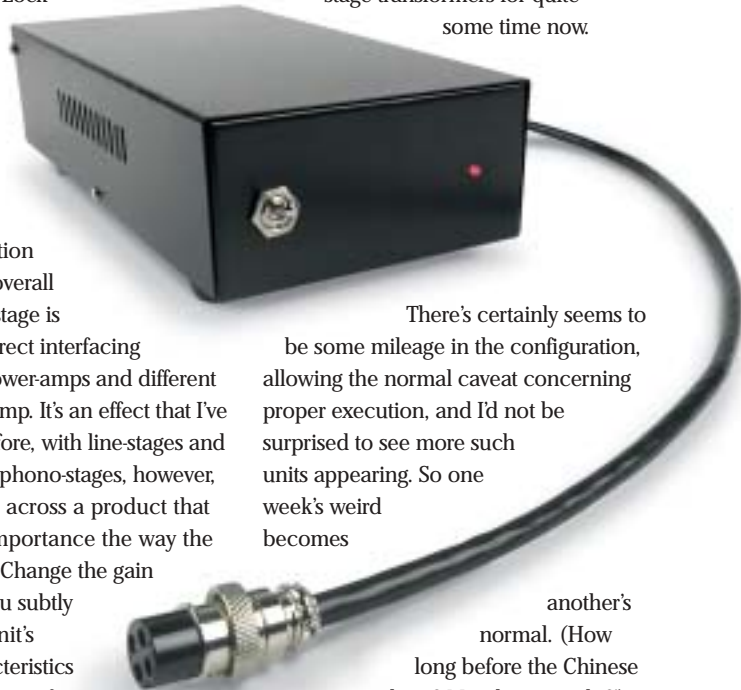
The Audiopax Model 5 line-stage may not be as obviously novel or challenging as the Model 88 mono-blocks, but rest assured that it is, in its own way cut from the same philosophical cloth. Remember, all a line-stage has to do is take a bunch of signals, select one and pass it to the waiting power-amp at the appropriate

level. But remember too, that signor de Lima has what could be considered an unhealthy obsession with equipment interfaces and what on the surface might appear a simple proposition takes on a rather more labyrinthine quality. Well, you can breathe a sigh of relief. The solution developed for the Model 5 is both far easier to use and understand than the Timbre-Lock controls on the power-amp, even if the background thinking has common elements.

The proposition here is that the overall gain of the line-stage is critical to its correct interfacing with different power-amps and different types of power-amp. It's an effect that I've experienced before, with line-stages and more obviously, phono-stages, however, I've never come across a product that underlines its importance the way the Audiopax does. Change the gain structure and you subtly alter both the unit's electrical characteristics and its distortion artefacts (the latter the object of the Timbre-Lock circuit). To this end, the Model 5 offers unusually comprehensive gain and level control, with a high-gain/low-gain switch on the rear-panel and individual gain controls alongside the volume control on the front-panel, graduated in single dB steps. De Lima sees this as a natural extension of his thinking, and even if gain matching is a familiar concept, his understanding of its effects certainly isn't.

Beyond the off-beat nature of its controls, the Model 5 is another product under-going a technological identity

crisis, combining solid-state circuitry with transformer coupling. This, I might remind you, from a manufacturer of parallel single-ended mono-blocks. Indeed, there's a faint echo here, strangely reminiscent of the Renaissance phono-stage reviewed in the last issue. Both units have impressed, while JMH has been a staunch advocate of inter-stage transformers for quite some time now.



There's certainly seems to be some mileage in the configuration, allowing the normal caveat concerning proper execution, and I'd not be surprised to see more such units appearing. So one week's weird becomes

another's normal. (How long before the Chinese catch on? Months or weeks?!) But in the meantime, the Audiopax is certainly ahead of the curve.

Styling matches the power-amps, the lacquered sides contrasting with the chromed metalwork, in this instance, the top-mounted handles/valve-guards being purely decorative. Aesthetics are one area which is always problematic, and I'm the first to accept that my taste is both personal and far from universal, however, this is where I part company with the Audiopax. Given that the Model 5's great claim to fame is that it offers universal matching to a whole host of alternative power-amps, quite such ▶

▶ a clumsy styling cue seems odd at best, even perverse. I can't help feeling that the construction and colour options would have been sufficient association and that it would have been sensible to make the "handles" an option. I'd also like to see greater care in the positioning and alignment of the control references. With their tdc placement, even the slightest deviation catches the eye, and whilst I've always approved of knob and disc type



controls, the switches for input select and record-out feel too sloppy for a product at this price. Of course, fit and feel have little or no effect on performance, but the Model 5 faces some pretty stiff competition, and potential customers will see and touch it before they ever get to listen to it. Presenting them with any excuse to pass over your product is a risky policy.

The Audiopax line-stage offers four inputs and a mute, as well as a defeatable tape loop. There is also a Direct input that bypasses the input selector for use in single-source systems. There are two sets of outputs to facilitate bi-amping, all connections being single-ended phonos, with no balanced option. There is a simple remote to control mute and volume, which is all you ever really need, although the handset supplied was an interim design. A pusher model is in the works and will be forwarded to all existing owners as soon as it becomes available.

The Model 5 is a two-box unit, with the external power supply housed in a simple, plastic chassis. This should be

positioned well away from the control unit, a task greatly simplified by the decent length of its umbilicals. In use, the main chassis runs surprisingly hot and should be allowed reasonable ventilation. Also, when you first power it up, it comes on with the mute engaged and this must be

switched out from the remote. It's a nice touch that further highlights the no-nonsense approach of this pre-amp. Once you've got sound it's time to set the gain controls. The clear guidelines contained in the instructions, along with the graduated controls, make



this extremely straightforward. As you increase the gain by a notch simply decrease the level by an identical amount to keep the volume constant; or vice versa, of course. It's a one-time setting for any given power amp, and should take no longer than a couple of minutes. Start from the recommended value and work in steps. Once you hit the right setting you'll hear the sound

lock together, with the pace and timing of the music hitting its stride. In this respect, it's not unlike vta adjustment (although as there are those who profess not to hear that then perhaps I should be careful what I say). The difference between right and wrong is clearly audible, and whilst you might refine it over time, you should hit a ball-park value pretty quickly. I used the Model 5 with the RADIA, Jadis JA30 and Rogue Model 90. In each case the setting was different. In each case it was equally apparent once I'd got it right. Like Timbre-Lock, this works and is far more than a gimmick or merely cosmetic in nature, having a genuinely positive effect on the Model 5's performance. And it's a pretty impressive performance too.

You could argue that the very adjustability of the Audiopax necessarily makes its sound a moving target. However, optimised for the three amps mentioned above it offers a

remarkably consistent character. Unashamedly solid-state, people looking for romance or paint-by-number colouration should look elsewhere. The Model 5 is all about clarity and clean, open transparency. Indeed, the line-stage it most resembles is the Vibe/Pulse combination. Now, there's no question that this is at least partly to do with the presentation of timing and the top to toe coherence displayed by both these products. Tom Evans talks in terms of phase ▶

► coherence, Eduardo de Lima in terms of Timbre-Lock and aligning the output of one product with another. I'm in no position to comment on the technology involved, but in both cases the sonic results are impressive indeed as well as being cut from astonishingly similar cloth.

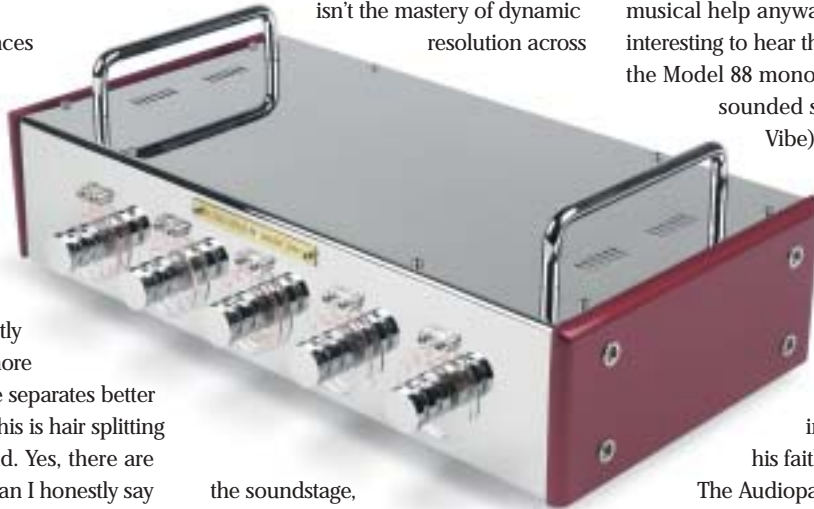
I can pick differences

until the cows come home: the Vibe is slightly more even top to bottom, the Model 5 throws a slightly larger stage with a touch more dimensionality; the Audiopax is very slightly richer, with a shade more colour where the Vibe separates better in spatial terms. But this is hair splitting of the most banal kind. Yes, there are differences here but can I honestly say that one solution offers greater musical enjoyment than the other? No, in that regard they're as near identical as makes no difference, which as regular readers will know, constitutes high praise indeed. Use the Audiopax via its Direct input and you gain even greater immediacy, depth and better focus and separation, edging it even closer to the Tom Evans combination. The benefits are worthwhile and if you can take advantage of them I'd urge you to do so.

Not that the Audiopax is beyond criticism. There's a gentle swelling in the mid-bass which doubtless contributes to its slightly richer and more colourful balance, but which can get a little unruly at times. Playing Amy Fradon's 'Long Black Coat' (*Passion Angel*, Leo100) the pared back sparseness of the stage is disturbed at the start of the chorus by momentary confusion between the drum-cello accent and the lead vocal. It's a cruelly revealing track, but you can hear the influence elsewhere if you try. It's more of a problem too with the JA30, which suffers its own mid-bass bloom, underlining the fact that whilst you might optimise the output of the Model 5 for its

partnering power amp, don't confuse that with compensating for its own failings. You will hear the line-stage in the system if you go looking for it.

Mind you, why bother? Why not just enjoy the music that flows so effortlessly forth? In absolute terms there isn't the mastery of dynamic resolution across



the soundstage, across level and across instruments that a product like c-j's ACT 2 delivers. Nor does the Model 5 possess the tonal palette of that product. But then it doesn't possess the price-tag either. Instead, I suggest you play to its strengths, which embrace dynamic range and discrimination alongside superb rendition of vocal and instrumental textures. This is a product that makes recordings sound lively and direct, exciting and engaging. Put on something like Milstein's reading of the Dvorak *Violin Concerto* (Steinberg and the Pittsburgh S.O. Capitol SP 8382, re-released by Cisco) to enjoy the presence and body this line-stage brings to the dramatic opening, the way it holds the soloist against the orchestral backdrop, extracting every last ounce of his passion and technique. For me, that's what hi-fi should be about and on those grounds the Audiopax Model 5 deserves, even demands, your attention. Correctly interfaced it brings a poise and authority to a system that's rare enough. To demonstrably do so in such a wide range of systems is itself no mean trick.

It's one thing buying a component – it's quite another realising its potential: With the Model 5 that should never be a problem. It's lucid, open and involving presentation offers the perfect foil to all but the leanest and most astringent partners (but then, they're beyond musical help anyway). It would be interesting to hear this line-stage driving the Model 88 mono-blocks (which sounded so fine with the

Vibe). That the distributor was happy to supply it alone and encouraged me to experiment with a range of partnering amps speaks volumes for his confidence in the product. Well, his faith was well placed.

The Audiopax Model 5 does exactly what it says on the tin – and then some. ▶+

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

(Typical Values)

Type:	Solid-state line-stage with external PSU
Inputs:	4x line + direct
Input Impedance:	45 kOhms
Outputs:	2x pre-out + tape
Output Impedance:	1500 Ohms
Gain –	
Low-Gain Setting:	12dB
High-Gain Setting:	23dB
Dimensions (WxHxD):	450 x 150 x 250mm
Weights:	5.5kg (control unit) 2.0kg (psu)
Finishes:	Chrome and black or various lacquers
Prices –	
Chrome and black	£3299
Premium lacquers	£3899

UK Distributor:

Precious Music Distribution  
Tel. (44)(0)141 332 5205  
E-mail. info@precious-music.co.uk

Manufacturer:

Audiopax (Brazil)  
Net. www.audiopax.com