

AURALiC TAURUS PRE preamplifier/ headphone amplifier

by Chris Martens



This review represents the continuation of a project begun some months ago, where our intent—over time—is to review the entire suite of audio electronics components made by AURALiC Limited. To date, we have covered the TAURUS Mk II headphone amplifier (issue 105) and the VEGA Digital Audio Processor (issue 106), and this month's instalment addresses the TAURUS PRE solid-state, balanced output, stereo line-stage preamplifier and headphone amplifier, priced at £1,790 (or \$2,199).

As I mentioned in my earlier AURALiC reviews, I was first introduced to the brand at last year's Munich High-End show, where the AURALiC components were used to drive a pair of then-new YG Acoustics Sonja 1.2 loudspeakers—speakers that, by reputation, do not suffer less than excellent amplification components gladly. What caught my ear was the fact that the AURALiC components not only drove the YGs with power and authority, but also drew forth both the revealing yet also the warmer and more natural-sounding, and thus more musical, aspects of the Sonja 1.2s (something many otherwise fine amplification components have tried, but failed, to do). Based on that enticing first taste, I felt it would be worthwhile to check out the entire family of AURALiC components as time allowed.

AURALiC shares certain core technologies across almost all of the firm's models, and the TAURUS PRE is no exception. Thus, like most AURALiC components, the TAURUS PRE sports a cabinet made of the firm's proprietary, highly EMI-resistant AFN402 metal alloy. Similarly, the TAURUS PRE's chassis interior is coated with a proprietary material called the Alire Resonance Damper, which not only rejects EMI, but also damps mechanical vibration and resonance. As you can imagine, the AFN402 chassis material and Alire Resonance Damper work in a synergistic way to help make the TAURUS PRE very quiet in operation, which translates directly into a superior ability to retrieve fine, delicate, low-level sonic details.

Next, the TAURUS PRE features AURALiC's 'Purer Power' power supply technology, wherein incoming mains power is passed through a power purification module located upstream of the triple-shielded, Plitron-made mains transformer. Downstream of the transformer, the TAURUS PRE features DC power supplies that employ extensive filtering and low-noise, low impedance, multi-stage regulators in order to provide DC voltages said to be stable and noise-free, mimicking the best qualities of battery-type power supplies, but with none of the downsides batteries can entail.

Not surprisingly, the TAURUS PRE uses what I have come to regard as a central, signature AURALiC design element; namely, the firm's distinctive ORFEO Class A analogue amplification module—of which the TAURUS PRE uses two. AURALiC President and Chief Designer Xuanqian Wang patterned his

► ORFEO module after the sound (and circuit design) of the classic Neve 8078 analogue recording console, aiming to capture the Neve's legendary combination of extreme sonic transparency coupled with qualities of unforced, natural warmth and richness of tonal colours.

Xuanqian Wang has received formal training both as an electrical and as a recording engineer, but at heart, he is also a musician. As far as I can tell, these elements in Wang's background mean that he approaches audio component design by asking what kinds of musical information can today's very best recording techniques capture, and what are the best ways for audio electronics faithfully to reproduce all that the recording chain has placed at our disposal. These questions are further illuminated by a musician's sense for what the music requires (or demands) of the audio components in a system. These disciplines inform one another, leading AURALiC to pursue a 'house sound' that is highly revealing of musical subtleties and details, while keeping a firm grasp on the sweep and flow of the musical whole.

The TAURUS PRE is a balanced-output linestage preamplifier with three stereo single-ended analogue inputs, one stereo balanced analogue input, and one pair each of single-ended and balanced, variable level, analogue outputs. Additionally, the TAURUS PRE features two front panel-mounted, single-ended headphone outputs (via 6.35mm TRS headphone jacks). The TAURUS PRE sports a mode control switch that enable the user to operate the unit either in 'preamp' or 'headphone amp' mode, plus an input selector switch. The only other controls are an on/off switch and a motorised rotary volume control.



“Wang has received formal training both as an electrical and as a recording engineer, but at heart, he is also a musician. As far as I can tell, these elements in Wang’s background mean that he approaches audio component design by asking what kinds of musical information can today’s very best recording techniques capture, and what are the best ways for audio electronics faithfully to reproduce all that the recording chain has placed at our disposal.”

Very high build quality is evident throughout, with the faceplate and controls reminiscent of the muted, matte silver finish found on upscale components from firms such as Constellation or Boulder. In short, the TAURUS PRE is a looker, albeit in a tastefully understated way. Appealing good looks and self-evident build quality are all well and good, of course, but we're in this for sound quality, and in that department the TAURUS PRE certainly did not disappoint.

For my review listening sessions, I used a complete suite of AURALiC electronics comprising the VEGA Digital Audio Processor (DAC), the TAURUS PRE, a pair of MERAK monoblock amplifiers (which will be the subject of the next review, in a couple of issues time), and the TAURUS Mk II headphone amplifier. These core electronics were used to drive a very revealing, but also very demanding, set of Magnepan 3.7i hybrid planar magnetic/ribbon-driver equipped dipole loudspeakers, plus several sets of reference headphones—from Audeze, Oppo, and others, which I had on hand.

As a starting point, I thought I might ask whether the TAURUS PRE is really necessary or beneficial, given that both the AURALiC VEGA and TAURUS Mk II are capable of functioning as preamplifiers in their own right. After only a few brief listening sessions, however, it became apparent that the TAURUS PRE was both audibly and functionally superior to the VEGA or TAURUS Mk II for use as a preamplifier. I say this because, when push came to shove, the remote control-equipped TAURUS PRE offered a superior combination of ample gain, excellent low-level resolution and detail, ultra-low noise, and superior input switching flexibility—factors that together add up to better all-around performance in its designated role.

Having experimented with using the VEGA to drive power amplifiers directly, I can say with confidence that the VEGA actually sounds better (as in, more dynamic, articulate, and 'alive') when its outputs are routed through the TAURUS PRE. In turn, the very good sounding TAURUS Mk II headphone amplifier is limited in its usefulness as a full-function preamp in that it is not configured to allow use with a remote control. In short, then, the TAURUS PRE occupies a valid and valuable place in the AURALiC product line-up.

What are the defining sonic characteristics of the TAURUS PRE? I can think of several, but let me start with three of my personal favourites: namely, high levels of resolution, expressive and at times explosive dynamics, and an uncommonly neutral and natural-sounding tonal balance. Let's look at each of these in turn.

In earlier reviews, I have already described the AURALiC VEGA as a high-resolution DAC, but when you hear the VEGA paired with the TAURUS PRE

the result suggests there is serious synergy at work. In the blink of an eye, what was already excellent performance becomes noticeably and palpably better, not unlike peering through a microscope and turning its adjustment knobs only to see miniscule details suddenly snap into fine focus. The only thing that makes this metaphor not entirely apt is that a microscope is plainly an analytical instrument, whereas I would say the TAURUS PRE is more a musical instrument than an analytical one. Either way, though, it's a heady and breathtaking experience to hear the TAURUS PRE do its thing, creating the illusion that your ears have suddenly developed the auditory equivalent of 20/10 vision.

Dynamics play a big part in this, too, as you soon realize the TAURUS PRE conveys living, breathing sonic images that have a pulse and dynamism all their own. With the TAURUS PRE, then, dynamics are not purely a matter of some passages being louder or softer than others; instead, you get something much more valuable, which is a sense of the continuous and at times transitory ebb and flow of musical energy unfolding all around you in real time.

To illustrate what I mean by the preceding comments, let me describe the TAURUS PRE's performance when navigating through the track 'Talking Wind' from Marilyn Mazur's *Elixir* [ECM]. In this track, one hears a plethora of high, mid, and low-pitched percussion instruments played sometimes with great delicacy and at other moment with fierce abandon (the Mazur track reminds ▶



► me more than a little of Charles Wourinen's chamber music composition, 'Ringing Changes for Percussion Ensemble'). Through the TAURUS PRE, the distinctive attack, sustain, and decay envelope of each percussion instrument is presented with razor-sharp focus and precision—even when instruments of overlapping pitches are in play. Similar, the timbres and complex overtone structures are rendered with exceptional purity, vividness, and clarity. Moreover, the AURALiC made it easy to follow the artists' intentions, capturing subtle matters of 'touch' and 'feel' whereby the players deftly add emphasis to some notes or deliberately pull others back in the mix. What I found particularly impressive was that these qualities of focus, precision, purity, vividness, and clarity remained consistent from the highest-pitched cymbals on down to the lowest-pitched bass drums. I played the track at near-lifelike levels (which is to say, pretty loudly) and when the piece came to an end I was so engaged and moved by what I had heard that my one-word note on the experience was simply, "Wow!" (What can I say? The TAURUS PRE can and sometimes does leave listeners at a loss for words).

For another great example of the TAURUS PRE's best sonic qualities at work, consider the preamp's performance on Robert Paterson's *The Book of Goddesses - III. Aphrodite* [American Music Recordings] as performed by the MAYA trio (comprising flute, harp, and percussion). Heard at its best, *The Book of Goddesses* offers impressively deep, wide, and highly three-dimensional soundstages and the TAURUS PRE faithfully retrieved even the smallest and most subliminal of spatial cues, giving the presentation an almost shockingly realistic "you are there" quality that is often talked about, but far less often observed. Honestly, the AURALiC found layers upon layers of subtle inner details and evanescent reverberant cues that, prior to the TAURUS PRE's arrival, I had not fully realised were there to be enjoyed. In short, we had a clear-cut case of technology serving, rather than overriding, the artists' and producer's intentions.

You might be tempted to interpret the foregoing to mean the TAURUS PRE is as analytical as an electron-scanning microscope, but please don't. Part of the great beauty of the TAURUS PRE (and other AURALiC components) is that it struts its hi-fi stuff always within the broader context of an overarching quality of natural, acoustic warmth—commonly called 'musicality.' But don't misunderstand me; there is absolutely nothing mushy, slushy, vague, or artificially 'warmed-up' about the sound of the TAURUS PRE. Rather, it comes by its naturalism honestly—by faithfully reproducing what the recording has to offer, yet without lapsing into what I call the 'medicinal' school of audio thought (a school founded on the belief that, if the sound doesn't 'taste bad' at least to some degree, then it's probably not good for you). AURALiC wisely rejects such insane high-end posturing as errant nonsense.

Instead, the TAURUS PRE holds to the view that anything that gets between the listener and the beauty of well recorded music is, more or less by definition, a form of distortion (either that, or a badly made recording, of which there are sadly more than a few about). The result is that, sonically speaking, the TAURUS PRE stands as one of those rare 'have your cake and eat it, too' products whose list of high-end virtues is long and distinguished, but whose unflinching naturalism is what keeps you coming back for more. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Solid-state, balanced-output, line-stage preamplifier and headphone amplifier with Class A circuitry.

Analogue inputs: Three stereo pairs of single-ended inputs (via RCA jacks), one stereo pair of balanced inputs (via XLR connectors).

Analogue outputs: One stereo pair each of variable-level single-end outputs (via RCA jacks) and balanced outputs (via XLR connectors), two stereo headphone outputs (via 6.35mm TRS headphone jacks).

Frequency response: 20Hz – 20kHz, ± 0.1dB; 3Hz – 300kHz, ± 3dB.

Input impedance: Not Specified.

Output impedance: Not Specified.

Gain: 10dB (XLR input), 16dB (RCA inputs); maximum swing voltage 24Vrms (XLR input), 12Vrms (RCA inputs).

Distortion and Noise: <0.001% THD +N, 20Hz -20kHz.

Dimensions (HxWxD): 65 x 330 x 230mm.

Weight: 4.4kg.

Price: £1,790

Manufacturer: AURALiC LIMITED

URL: www.auralic.com

UK Distributor: Audio Emotion Limited, Unit 2 Banbeath Court, Banbeath, Leven, KY8 5HD, United Kingdom

Tel: +44(0)1333-425999

URL: www.audioemotion.co.uk