



The ASR Basis Phonostage Is No Mistake

— Dan Babineau



enjoy the occasional mistake. I made a mistake when I bet one of my good friends that the Boston Red Sox would never win the World Series in our life time. I made a similar bet on the Chicago White Sox and in both cases I gladly paid the bet because it was incredible to watch two underdog teams take the pennant.

When I first heard about the ASR Basis phono stage I was very reluctant to even stop in for a listen. Generally, I don't like the sound of a phono stage with electrolytic capacitors in the power supply and I'm also not always that fond of OP amps in the phono circuit.

And then there is the solid-state caveat. I have an old photograph of me sitting on the floor of my father's den holding a Mullard EL34. My mother tells me that I was about two years old when the photo was taken and I have been absolutely devoted to vacuum tubes ever sense.

So imagine my hesitation to evaluate a battery powered, solid-state phono stage with op amps under the hood. It's a tough job but someone had to step up to the plate and do a David Ortiz, namely knock one out of the park! And that is exactly what Mr. Fredrich Schafer has accomplished with his ASR Basis, a grand slam homerun!



Sometimes Good Things Come In Large Packages!

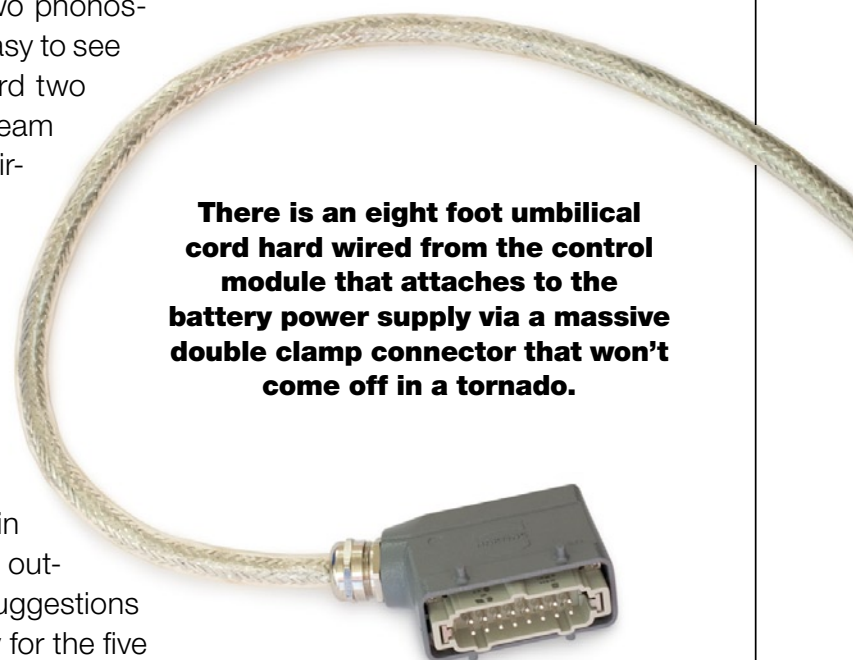
The unit comes in two boxes, one for the control unit, (the light one) and one for the battery power supply, weighing about 60lbs. There is an eight foot umbilical cord hard wired from the control module that attaches to the battery power supply via a massive double clamp connector that won't come off in a tornado. I sat down with the two units unboxed and a cup of tea, proceeding to learn the basics of the ASR Basis.

The owner's manual is one of the best in the business, starting with basic setup and then going into detail on how to obtain the best performance possible from your cartridge. It also gives a good lesson on the care of the battery supply. I was very impressed that the unit came fully charged (nice touch right off the bat), so that I didn't have to wait a day or so to give it a test drive!

The control module of the Basis is constructed entirely from black acrylic and looks very racy sitting on my racks. All adjustments are facilitated with the top off; gain, loading and

even a high pass filter. The top stayed off until I was satisfied that all was just right.

Inside, the ASR is neat as a pin with blue circuit boards and a series of LEDs that indicate the status of playback. One of the first delights for me was learn that the ASR is actually two phono stages in one. With the top off it was easy to see two identical circuits that would afford two turntables/cartridges. A reviewer's dream but better yet an analog fanatic's nirvana. I've always had two turntables in my system and NO, I DON'T DJ. My Linn LP-12 is used to evaluate the many used records that I purchase, while the SME 20 has been my mainstay for over 5 years. Gain and loading are set via separate dip switches that even I could see with my extreme far-sightedness. The gain structure will handle even the lowest output cartridges and Mr. Schafer's suggestions for loading and gain worked perfectly for the five cartridges that I used to evaluate the unit. *(continued)*



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I preferred the high pass filter off and I strongly agree with the manual that the unit sounds best when run balanced from the tone-arm if you have this option available. While I run my LP-12 single ended with good results, the SME 20 is run balanced.

Setup Options

The Basis can be played using either AC power or DC with the internal battery. One silver knob on the face plate of the control module allows you to select AC or DC for input A or B; it doesn't get any easier than this. The single output can be run to your linestage or integrated amplifier via balanced or single ended. My Conrad Johnson ART 3 preamplifier uses RCAs, so that choice was already made for me.

A Lyra Skala cartridge (.5mv output) is currently mounted to the LP-12, and a Koetsu Rosewood Signature Platinum (.2mv output) is mounted to the SME 20 with an SME 4.5i arm. Cardas Golden Reference interconnects are used between the tables and the ASR, with Cardas Golden Cross interconnects everywhere else. Both tables sit on separate Grand Prix Audio Monaco racks.

The rest of the system consists of the Conrad Johnson 350SA power amplifier and a pair of Avalon Opus speakers. Power conditioning is handled by my own Running Springs Audio Haley and Danielle with RSA Mongoose power cords throughout.

I experimented with the gain and loading settings a bit, but ended up liking the factory suggestions the best. Remember to set the number 10 dip switch on the gain block to the on position if you run single-ended or you'll experience a rather loud pop during playback! *(continued)*

cardas.com

Using the ASR Basis is very straightforward. There is an amber light on the power supply that indicates that the unit is running in AC, when you select the battery position on either inputs, this light turns to blue indicating the battery mode.

DC Magic Indeed

I first listened to the Linn/Skala using AC power: Quiet, with a lot of energy. I then selected the battery mode, dropped the tone arm on the Linn and then things went DEAD QUIET with a musical naturalness that at first was hard to describe. The same results happened with the SME/Koetsu combination, maybe even quieter and more lifelike. And this thing had no hours on it! I sat on the floor of my listening room and started to laugh to myself, thinking what a great piece of hardware, boy I am glad I was wrong!

Then I started to put the Basis through the paces, playing every type of record I could pull off of my record shelf. I'm not going to tell you that the ASR sounded unbelievable right out of the box, but I will tell you that it was easy to listen to music while it broke in without getting that funny 'what happens if this thing doesn't get any better' feeling in my stomach. And by the time I had played about fifty LPs I began to hear the true magic of this battery driven phono preamplifier.

Music is magic! It can take you places that no other artform can: it can set the stage, create an instant atmosphere and bring you to tears all at the same time. Music playback is a little trickier. If you hear too much of the electronics involved in playback your senses get overloaded, your brain starts to overprocess and tries to make sense of what your ears are hearing. This subliminal organization of information creates what we've come to call 'listener fatigue'.

Here lies the magic of the ASR: while running on DC, the ASR creates a naturalness, an organic presence that allows you to hear into the music and does not fatigue your brain. This presentation is one of the most unique and thoroughly musical examples of analog playback that I've heard to date in over thirty years of analog obsession. Yes, the ASR is dead quiet; you can actually hear a pin drop between tracks. Yes, surface noise seems to evaporate even on questionable LPs. And yes the ease of use is a welcome relief in this modern world of noisy vacuum tubes.

The precision built into the unit structurally and the accuracy in tone, pace and ultimate dynamics is what make this phono stage capture your soul. Now throw in the lack of distortion obliterated by the use of DC power and you get one or should I say two first class phono stages.

And Many Records Were Spinned...

I played everything including the kitchen sink through the ASR and came away smiling every time. I started with piano music and

Debussy: Charles Rosen on Epic performing some of my favorite Claude Debussy piano music. Tonally correct, spot on for rhythm and pace and extremely realistic decay. Next some string quartets and Shostakov-

ich with the Borodin String Quartet playing all lucky 13 of these Russian masterpieces. Again, quiet, tonally correct and extremely musical.

Believe me if it is going to sound harsh and wrong it will be with these intense quartets all composed in minor keys. Other big stand-outs in the classical mode were Michelangeli's stunning performance of Ravel's *Concerto for Piano in G Major* for intense inner detail and amazing air. The fact that the ASR is so dead quiet allowed me to finally hear into the brilliant second movement of this piece and discover even more micro detail of pianist Michelangeli's unbeatable performance. For tonality and tempo I especially like David Oistrakh on EMI playing the Prokofiev *Violin Concerto in G Minor*. Spot on for tone and enough energy to launch the space shuttle. *(continued)*

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Shostakovich *Symphony #10*, with Andre Previn and the LSO on EMI, a digital recording, gave me fine examples of the ASR's core strengths: extremely low noise floor, accurate, incredibly dynamic and definitely musical.

I love the atmosphere that Shostakovich creates in the first movement. As we progress through this monumental work the energy and power of the orchestra takes over the room and we are catapulted head first into the turmoil and chaos of this extremely volatile time in Russian.

This work gets loud and the ASR delivered the 10th unerring and without distortion!

The same can be said of the Bax symphonies on Lyrita where things get violent at times but the ASR allows you to pick out the details and hear the various instruments that collectively create a musical atmosphere.

To change moods I dragged out a copy of the Dixie Dregs **Industry Standard** and the room exploded with energy. I could play the Dregs much louder than I could before the ASR and that felt great! I got the same buzz playing more fusion, this time it was Brand X. I played both sides of **Masques** and again sat in my listening chair grinning ear to ear. I played a bunch of jazz, tons of Miles, Coltrane, Parker, and Dizzy. I had to play the rather sinister *Back Seat Betty* off of Miles' **Man With A Horn**. Marcus Miller's bass just locked in the middle of the soundstage as Miles proceeds to blow his brains out on trumpet.

(continued)

This record is not a great recording, but with the lack of surface noise coupled with the low distortion delivered consistently by the ASR, I could play it over and over without fatigue.

It got to the point where I wasn't afraid to play almost any record in my collection. Even my favorite rock recordings sounded great: Metallica, Audioslave, Nirvana, Sabbath, Pat Travers. . .

Boom, Boom out came my neighbor to tell me to turn it down a bit.

Of course you know the trick when you get in the volume predicament with your neighbors – just invite the annoyed neighbor in and play something that they enjoy. I shifted gears for my grumpy neighbor and played The Stones' **Beggar's Banquet**. After a few songs Mr. Grumpy replied: 'I've never heard The Stones sound this good, what's the secret?' 'Battery power, my grumpy friend,' and he went off singing the chorus from *Symphony for the Devil*.

Eventually, I moved on to some blues and even a few reggae discs, where my daughter danced around the room and said 'This is fun, daddy.' And fun is exactly what the ASR Basis Exclusive is: fun to use and fun to play!

I tried other cartridges just to be sure; a Benz Ebony LP, a Lyra Argo and my old standby, the Van den hul Frog. In all three cases the ASR just made the music come alive. I've owned a multitude of phono stages through the years but the ASR playback is truly unique in the best possible way – it draws amazing amounts of information from your phono cartridge, deciphers the data and turns raw data into a magic we call music.



Delivery From Tube Agony!

— Jeff Dorgay

If this were **Car and Driver**, I'd be delivering a counterpoint but that's not the case this time. I completely agree with Dan on the Basis Exclusive. After listening to his at length, I bought one of my own a few months ago and can't be more thrilled.

And I'll tell you why, no tubes! Don't think I've lost the faith with tubes, but they are the most difficult to deal with in a phono preamplifier because of all the noise issues. With good NOS tubes getting more difficult to procure all the time, it's another rabbit I just didn't want to chase any longer. I can't tell you how many times over the last year or so that I thought I had it JUST RIGHT, only to lose a tube! Then the replacement wasn't QUITE RIGHT and the chase started all over again.

Granted if you aren't as obsessed as we are, you can throw a set of Sovteks in and pray. It will work (for a while) and certainly play music, but if you want that last bit of musical magic, locating high quality tubes will make your job harder.

Oh yes, the magic is there and if you don't listen every day or perhaps only a couple of hours a week, the valve approach is still sound.

I've said it before and I'll say it again; my reference system is a tool by which I evaluate and compare all the other equipment I evaluate, so I just didn't have time for this anymore, but the dilemma was to find a solid state phono preamplifier that was musical enough to make me put the tubes away for now. The ASR Basis passed with flying colors. I still have a couple of great tubed phono stages that I use from time to time, but only sparingly. The Basis is what I spin records on every day!

The nicest thing about the ASR Basis is that the sound is so neutral that I feel that anyone with tubes or transistors in their system could find real happiness with it. I know I did. Rather than tell you about all the records I played, I would like to point out another thing that might make the ASR more interesting to you; it doesn't need a fancy power cord! Thanks to the battery operation, once it's charged, the AC supply is out of the circuit.

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Once Is Not Enough

I really am not interested in making the quick, one-time sale. Rather, I want you as a long-time repeat customer. Earning your confidence is the key to this philosophy.

I do this by offering honest, knowledgeable service tuned to your specific needs. Your goals determine our careful recommendations, not the equipment occupying space on the warehouse floor. — Galen Carol

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For the naysayers in the crowd that don't think the batteries make a difference, switch the Basis back to AC power and watch the soundstage collapse. It's ok and will do in a pinch (or if you forgot to turn it back to recharge mode for a day or so) but no where near in the same league as with DC power.

In the end, if you are considering a phono stage in the \$5-10 thousand dollar category, this one gets my vote. My hat is off to Mr. S. ●

The ASR Basis Exclusive
MSRP: \$7500

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PERIPHERALS (Dan)

Preamplifier: Conrad-Johnson
ART 3

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Analog Sources: SME 20 w/
SME 4.5i and Koetsu Rosewood
Signature Platinum, Linn LP-12
w/Lyra Skala

Phono Preamplifier: Aesthetix
IO with dual power supplies

Interconnects: Cardas Golden
Reference, Golden Cross

Speaker Cable: Cardas Golden
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Power Cords: Running Springs
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Power Conditioning: Running
Springs Audio Danielle, Duke