

# Audio Note M3 Preamplifier

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Constantine Soo

## Specifications

**Weight:** 16kg

**Dimensions:** 141(H) x 445(W) x 410(D)(mm)

**Power Consumption:** 81W with 1A anti-surge fuses

**Input impedance:** 100K line input and 47K phono input

**Gain:** 8.2 Line in (18dB) and 1900, Phono in (65dB), both at 1KHz

**Output noise:** Less than 0.08mV RMS, unweighted line input.

Typically 12mV RMS, unweighted, phono input.

**Maximum output:** 4.4 volt RMS

**Output impedance:** Less than 10 Ohms

**Tube compliment:** 6X5 Philips x 2/5687 Philips x 2/6072 G.E. x 2

MSRP: \$7,500 with Phono preamp, \$6,000 Line Stage only

## Manufacturer:

Audio Note (UK) Limited

Website: <http://www.audionote.co.uk>

## Object of Art

Audio Note's M3 pre-amp is the matching companion to its line of single-ended directly heated 300B monoblock amplifiers in Level 3, such as the recently-reviewed Quest. The M series pre-amplifiers begins with the \$699 M Zero and increases to the silver-faceplate, large chassis M3 as the optimized pre-amplifier platform, incorporating dual mono double chock tube rectified power supplies, optimized output transformers and high gain line stage. Based on this platform, Audio Note believes upgrades of component and material quality are the answer to increasing fidelity, culminating in the supreme M8.

Acknowledging the finesse of classic amplifiers like McIntosh 275 and Marantz 8 on its website, Audio Note states that it doesn't believe in "selling old wines in new bottles". According to Audio Note, the M3 platform was a result of the pursuit of a "timelessness" in AN's designs, which had "no regard for the dogma ruling at the time and [no] regard for commercial expediency [and] reviewer preferences or prejudices." The M3 sports six inputs using 5687WB series zero-feedback anode follower line stage with output transformer, plus a phono input using three 6072A double triodes as input stage in conjunction with a completely passive zero-feedback RIAA EQ network and high quality ELMA switches. Four Noble pots line up on the silvery faceplate from left to right, representing Inputs, Tape Monitor, Balance and Volume.

Being the pride and joy of Audio Note preamp line, the audio circuit of the "Level 3" M3 preamplifier is hand made and hard wired, using Audio Note<sup>TM</sup> tantalum resistors, Cerafine filter caps, pure copper foil signal capacitors and Black Gate de-coupling capacitors. Output transformers are of the copper wired IE-core variety with M4 laminations, and the dual mono power supplies occupied most of the enormous chassis, using independent 6X5WGT double choke rectifiers for each channel.

AN claims M3's line output stage is powerful enough to drive both solid-state and tube amplifiers. The transformer-coupled LEMO 600ohm balanced output is said to enable true balanced operation, negating the use of complex differential circuitry as common in other designs. Two pairs of single-ended outputs are also standard. All jacks are thickly silver-plated over solid copper, which AN claims from their in-house experimentation can compete sonically with solid silver versions, thus representing an excellent quality to price relationship. Balanced and unbalanced outputs are not recommended for use simultaneously. An uncommon engineering feat practically exclusive to Audio Note is the incorporation of an interface transformer. Unlike the common practice of connecting critical components inside the chassis with only wires, AN believes major sonic benefits can be achieved by

relaying signals between these critical components via transformer-coupled interfaces. Consequently, eight transformers are employed in the M3.

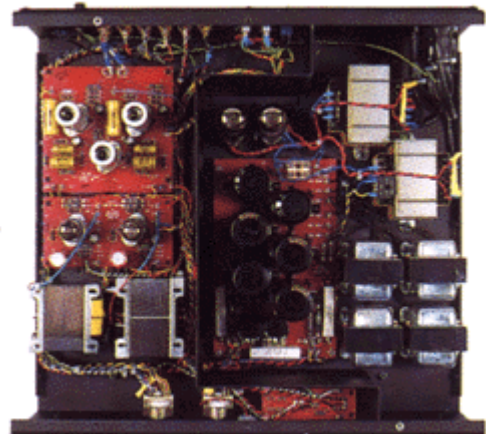
Regarding housing the substantial power supply and critical analog circuits together in a single chassis, in an email to me, Audio Note owner Peter Qvortrup stated that he thought power supply interference and radiation as problems overrated by other manufacturers who devised external power supplies. Peter believes a properly designed power supply system sharing a single chassis with the audio circuitry has the advantage of direct and short connection, further enhancing the sound quality.

A Line-Stage only M3 is available for \$6,000.

## Setup and Audition

In my Audio Note Quest review, the lack of a suitable preamplifier prompted me to drive the Quest monoblocks directly from my Wadia 27 Decoding Computer. In considerations of the Quest's input sensitivity, the 27's internal output level was set to its lowest to facilitate maximum resolution. Despite the sizeable transformers in each monoblock, the amplifiers were inadequate in sustaining high volume from my 90dB, 6 ohm Genesis VI and retaining all the dynamics. The Genesis VI is a 4-way speaker system consisting of one 1-inch circular ribbon tweeter, one 5-inch midrange, one 6-inch mid-bass coupler and one phase-inverted 1-inch circular ribbon on the rear. Working below a frequency cutoff point of 85 Hz are three 8-inch subwoofers each powered by a dedicated servo amplifier.

With the M3 presiding, I went ballistic and raised the 27's internal output to the full 9V, ran it into the M3 and replaced the Quest's generic power cords with two 5-foot Granite Audio #570 AC Mains (review to follow). This configuration surprisingly enabled the Quests to drive the Genesis VI with outstanding dynamics. Whether it was a combination of increased signal strength from the Wadia, coupled with outputs from the M3 and better power supply by means of the AC Mains, or actually just one of the above factors, adding the M3 sparked the transformation. Although other speaker systems with qualifying efficiencies were available for the purpose of this review, like Audio Note's own AN-E/D and the Klipschorn, the Genesis VI was used instead. Despite the fact that it didn't have the scale of dynamics of my Klipschorn or the timbral finesse of the AN-E/D, the Genesis persistently approached both contenders with authoritative dynamics and complex timbral portrayals. Its bottom-end capability was peerless altogether as rendered by the servo-powered woofers. Believing the Genesis' overall finesse stemming from its well-balanced design, I was hopeful it would showcase the potentials of the amplification. The front end of my reference system consisted of both the CEC TL1 CD transport driving Wadia 27 Decoding Computer via Kimber Illuminati Orchid AES/EBU digital cable, and the Sony SCD-777ES Super Audio CD Player going straight into the M3. Cables used were Granite Audio's #470 slow-drawn, continuous-cast single crystal silver interconnects throughout, and Cardas Quadlink 5C single-wired speaker cable. Solid-state equipment, like my Krell KRC-2 preamplifier, McCormack DNA-1 Deluxe power amplifier and Monarchy Audio SM70 monoblocks, were also used to cast light on the magnitude of changes wrought by the AN M3 and Quest in their all-tube coupling.



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One brief note: the Western Electric 300B tubes in the Quest monoblocks were retrieved by AN upon M3's arrival, replaced by original Chinese tubes. AN recommends a 200 hours "bedding in" period for the new M3 to sound its best. At the time of this writing, the 200-hour period has passed and my findings confirmed the validity of that recommendation.

In the soundtrack to "Conan The Barbarian" [Varese Sarabande VSD-5390], screen music composer Basil Poledouris' answer to the legendary film producer Dino De Laurentis's vision of the pre-civilization adventure, was deep in emotion and vast in scope. The somewhat dry and opulent recording did not diminish the genius of the composer, nor did it impair the befitting classical touch

lent by the very capable Orchestra and Chorus of Santa Cecilia, and the Radio Symphony of Rome. The M3 rendered instrumental tonalities in a full-ranged manner amidst the sub-optimal recording, acutely contrasting such instruments in similar passages as sounding relatively truncated when played through the Krell/McCormack DNA-1 Deluxe combo. From the dryness also emerged micro dynamics the likes of which even audiophile labels would love to lay a claim to.

Despite AN's candid forewarning of possibly sub-optimal soundstaging resulting from its design priorities (see "Understanding Audio Note" in Quest review), I nevertheless found imaging and soundstaging to be excellent and satisfying. Instrument localization never drifted and the soundstage was dimensional with airy ambience. Eclipsing my Krell KRC-2/McCormack DNA-1 Deluxe, the M3/Quest combo's front to back layering demonstrated superior instrumental and spatial definition from the back-row woodwinds and brass. Composer Elliot Goldenthal's tonal depiction of the motion picture, *Alien3* [MCAD-10629], was highly original in both the composition and the execution, its scope momentarily excited my imagination of a Requiem of the avante garde.

Under his baton, the orchestra produced some of the most memorable and haunting notes, not to mention their lasting and stirring effects. In addition to *Agnus Dei*, the first track and opening title, track 4, *Lento*, and track 5, *Candles In The Wind*, were compelling showcases of both the content and quality of the recording. The M3 created an experience both musically and sonically satisfying with a seamless demonstration of the contrasting serenity and chaos. Topping it all off was the composer's occasional bursts of shocking creativity, as accompanied by superlative sonics.

Degree of dynamic transients and rendition of tonalities reached new heights when presented by the M3. Give particular attention to track 10, *Visit To The Wreckage*, where at the very end the remembrance and suspense was punctured by a ferocious succession of snare drum rolling. Although the M3/Quest's tube rendition of the rolling of bass drums was less solid than my Krell KRC-2/McCormack DNA-1 Deluxe combo in its forcefulness and blatancy, the ANs were richer in content, conveying destruction and the very devastating agony and helplessness. Granted that dynamic transients were slightly more subdued than the transistor amplifiers delivered, the ANs brought out new dimensions of the performance in terms of instrumental overtones and spaciousness. In Deutsche Grammophon's 1984 CD release from the original 1972 analog recording of Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons* [Duetsche Grammophon 415 301-2], the technically superior strings of Berlin Philharmonic under the baton of Herbert von Karajan has massive and coherent sound, dwarfing interpretations from quite a few other ensembles in mastery and scale. From the M3, convincing tonalities of instruments and thus the dimensionality of them were preserved, which momentarily bore striking resemblance to the frequency coherency inherent in Sony's DSD archiving technology.

More than the "Conan The Barbarian" CD, this DG classical recording benefited from the M3 in the rendition of timbre totality. Contrary to the effect when instrument images were bloated, this timbre totality has to do with the way an instrument was rendered full-bodied by a complete and yet meticulous depiction of its inherent timbre. This resulted in the kind of realism characterized by timbre portrayal sophistication.

Furthermore, although the overall dryness of sound and the oftentimes sawing fiddling were the persistent traits in DG's early CD releases, with the M3 presiding that dryness was largely alleviated. The resultant sound was detailed and layered, carrying a keen sense of presence with the strings sounding fresh and smooth. Consequently, von Karajan's dynamic and yet lyric reading of the score was complimented with renewed degrees of tonal coherency and shading diversity that were dormant prior to the participation of M3. Turning to jazz recordings, I had not played for at least a year the CD version of the 1964 milestone jazz recording Getz/Gilberto [Verve 810 048-2], which I bought in the mid 80s. The overbearing ringing created from Joao Gilberto's close-miked vocal in the midrange section, along with the overall dry sound, terminally discouraged further listening. Joao's vocal wasn't to my liking either. But the M3 injected new life into the recording.

Through the M3, ambience came through where it was previously masked, and the male vocal carried definitions in all its bandwidth that no longer offended me. For example, in *The Girl From Ipanema*, Astrud Gilberto, Joao's wife, gave a day-breaking female rendition following her husband's. Similarly in "Corcovado," her softly sung lines brought out a loveliness that is ageless. While imaging was not the strong suit for the majority of this recording, the center-stage stereophonic sound of Stan Getz's

saxophone playing was nicely captured. The Mobile Fidelity Gold CD version will hopefully escalate the beauty of the disc to new heights. Playing the Sony SACD's "Mahler Symphony No. 1" [Sony SS-7069] and "Horowitz" [Sony SS-6371] reaffirmed the excellence of M3. Taking into account the inevitable background hiss from the aged masters, what the Krell KRC-2 previously did well in its transparency, the M3 executed with ease and aplomb, with more faithful timbres and tonalities representation befitting a SACD companion component.

Take, for example, the piano playing by the legendary pianist Vladimir Horowitz in my listening room, courtesy of the SACD technology. In the third movement, "Funeral March: Lento", from Chopin's Sonata No.2 in B-Flat Minor, Op. 35, the M3 radiantly illuminated Horowitz's irresistible spontaneity and superhuman dynamic control in his reading of Chopin's arguably most serene and lyrical piano composition. At its softest point, Horowitz's keystrokes transcended my listening experience, converging listener and pianist into one synchronous mood. The M3 unswervingly partook in the recreation of realistic dynamic transients and tonal complexity granted the illusion of a live piano performance. None other than the M3 made this happen. Compared to his hastening and vigorous interpretation of Dvorak's Symphony No. 9 on another SACD, Leonard Bernstein's Mahler Symphony No. 1 represented a more conventional approach in his tempo evenness.

In his seemingly unusual contemplative state, Bernstein inspired some highly spirited playing from the NYP members, which sparked precious moments of spontaneity that makes repeated listening invigorating. Sonic-wise, via the M3, the recording is peerless in DSD SACD. The evident timbre wholeness and unrestrained dynamics successfully conveyed a scale so enormous yet delicately balanced that it humbles a home-listening experience. All of the above propel it to becoming the ultimate Mahler Symphony No. 1 experience to be had. In light of the towering DSD SACD testament of the legendary Horowitz's refinement of pianissimo and grand sonority, RCA Victor Red Seal's 2001 Redbook CD release of Chopin's 24 Preludes, Sonata No. 2, Polonaise, Op. 53 [09026-63535-2] by the then-28-year-old Evgeny Kissin qualifies as a major triumph. Recorded in 1999 at Germany's SWR-Studio, this 20-Bit recording practically exhibited the dynamics and timbral intensity of SACDs.

The recorded sound has lingering layers of harmonics with superior precision in the portrayal of the pedaling, which serves as an encouraging testimony to the Herculean efforts undertaken by studios in the refinement of the 16-bit 44.1kHz format. Although lacking in the drama of the grand master, Kissin displayed impressively seasoned insights but ultimately youthful and incisive exposition. While previously the Krell KRC-2 energized the dynamics of keystrokes and intensified the vividness of the soundscape, the M3 revealed the abundance and complexity of Kissin's tonal treatment. Sounding admittedly less energetic than the KRC-2, the M3 offered better timbral resolution and greater ambience. By comparison, the KRC-2 was somewhat artificial and forward sounding.

## Summary

Through the AN system, vocal music in its rich tonality and effortless dynamic transients immediately became engaging and was the predominant genre that I consistently returned to. Never had such recordings sounded so compelling and enticing, which made me realize the reason I was never enthusiastically into jazz singing stemmed from the characteristics of my own audio system. Particularly noteworthy was the timbral totality rendered by the M3. No preamplifiers that graced my system ever approached the same level in the totalities from instruments and voices, whether in a soloist setting or a group. This level of amplification is unprecedented in my system.

Unlike solid-state preamplifiers like the Krell KRC-2, the M3 will not inject tenacious transients and edgy imaging that some of us favor. Retrospectively, the M3 contributed in its ultimate tonal accuracy and timbral totality, something that never happened in my system before and was incredibly striking when it did. Even when driving solid-state power amplifiers, like the McCormack DNA-1 Deluxe and Monarchy Audio SM-70 monoblocks, the M3 was able to transmute it's own tonal complexities and timbral integrity to a large degree throughout all types of music. When using the Krell KRC-2, the Quest's distinctive tube tonalities were not as prevalent. If a choice was to be made between the M3 and Quest, I believe the maximum result would be realized with M3 as opposed to power amplification.

In the company of a full-range speaker system like the Genesis VI, the potency of the M3 in its consummate subtleties and state-of-the-art dynamic attacks was at once revealed and undisputed. High volume settings did not coerce discords or induce soundstaging instability. AN's own AN-E/D speakers consistently showed its ability in producing high degrees of unrestrained transients and full-range tonalities requiring only moderate volume levels. Instrument images would interestingly enlarge disproportionately when driven too loudly, which could make the experience rather disconcerting. It was obvious and very satisfying the moment you got the volume just right with the AN-E/D. With the K-horns, superior dynamics were attained and the tonalities and transients were preserved perfectly even when asked to play loud. However, the K-horns could never surpass the AN-E/D or the Genesis for the sheer tonalities. Regarding the theoretical superiority of Wadia's proprietary "Direct Connect" technology in driving a power amplifier directly, I found the 27 to sound its best when used in conjunction with the M3, surpassing the advantage claimed by the Wadia method. In this regard, by outputting maximum resolution and voltage to the M3, the system attained unprecedented tonal resolution and timbral wholeness.

## Epilogue

For me, the M3 dispelled the stubborn notion that all preamps will degrade signals because of the extended signal path represented. I have not seen other preamplifiers with as complex and lavish a combination of M3's substantial power supply, tactful signal transfer coupling via numerous strategically placed output transformers and meticulous tube-rectification. The aptly applied premium parts and the interior layout reflect the perfectionist in the designer and the engineer. As a result, the M3 nourished signal integrity with all the impedance matching and tube rectification, according instrument textures and tonal wholeness breathtakingly reminiscent of a real instrument's.

Implemented in a most expertly manner, the M3 preamp's fundamental design represents a stark contrast, and can even be considered as a throwback, to other technically advanced ones with features like remote control and digital-domain volume control. Yet, the M3's singular listenability reigns supreme. While the DSD SACD continuously proves its sonic superiority over the technologically obsolete Redbook CD, the M3's brilliant handling of signals secures its place in a system built with either format in mind. Contrary to Peter Qvortrup's claim of the opposite, I find the frequency extension and soundstage definition of the M3 to be exemplary, capable of easily impressing an audiophile with the accompanying dynamic transients and wholesome timbre rendition. Furthermore, Peter's vision of music reproduction at the expense of superlative effects was bold but fruitful, as the system revealed the intrinsic musicality in my CDs, thus progressively augmented my endeavor in home audio. Audio Note's elaborate design philosophies and execution brilliance will undoubtedly speak volumes to many a connoisseur, inviting long-term ownership. The distillation of expertise and craftsmanship as evident in the culmination of the M3 certifies its distinction among its kind.

To me, its adorable qualities attest its existence as a work of art. Therefore, as a system that exhibited the most complex and vivid tonalities ever to grace my home, the AN combo was a force to be reckoned with. Whether you have a solid-state or tube system, and regardless what preamplifier you are using now, if you plan to spend \$6,000 towards improving a high-end 2-channel audio system, do check out the M3 in your auditions. The M3 not only surpassed and advanced the performance of my Wadia 27, in doing so it introduced greater harmony to my system and made it a far greater organic whole. It may bring you fulfillment as well.

## Software

### SACD

Mahler Symphony No. 1, New York Philharmonic conducted by Leonard Bernstein [Sony SS-7069]  
Vladimir Horowitz: Chopin: Piano Sonata No.2; Rachmaninoff: Etude-Tableau, Op. 3 [Sony SS-6371]

### CD

Alien3 Original Motion Picture Soundtrack [MCAD-10629]  
Conan The Barbarian Original Motion Picture Soundtrack [Varese Sarabande VSD-5390]  
Evgeny Kissin Chopin-24 Preludes, Sonata No. 2, Polonaise, Op. 53 [RCA Victor Red Seal 09026-

63535-2]

Vivaldi "Die Vier Jahreszeiten (The Four Seasons)," Berlin Philharmonic conducted by Herbert von Karajan, Michel Schwalbe, soloist [Duetsche Grammophon 415 301-2]

Best of Ella Fitzgerald & Louis Armstrong [Verve 314 537 909-2]

Bill Wither's Greatest Hits [Columbia CK 37199]

Getz/Gilberto [Verve 810 048-2]