

Audio Research, Sonus faber, Transparent cable system

by Alan Sircom

Audio Research, Sonus faber, and Transparent Cable: that's basically high-end audio royalty, all rolled into one extremely elegant and competent system. OK, so two of the three brands (Audio Research and Sonus faber) are subsidiaries of the McIntosh Group, but their autonomy and manufacturing smarts make them distinct entities in their own rights, and they have been a trio of brands known to work in harmony long before two of them teamed up!

The other common factor between these three well-established high-end audio brands is a desire to push the envelope. Any of these three companies could rest on some quite heavy laurels and coast for a decade or so. And, let's be honest here, inertia is endemic in the audio industry and – digital audio notwithstanding – this is not the fastest-moving river in consumer electronics. But, despite – or perhaps 'because of' – that, all three brands keep developing new products that often take their brands in very different directions. The old days of the big, melliflous sound of Audio Research and the warm and enveloping sound of Sonus faber are behind us. They walk a different path today.

However, for this system, we have chosen a mix of the old(ish) and the new. The old is one of the longest serving products in today's Audio Research line-up, and the only purely solid-state product in its current portfolio: the CD6 CD player. Despite a fine DAC in the company's Foundation Series (the DAC 9, tested in issue 148), CD is still a very popular medium with Audio Research owners, and the CD6 refuses to quit!



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► The CD6 is unashamedly old-school in places. Its one-colour faceplate harks back to classic Audio Research products, its top-loading transport is the superb NOS (new old stock) Philips Pro2 mechanism (Audio Research bought up the last batch) and the green numeric LED panel harks back to classic players of the 1980s and 1990s. If it ain't broke, don't fix it!

However, the CD6 is not some throwback from audio's recent past. Alongside the CD mechanism, there are four digital inputs (two Toslinks, RCA S/PDIF, and an asynchronous USB connection), all of which are said to handle up to 24-bit, 192kHz PCM files. While not at the bleeding edge of TLA (three-letter acronym) technology – DSD and MQA are MIA – the CD6 is ideal for those with an extensive CD collection who have no burning desire to rip it to anything computery, but might want to dip a toe into the high-resolution waters. If you find those waters so refreshing, you start looking to DACs in the future, the CD6 keeps your options open by including a BNC-equipped S/PDIF output and an AES/EBU XLR connector. Or you can stay with the on-board quad 24-bit DACs of the CD6 a little longer and use its RCA single-ended or XLR balanced line-level analogue outputs.

Talking of analogue outputs conveniently moves us to the core of the system; the Audio Research LS28 line preamplifier from the company's Foundation series. In fact, Audio Research has been doing a spot of consolidation recently, and in line preamps, there's now just a Good-Better-Best line-up (with the LS28, the REF 6, and the two box Reference 10 – with the GSPre and the rest of the GS line allegedly soon to disappear). This preamplifier features four single-ended RCA and four balanced XLR inputs, with two RCAs and two XLR outputs. Audio Research learned a lot from its most recent Reference series preamplifiers, and the technology (both solid-state and valves) has filtered through to the LS28. The audio circuit uses a quartet of 6H30 valves. This valve is fast becoming the popular choice for preamp designers wanting to move from the ubiquitous 6922 because they are reliable, long-lived, readily available, have low plate resistance, high transconductance, and requires no cathode follower. In short, even before you take sonic performance into account, the 6H30 is an obvious choice for a modern high-end valve preamp.

The other big aspect pulled from the Reference preamps is the logic control. This allows that big, two-deck green fluro display to access a wealth of information, allowing you to custom name inputs, control the shut-down system (ideal to prevent power-up or power-down thumps through power amps), assign pass-through for AV systems, and display the amount of hours elapsed on a set of tubes. As 6H30s are good for between 5,000-10,000 hours, there's no need for clock-watching. Hard buttons on the LS28 are the large volume and source selector dials, and the sextet of push-buttons to power up the preamp, access the menu, run the preamp in mono, invert the

phase, or mute the preamp altogether. These are replicated on the remote.

The newest addition to the group is the VT80 power amplifier, which can be – and in our case, was – provided as a VT80SE. Or you can cut out the middle-man and just go for the VT80SE. The difference between the two is the power valves, with the VT80 configured for two pairs of KT120s, and the VT80SE sporting two pairs of KT150s. As the two are electrically identical, this is an easy upgrade, and the two share the same clever auto-biasing circuit, the same pair of 6H30s (I said it was proving popular!) driver tubes, the same option of RCA single-ended or XLR balanced input and either four or eight ohm outputs. We pay a little more for the VT80SE in Europe because we are afraid of the universe and demand hot valves be caged for our protection. More enlightened parts of the world demand freedom for tubes!

Audio Research spends a great deal of time selecting KT150 valves, and the company's 'Certified Matched' versions (supplied with the SE) have been through a secondary quality control pass that ensures they have tolerances 10x tighter than a standard matched pair straight from the family. This effectively means a 48 hour burn-in before final sort, and there are always those who get hot under the collar about 1.6% of the typical 3,000 hour lifespan of their valves lost to testing, but I'd take tighter tolerances every time. Such is the quality of performance from KT150s (as evidenced by the fact that every other current Audio Research power amp or integrated amp has switched to these valves as standard), I can't really imagine anyone short-changing themselves with the KT120 version.

The Serafino Homage Tradition is a wholly new model in the evergreen Homage series ►

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this specific cable. The cables themselves feature multi-strand twisted pairs of high grade copper for their conductors, feature non-metallic components in the design of their plugs, and sit in extremely well made braided outer sleeves. We used balanced interconnects throughout.

As suggested earlier, if you are expecting the traditional Audio Research and Sonus faber values, you are sadly mistaken. This is perhaps one of the most perfectly poised and constructed systems, ideally optimised to work together in absolute harmony, but those old concepts of the rose tinted Audio Research and the lush-sounding Sonus faber are far out of date. This is a system that's surprisingly clean and bright sounding. Not so bright that it's forward or pinched, but it definitely adds a sense of sparkle to music.

I'm not big on drug references and am dead against promoting the use of recreational pharmaceuticals, but if I recall my wilderness years, there's something about music played through this system that's like the world seen through the filter of a small amount of cocaine. I've been told. Not a full snootful, but just enough to bring out the best in everything. And similarly, this system is a bit 'moreish'; you want to use this stuff more and more, but at least this system doesn't end in tears, and a drugs bust.

Unlike other high-end systems though, this one is relatively fine with compressed albums. 'Sleeping by Myself' from Eddie Vedder's *Ukelele Songs* [Monkeywrench] is a fine example of a compressed album that masks hidden depths. There's some difficult rhythmic work hidden in the basic strumming of a ukelele here. No system can rescue the album from its compressed prison, but they can make it seem less bleak and thin, and this system makes it sound entertaining. ▶

▶ from Sonus faber. In the past, the line moved from the Guaneri standmount, through the Amati floorstander to the wide-baffled Stradaveri, but this last was dropped when the range was relaunched in 2017. Instead, the Serafino is the mid-point between the two-way standmount and the 3.5-way Amati. Billed as 'everyday luxury' the Serafino is also a 3.5-way design, but features a scaled-down cabinet and smaller bass drivers to make the loudspeaker a little more approachable in typical European listening rooms. It sports the company's innovative laminar 'Stealth Ultraflex' rear port (making the design technically a para-aperiodic reflex cabinet) and its 'silent spikes' (part of the company's 'Zero Vibration Transmission' system), which are a metal/elastomer sandwich design preventing any stray cabinet resonance from leaking out into the listening environment through the floor.

Sonus faber has long used a Damped Apex Dome (or Arrow Point) soft-dome tweeter in its higher end models. This 28mm design is coupled with a 150mm pulp midrange driver with a neodymium magnet, and a pair of 180mm bass cones. Such is the elegance of Sonus designs that neither this nor the pair of 220mm cones on the Amati make the loudspeaker look particularly imposing. Of course a big part of that is the boat-backed design and the frankly gorgeous polished Wengè with maple inlay and titanium details, and coffee-coloured leather front baffle. Sonus faber advertising really pushes the Riva motorlaunch styling for a reason: you see either in the flesh and you want one. It's that simple. The only difference between a Serafino and a Riva Aquarama is the price... and that you can't go waterskiing in a loudspeaker. On the other hand, this loudspeaker is also styled and finished in the way that really does honour violin makers and high-end piano makers.

The last link in the chain is Transparent Cable. Transparent's Reference series of interconnects, loudspeaker cables, and power cords have been around for some time, are highly prized, and fully upgradable to the company's Reference XL line. Each cable in the line features its own network box, precisely attuned and optimised using the 'this' rule: this network for this length of

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► What this system does exceptionally well is fill a room with sound. The soundstage is large and deep, possibly deeper than wide in most rooms. There is a sense of a stage rather than a forward, enveloping presentation, and there is a palpable sense of living, breathing musicians in a solid three-dimensional space. My go-to check track for this is ‘Memphis Soul Stew’ by King Curtis [*Live at Fillmore West*, ATCO]. It’s an outstanding live slow-build from one bass guitar, to a full-sized funk band, complete with horn section, piano, two types of percussion, and famous names like Billy Preston, Bernard Purdie, Jerry Jemmott, and Cornell Dupree. Each instrument is introduced, the musician plays a few licks, and joins the build-up. On a good system, you can follow each musician in turn, shift focus from musician to musician and back again, and never once lose the musical theme and the infectious rhythm. And that’s precisely what this system does so well. Yes, I’ve heard systems that have even more of a ‘walk-in’ feel to the sound (including a few from the same stable), but invariably they are either vast and unwieldy designs that require a room the size of an aircraft hanger, or they cost a King’s ransom. Or both.

Everything about this system is both effortless and in good order, which kind of makes for great listening and very dreary writing. Every aspect of the performance is exceptional and outstanding, but the system is so unfussed by such things and just gets on with playing music, you are hardly aware of these performance high points. Take the system’s dynamic phrasing for example; this system has the sort of microdynamics and ability to create tonal shades that were simply not possible a couple of decades ago at any price. Now, it makes that truly staggering sound so easily, that you almost overlook it. Only when you realise you are listening to the hi-hat in a piece of music where a dozen other musicians are playing at absolutely full tilt, do you appreciate just how good this system really is at reproducing music.

If there is a comment – and I use the word advisedly – it’s that sparkly brilliance it brings to music is possibly not the last word in absolute neutrality. It’s not as rich and as exciting as you might expect, but it is making a sound that is better than the original. Many of us would happily put up with such a compromise, especially as it doesn’t seem to favour one genre over another. It just sounds good with music, whether that music is classical or driving rock.

We’re at something of a new dawn for Audio Research and Sonus faber. Both the Foundation series from the former and the Homage Tradition line from the latter are now both well-established and demonstrably meld together brilliantly, and shows great promise for future combinations. This is a fun sounding system, too. It’s not just cerebral or visceral, it’s entertaining, and that’s one of the great missing components from some of the more straight-laced audiophile brands and systems. Neither stuffy or fluffy, the combination of Audio Research, Sonus faber, and Transparent Audio pull together in perfect harmony here – both figuratively and literally. +

PRICES AND CONTACT DETAILS

Audio Electronics

Audio Research CD6

CD Player: £8,499

Audio Research LS28

preamplifier: £7,498

Audio Research VT80SE

power amplifier: £8,998

Manufactured by: Audio Research

URL: audioresearch.com

Loudspeakers

Sonus faber Serafino Homage Tradition

floorstanding loudspeakers: £17,998

Manufactured by: Sonus faber

URL: sonusfaber.com

Cables

Transparent Cable Balanced Reference

Interconnect cable: from £6,385 for

1m pair to connect between CD

player and preamplifier

Transparent Cable Balanced Reference

Interconnect cable: £8,345 for

25’ pair to connect between

preamplifier and power amplifier

Transparent Cable Reference

loudspeaker cable: from £8,885 for

8’ pair

Transparent Cable Reference

power cord: from £1,255 for 1m pair

Manufactured by: Transparent Cable

URL: transparentcable.com

Total system price (as tested): £70,373

Distributed in the UK by: Absolute

Sounds

URL: absolutesounds.com

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