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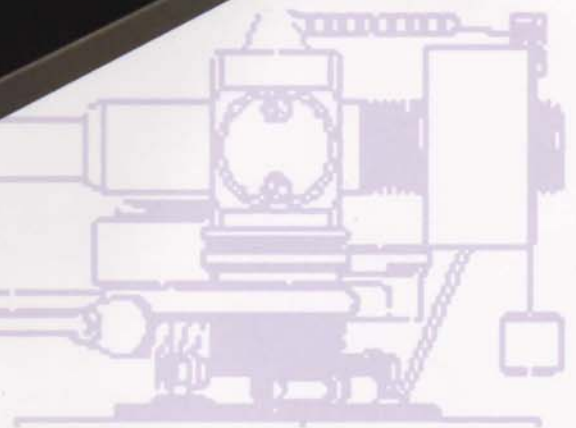
## Coming around again...

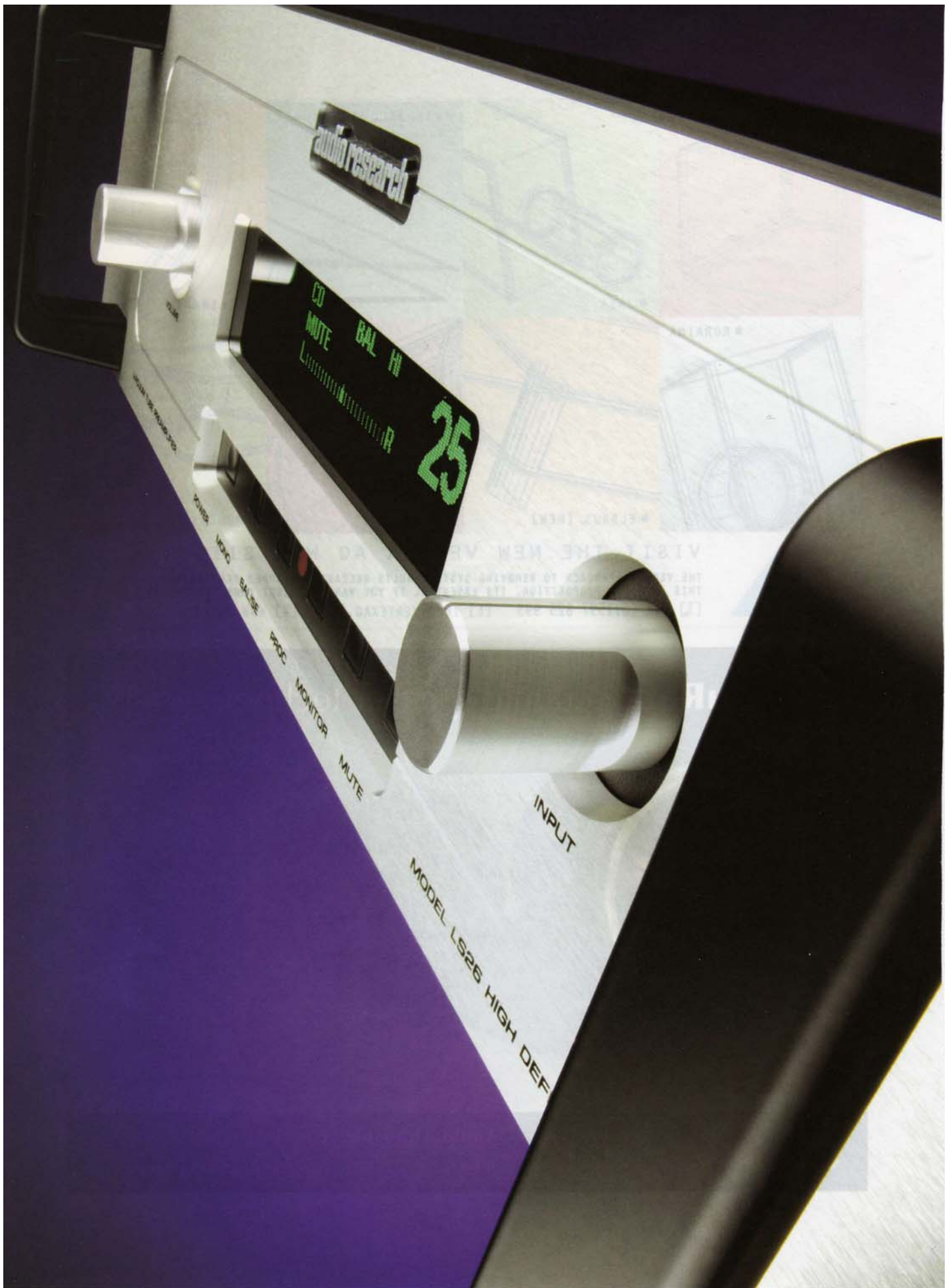
### 50th Issue analogue special



## The Price of Power

### Rotel, Creek Arcam and Denon





# The Audio Research LS26 Line-stage

by Roy Gregory

Back in Issue 45 I was summarily bowled over by the performance of ARC's Reference 3 line-stage (not to mention the PH7 phono-stage). It marked for me, a welcome return for the brand to the forefront of pre-amplifier performance, the field in which it made its first great impact in the UK. At a "mere" £9K it also significantly undercuts most of the competition, whilst bringing its own particular mix of virtues to the cutting-edge mix. Chief amongst these are its expansive and preternaturally stable soundstage, built on a foundation of rock solid low frequencies. Combined with an astonishing transparency (marred in the initial review sample by a noisy tube) it makes for a clear and lucid performance that is disarmingly easy to listen to.

Now comes the LS26, to all outward appearance a chopped down version of the Ref 3 – with an attractively chopped down price-tag to match. It's an impression that ARC are understandably anxious to reinforce. Costing £5300, on the surface the junior model appears to give little away to its more illustrious cousin. Virtually identical styling and layout underline the similarities, while it actually offers an extra input and adjustable input sensitivity, as well as tape monitoring, over the more expensive model.

But under the skin you'll find a different story. For a start the cheaper model weighs almost two-thirds less than the Ref 3. Lift the lid on the LS26's slimmer chassis and you discover that the rigidly constructed and internally

partitioned construction of the Reference product has been replaced by a conventional bent metal enclosure containing a single, large circuit board. Likewise, the Ref 3's all-tube audio circuit and valve regulated power supply have been superseded by a solid-state regulated, hybrid tube/J-fet layout. But before you start crying foul, just remember that the designers have managed to lop £3.7K off the price and that saving has to come from somewhere.



What makes the LS26 so impressive is that, despite the significant differences in construction and circuitry, it retains so much of the Ref 3's character and performance – and that where it deviates the differences might actually make it a better product, at least in a lot of circumstances.

Taken in isolation, the LS26's lower front panel and slightly smaller display make for a more balanced appearance, while the adjustable input sensitivity, driven from the excellent remote control is a welcome addition. Electrically it loses a tiny amount of top-end bandwidth to the Ref 3, has a lower input impedance on single-ended and a slightly higher output impedance on both sets of connections – which

is pretty much what you'd expect. It's also slightly quieter (possibly due to the solid-state power supply) which is impressive indeed, given the ghostly silence emanating from the Ref 3. All connections are available both balanced and single-ended and as well as eight line inputs (including a tape loop) there are paired main outputs, a unity gain option for use with an external processor, phase invert, balance and mono facilities – all available on the remote. A 12V trigger and an internal clock to monitor tube life complete a package that includes just about everything you could reasonably want.

In use, what does the LS26 give away to the Ref 3? Well, it can't match the bigger unit's huge soundstage or absolute stability and low-frequency authority, factors related I suspect to the structural integrity and valve regulated supply in the more expensive design. But the Ref 3 sets the standard in these respects and the 26 gets surprisingly close. It's also close to matching the lucid clarity and easy musical access of the Ref 3, helped by its low noise and transparency. But things get interesting when you consider what the LS26 adds to the mix and how it interfaces with a system. The leaner bottom end makes for a quicker, more immediate quality, with greater musical drive and purpose. Where the Ref 3 sounds incredibly unforced and relaxed, relying on its massive dynamic range and presence to deliver the drama in music, the 26 imbues events with greater pace and impetus. ▶

## ● EQUIPMENT REVIEW

► Put the two units into a system and how do these differences effect the musical results? The answer of course depends on the system and that's the crucial thing. At least as far as the UK is concerned, the smaller speakers with which most of us live, as well as the cultural history of our hi-fi development with its emphasis on rhythm, pace and timing, mean that for many of us the benefits of the Ref 3 will be lost in translation. What's more, the price differential also dictates that few who hear the 26 will be seriously considering the more expensive model while those who do are also likely to have the full-range speaker systems necessary to appreciate its performance.

Sandwiching the LS26 between the matching ARC CD7 and the Hovland RADIA was an instant and hardly surprising success. The pre-amp's warmth, presence and easy sense of time and pace allowed the best to flow from digital sources. Matching to phono-stages proved far more critical. In the absence of the PH7 (with its rollicking, high energy ride) I tried both the Connoisseur and the Groove Plus SRX. Despite the superior energy and presence of the former, it was the adjustable loading of the latter that proved decisive. Running the Titan-i at 200 Ohms (rather than my more normal 100) allowed the sound to ease a little, adding flow and pace to balance the definition. The 10K load of the Connoisseur lacked the necessary grip in this instance, allowing the music to err towards the lazy side of relaxed, robbing performances of tension and overall shape.

Used with the preferred sources and driving the Nola Pegasus Signatures, the Audio Research delivered most of the superb spatial definition and separation I've come to expect from the Ref 3. Add that to the physical substance and rich

hues it brings to notes and images and you have a unit that manages to sound immediate and musically compelling without ever sounding forced or forward. It's this blend of virtues that makes the LS26 a product for the long haul rather than flavour of the month. The ease with which you can hear into a band or a performer's playing keeps you interested while the absence of strain in the music equates directly to an absence of strain in the listener: qualities that should not be underestimated.



Listening to the Yepes Rodrigo, the strummed chords that open the second movement; the separate identity of each string and the sense of the hand's motion across them is almost ghostly. The body of the guitar is a physical, vibrant volume, as is the air in the acoustic. Where the 26 loses out to a unit like the Connoisseur 4-2 LSE or the Vibe/Pulse, is in the overall shape of the ensuing melody, the player's progress from one note to the next. But it gets close and the notes themselves... their colour, envelope and the way they expand into the space around the instrument is just wonderful.

Substituting the ARC VS110 power amp for the RADIA was also an interesting exercise. With its easy dynamics and real sense of power and substance, so reminiscent of great ARC amps like the D115, the 110's musical muscle and expressive generosity proved a perfect foil for the grace, space and easy progression of the 26. The vitality and solid scale of the pairing made orchestral

recordings like the live du Pre Elgar *Cello Concerto* a vivid, communicative presence in the room, making them an extraordinarily cost-effective and versatile combination for any music lover seeking that elusive balance of colour space and serious musical impact. The amp has just the right amount of life, bounce and boisterous energy to fire the line-stage to greater musical heights, the perfect counterpoint to what might be considered a touch too much politeness in certain circles.

Even with the 110 in tandem, the 26 can't quite match the thunderous authority of the REF 3, or its stunningly stable and transparent sound-stage. But without the much more expensive unit for immediate comparison you'll neither know that, nor should you care. Just revel in the musical glory that is the LS26 and the access it opens on your musical collection. ➤

### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Vacuum tube line-stage
Tube Complement:	2x 6H30P
Inputs:	6x line-level 1x tape monitor 1x processor
Outputs:	2x main out 1x tape out
All connections both single-ended and balanced	
Gain:	6 - 24dB, user selectable 0dB processor input
Input Impedance -	
Balanced:	120 kOhms
Single-ended:	60 kOhms
Output Impedance -	
Balanced:	700 Ohms
Single-ended:	350 Ohms
Dimensions (WxHxD):	480 x 134 x 305mm
Weight:	7.5kg
Price:	£5300

**UK Distributor:**  
Absolute Sounds  
Tel. (44)(0)20 8971 3909  
Net. [www.absolutesounds.co.uk](http://www.absolutesounds.co.uk)

**Manufacturer:**  
Audio Research Corporation  
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