

## Equipment Report

### Dan D'Agostino Master Audio Systems Relentless Preamplifier

Fundamentally Better

Michael Fremer



**“H**ow long are the umbilicals?” I asked D’Agostino Master Audio System’s Bill McKiegan, because three large chassis won’t fit on any of my lower rack shelves, and I reserve the top ones for turntables.

“There are no umbilicals,” he replied. “The three link directly together using gold-plated multi-pin plugs and jacks integrated into the chassis top and bottom plates” (these connections do not carry audio).

“Oh, too bad,” I replied. “I need those top shelves, so I’ll have to pass on this review... just kidding!” This monster preamp *needed* to be in my system. How’d I know?

I’d previously attended events in the big room at Innovative Audio in New York City where the setup comprised Wilson Audio Specialties Chronosonic XVX speakers, driven by the smaller (still large) D’Agostino Relentless 800 amps and Momentum preamp. The sources were from dCS and TechDAS/SAT. More recently at Innovative, I’d hosted a record-playing event featuring Patrick Leonard, whose double album *It All Comes Down to Mood* I’d “vinyl shepherded.” It was the first time I heard the Relentless preamp, and it was an unforgettable sonic experience.

The sound was fundamentally *better*—and it was damn good before—now more transparent and “free,” with a noticeably more distinct and insistent (you could say “relentless”) soundstage on which were more solid, effortlessly placed images than I got at home on the same speakers. The album’s recording engineer Kevin Killen (U2, Peter Dinklage, Elvis Costello, David Bowie, Eno, etc.) attended, and he caught the sensational sonic drift, though he’d been somewhat of a digital to vinyl records skeptic.

A few months later Dan D’Agostino got the L.A. & Orange County Audio Society’s Founders Award at the organization’s

annual gala, and I “roasted” him before the fullest house they’ve ever had. I got Dan good! Then I got serious and recounted his long audio history, some of which, as many of you know, was turbulent and required a daring and very successful reset that resulted in Dan D’Agostino Master Audio Systems. Dan must have been touched by it all because right there at the luncheon Bill McKiegan asked if I’d like to listen to the Relentless at home. So, here we are. Not your usual product procurement route but a sweet one.

#### The Three-Box Monster

Two sturdy chassis, one for each signal-carrying channel, sandwich the control system/power supply. Speaking of bread, the Relentless costs \$149,500 (\$164,500 with the Digital Streaming Module). The total weight of 132 pounds makes it one of the heaviest preamps ever manufactured.

With two giant backlit “one-hand” clock-like volume controls set into the chassis fascia, its looks are bold and dramatic eye candy that I found almost difficult to turn away from, though of course it’s not likely everyone will see it that way. McKiegan told me there’s a waiting list, and they are building as fast as they can—not that Relentless is about looks.

#### Overbuilt Power Supply

Preventing radiated interference from reaching signal paths placed near noise-producing power supply and control circuitry required extensive electrical and magnetic shielding. Internal line-conditioning circuitry filters RF noise on the incoming AC and compensates for both asymmetrical power waveforms and DC that sometimes infiltrates the line. Transformer hum and buzz is often caused by DC on the power line.

Relentless’ power supply more closely resembles that

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of a power amplifier. It includes two large 150VA toroidal transformers—one for the analog and one for the digital and control circuitry. The pair drive an 8-amp bridge rectifier and 26,400 microfarads of filter capacitance. Two regulators for the analog stages are pared-down versions of the ones used in the Relentless monoblock amplifier. A separate digital regulator offers thermal and current-limiting protection should there be a fault, which the instructions of course assure you is “unlikely.” According to D’Agostino, the preamplifier has almost as much power-supply capability “as many power amplifiers.” D’Agostino avers that due to the power-supply filtering and robust chassis construction Relentless requires no external power conditioning or special footers or top-plate damping weights.

### FET Sounds

Signal handling begins with a “highly evolved” discrete, differential FET input stage, capable of managing a 30-volt input signal. It’s based upon a “novel” circuit design experiment related to the development of the Momentum phonostage that also helped produce the Momentum preamp’s input stage and later that of the HD Preamplifier.

With an input impedance exceeding 1 megaohm, D’Agostino says it’s unaffected by source-related electrical disturbances. A special circuit that maintains consistent bias prevents sound quality degradation due to heat buildup during long listening sessions.

“Unique” current-domain amplification utilizes “proprietary multiple-output current mirrors, exhibiting nearly 30-fold improvement in linearity over conventional designs” (if you are interested in what a “current mirror” is, please search online).

Internal construction includes distortion-reducing four-layer circuit boards. The layout “meticulously segregates” analog and digital circuit components, including their ground planes. Analog circuit signal integrity is insured using digital control optical coupling. Hermetically sealed relays incorporating gold-plated contacts also help maintain signal purity. The *zero negative feedback* design has a claimed flat frequency response up to 120kHz.

The Relentless’ volume control uses 14 separate metal components to produce smooth (you could say positively sensual) physical response and control over the military-grade, high-linearity solid-state switches and discrete precision resistors. Both bandwidth and transient response are claimed to be unaffected by the volume setting. There’s no “sweet

spot.” The result, D’Agostino claims, is especially smooth and extended high frequencies, with music emerging from “jet-black” silence.

### Basic Facilities With a Twist

Two sets of five “robust-to-the-push” illuminated buttons set within copper accents are arrayed across the power-supply chassis fascia, separated by a circular numerical volume setting display. To its left are buttons for “standby/power on,” “mute,” “polarity,” and “Zone 1” and “Zone 2” (Relentless offers two-zone independent operation). To the display’s right are five equally robust-to-the-touch source buttons. Other than the giant meters that change color or blink depending upon setting, that’s it for the front panel. D’Agostino opted for design simplicity.

A large circular Bluetooth 5.0 bi-directional touchpad remote that eliminates IR line-of-site limitations duplicates all front-panel operations other than the Theater Bypass mode and offers additional controls.

Signal chassis rear panels each feature five XLR inputs and a trio of output XLRs: a Zone 1 pair and one for Zone 2 (properly configured RCA/XLR adapters can be employed for unbalanced source gear).

The equally uncluttered power-supply rear chassis features an IEC AC jack/main power switch, a Bluetooth antenna jack, a pair of 12V trigger outputs, an RS-232 control connector, DSM (Digital Streaming Module) and preamplifier programming access openings, a large hatch for the optional Digital Streaming Module, and a pair



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## Specs & Pricing

<b>Frequency response:</b> 0.1Hz–120kHz	<b>Dimensions (preamp):</b> 17" x 3.9" x 17"
<b>Signal-to-Noise Ratio:</b> –105dB, unweighted/ –100dB, weighted	<b>Dimensions (power supply/base):</b> 17" x 3.9" x 17"
<b>Gain:</b> +6/+10dB selectable	<b>Weight:</b> 132 lbs. total
<b>Finish:</b> Silver or black with custom finishes available upon request	<b>Price:</b> \$151,000 (\$170,950 with the digital streaming module)
<b>THD:</b> <0.006%, 20Hz–20kHz	
<b>Inputs:</b> Five pair balanced via XLR connectors	<b>D'AGOSTINO MASTER AUDIO SYSTEMS, LLC</b> 5855 E. Surrey Drive Cave Creek, AZ 85331 (480) 575-3069 dandagostino.com
<b>Outputs:</b> Two pair balanced via XLR connector for Zone 1, one pair balanced via XLR for Zone 2	

## Associated Equipment (for this review)

**Turntable:** Wilson-Benesch Prime Meridian  
**Tonearms:** Wilson-Benesch Graviton Ti and SAT CF1-12  
**Digital:** dCS Vivaldi One SACD Player/DAC/Streamer  
**Preamplifier:** darTzeel NHB-18NS  
**Power amplifier:** darTzeel NHB 468 monoblocks  
**Phono preamplifier:** CH Precision P10  
**Phono cartridges:** Wilson-Benesch Tessellate Ti-s, Gryphon Black Diamond DLC, Analog Relax 2000  
**Loudspeakers:** Wilson Audio Specialties Chronosonic XVX, treble clef Audio TCA-M Active Loudspeaker  
**Cable and interconnects:** AudioQuest Dragon & TARA Labs The Zero Evolution, Stealth Sakra and Indra (interconnects), AudioQuest Dragon, Thunder and Dynamic Design Neutron GS Digital (AC power cords)  
**Accessories:** AudioQuest Niagara 7000 (line level), Niagara 5000s (amplifiers) CAD Ground Controls; AudioQuest NRG Edison A.C. wall box and receptacles, ASC Tube traps, RPG BAD, Skyline & Abffusor panels, Stillpoints Aperture II room panels, Stillpoints ESS and HRS Signature stands, Thixar and Stillpoints amplifier stands, Audiodharma Cable Cooker, Furutech Record demagnetizer, Orb Disc Flattener, Audiodesk systeme Vinyl Cleaner Pro X, Klaudio KD-CLN-LP200T record cleaning machine, full suite WallyTools

of power-supply DC outputs for future products (I can only guess a next-gen phono preamp).

Clearly D'Agostino opted to keep things simple and not take to the max operational "tchotchkes," like input naming, but no worries, the remote does offer balance and +8 and +14dB output gain options. A "dark mode" extinguishes all front-panel and

remote-control illumination until you change volume.

And that's it! If you need to "play" with your gear and get lost in "nested functionality" to feel like the ultimate master of your audio universe, best to look elsewhere. I figure Dan thinks most who can afford one of these will find having to navigate a tricky learning curve annoying. Only the touchscreen remote's operation requires a bit of use orientation.

## Setup and Use

The "plug and play" set-up ease is exceeded only by the tactile pleasures of rotating the large, smoothly turning knurled copper peripheral volume adjustment rings that surround the large meters (in single-zone operation the two are synched and rotate together). The feel, reminiscent of an old school analog FM tuner station-selector knob, is duplicated on the circular remote.

Dual-zone operation lets you play the same source in two locations or a different source in Zone 2. The volume meters un-synch in two-zone operation with the upper one controlling Zone 1 and the lower one Zone 2. As delivered for review, there was no fixed-gain recording output, but I was told it was easy enough to write code to modify the second output for that purpose.

## Leave Your Audiophile Check List at the Door

The description below compares the Relentless to my reference battery-powered darTzeel NHB-18NS (approximately \$65,000 depending upon options), which is *no slouch* of a preamp especially in terms of "musicality" and

freedom from unpleasant artifacts like grain and "etch," though its weak suit not compared to anything else is a relatively high noise floor.

My first serious Relentless listen was to the direct-to-disc Bruckner 7<sup>th</sup> with Haitink conducting the Berlin Philharmonic (BPHR 200271-2LP)—a record I know well, since before daring to write "vinyl appreciation" annotation for the box set, I listened intently to it more than a dozen times, and I've played it often since. Emil Berliner Studios dragged its lathe into the Berlin Philharmonie.

The five tube-based microphone array used for the recording consisted of a three-microphone main array: one Josephson C700S stereo-mic in the center and two C722s (custom built for EBS) left and right, plus a pair of C617 room mics. The mic preamps were Siemens V72s. The mixer was a vintage 12-channel Siemens V76. It's a *spectacular* recording and record.

I'm not going to cautiously approach this: The Relentless preamp fundamentally and totally improved in every conceivable way not just the *sound* of this record but my understanding of the *performance* itself and how Haitink arranged and delivered its inner workings. It also presented the orchestra and the open Berlin Philharmonie space more convincingly than I've ever before experienced it on a recording.

Writing about "better bass," "improved bottom end," and the rest has no place in a review of this preamp; *everything* was so fundamentally better.

The first movement opens with an unusually long sim-



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mering theme delivered pianissimo by cellos and violins. This play produced rhythmic, textural, and spatial detail that, in the first minute, communicated a powerfully emotional, throbbing sensation I *felt*, rather than the expected “string rumble” to which I’d become accustomed. There was so much more there in just the first few minutes!

As the movement progressed, I heard believable timbral richness and expression in the double basses, violas, and cellos I’d previously thought the recording lacked, while at the same time the preamp nimbly unpacked their interplay as I’ve never heard. Richer but not “thicker,” with far greater rhythmic sweep. As the piece continued, I didn’t know where to look or listen first. I was overwhelmed by a recording I thought I’d fully absorbed.

At the same time the flutes, oboes, and clarinets were no longer lost in the musical thickets or presented as thin representations of themselves somewhere “back there” but were revealed in full, three-dimensional, solid yet airy bloom, as you’d hear them in a good concert hall seat. I noted a solo flute effortlessly suspended and differentiated in space that I’d not previously noticed even through the Wilson Benesch Prime Meridian turntable, which, of course, produced another set of similar new sonic experiences.

This was not a “get something, give up something” kind of performance from a piece of electronics. It was a “get more of everything” presentation that I thought I’d long ago left at the audio-evaluating door because, I believed, with the best I’d heard over the past few years, I was getting it all, just with a different accent.

The climactic coda, which is a figurative and literal religious experience, is introduced by a tremolo tympani roll that I’m used to hearing “somewhere back there” and not all that distinctly rendered, yet through the Relentless it emerged with urgent clarity, as the product description says, from “jet-black” silence (something I admit my ears no longer deliver).

Then came that coda, which spirals up and up in sonic intensity, adding glory with each repeat. That it gave me close to a first-time thrill so many plays after I first heard it says something. What it says is that the preamp has unlimited dynamic range, free of any sense of compression no matter how you push it, that it produces a three-dimensional soundstage that presents itself totally detached from the speakers in ways that gives that phrase new meaning and that the timbral riches it passes or produces are limitless.

From the sublime to what some readers might (incorrectly) think ridiculous: Relentless’ magnificent bass performance had me pulling from the shelf *Truly Fine Citizen*, Moby Grape’s fourth studio album—a Columbia Records contract-fulfilling trio (Peter Lewis, Jerry Miller, and Don Stevenson) set minus key members Skip Spence and Bob Mosley—that was recorded in three days in Nashville, with Monument Records co-founder and Elvis Presley sideman Bob Moore on bass.

Released in 1969, in some ways it presages Big Star, though I don’t know if the record was on the group’s radar screen. Bob Johnston produced (*Blonde on Blonde*, *John Wesley Harding*, etc.). Johnston almost always got great bass on his productions, including this one. He was never shy about pushing the bottom.



Over the years through my systems, on the opener, “Changes, Circles Spinning,” the electric bass line—bathed in reverb—has gone from fun-fat-bloated (how I mistakenly thought it was supposed to sound) to, through the Relentless, surprisingly shapely and well controlled but still, due to the reverb, fat and deep.

Many of the sonic upgrades resulted from better turntables, tonearms, cartridges, and, to a lesser degree, phono preamps, but through the Relentless, bass-note grip and shape notably improved as they had on the Bruckner double basses. I was equally amazed by the preamp was telling me about the tune. The song’s rhythmic thrust intensified. Each bass guitar pluck had an individual attack-personality that I’d never heard in such detail. Mid-range musical information, greatly clarified, helped the mix itself to pleasingly cohere.

On a song called “Looper,” there’s a soft repeat—a call

and response—of the lead vocalist’s lines mixed low in the background that I always heard as mush. Now, there it was, every word easy to hear and not because of spotlighting or a shift in the overall timbral presentation.

I realize most reading this don’t and won’t care about Moby Grape, but what the Relentless preamp did there, is what it did for every record, file, and stream I played, solidifying the sound into similarly coherent rhythmic shape and physical and timbral order.

That’s clearly what helped produce via a piece of *electronics* (as opposed to a transducer) one of the most amazing and transformative changes I’ve ever experienced in my system. I try to avoid superlatives in reviews, but they’re unavoidable here. The organizational clarification and mid-band detail delivery—while still producing incomparable timbral richness—that I heard throughout the Bruckner symphony, especially the first

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movement's climactic coda—was also clear on Moby Grape and on everything I've played since the Relentless installation.

What the Relentless does was obvious not only from the first piece of music I played at home; it was also obvious from the first note I heard at Innovative Audio months earlier. The presentation is timbrally, spatially, and rhythmically seemingly unerring.

Centerstage imaging is noticeably more solid, bold, and “in your face” in a good way, and yet still effortless and non-electronic—as is the picture across the entire stage. The louder you play, the greater the pleasure, though, of course, the greatest pleasure is derived from playing anything on any system at an appropriate level for the music (something rare at a hi-fi show).

I don't think it's a trade secret that loudspeaker companies like Wilson and Fine Sounds, the American Sonus faber importer, among others use certain music tracks as speaker set-up aids. Sonus' set-up people like the Leonard Cohen song “Ballad of The Runaway Horse” from Rob Wasserman's *Duets* album sung by Jennifer Warnes. Wilson's Peter McGrath uses the song “So Do I” from Christie Moore's 2001 album *This is the Day*.

I've reviewed and owned *many* Wilson speakers, so I've heard the tune many times. McGrath recently visited to re-install the XVXs after they'd been out of the system for another speaker review, and he used the track to confirm the set-up before

the Relentless was installed. It sounded fine—no surprises.

Before putting this review to bed, I played the “So Do I” Qobuz stream McGrath had used. It sounded far better than ever. An acoustic guitar panned to the right of the left speaker *jumped* out as never before, each pluck clarified and precise. Moore's voice was *ridiculously* present; the consonants so perfectly textured I was ready to be spit upon. A bass accent as he sings the line “has cast a loving spell on me” went down deeper and with greater focus than I've ever heard it. It was like a different version of the song because, though the stream was the same, it was!

### Conclusion

Yes, the Relentless preamplifier is large. You could say it's ostentatious, and it's very costly. One of the things I like most about writing for *The Absolute Sound* is that there's little or no blowback about super-costly components. Nonetheless, I'm sure some readers are skeptical. However, if you get to hear the Relentless preamp—and obviously it will be in a good system—you will hear a presentation that I'm certain will remove your socks and if you have the financial means, your wallet from your pocket.

You're sure to understand why despite its cost, D'Agostino Master Audio Systems cannot build them fast enough. **LAB**