

# Silver Dream Machine

David Price auditions Music First Audio's delightful Silver Passive Preampfier...

If ever I'm asked to recommend a CD player at a certain price point, I can come up with any number of seriously capable designs from a variety of manufacturers. This holds for turntables, tuners, integrated amplifiers and power amplifiers too. But if ever I'm asked what preamp someone should buy, the conversation falls silent; there's a strange dearth of truly excellent designs, not just at one price, but at any.

It's funny, isn't it? A preamp is a relatively simple thing; there's no delicate mechanical engineering involved in its design, nor is there

much in the way of electronics. We have no sensitive digital electronics, no requirement to pump vast amounts of electrical current. All a serious preamp really has to do is switch between inputs unobtrusively, and not introduce much in the way of signal degradation. In essence, it's a simple gain stage, which doesn't require a command of Quantum Theory to expedite. There are some decent preamplifiers around, but – at least in my experience to date – there are precious few excellent ones.

One of the few stars in the rather small 'preampfier constel-

lation' is the MF Audio Passive. It's actually a rather boring device. It's not big, sexy or packed with leading-edge technology. Rather, it uses a clever transformer-based topography and doesn't get in the way too much. This fact alone led me to call it one of the very best that I've heard; no mere hyperbole, because along with my GyroDec, it's been the only thing that's stayed consistent in my system over the last three years...

Remarkable, isn't it, that what's effectively a 'volume control on steroids' should present such a gnarly, knotty problem to hi-fi designers? And it's all the more

so that so few have stepped up to the plate to fight it out, even at relatively high price points. Quad's 99 preamplifier is a case in point - it costs about as much as you'd think you'd need to pay for a decent hi-fi preamp, and yet (unlike the rest of the Quad range, I hasten to add), it's quite depressing in what it does to a hitherto 'pure signal', managing to turn it into a dry, sterile, barren shadow of its former self.

The chronic lack of decent mid-price hi-fi preamps has forced me to turn my attentions to the higher end, and it's here the MF Audio came in. Around £1,500 bought you a rather crude aluminium box with rather garish gold plated brass knobs, with not-so-impressive gold plated phono connections round the back, but a heck of a good circuit design inside. The result was a largely neutral, self-effacing musical performer which simply let the flavour of whatever went before or after it in the signal path, 'flood out'.

As I moved back from Quad 989s to Yamaha NS1000Ms as my reference loudspeakers, the MF Audio's few failings became a little more explicit. The Quads are a tad warm and woolly (but wonderfully endearing all the same), whereas the Yams have a rather more 'summary' attitude, and like a true born Yorkshireman, don't dilly-dally when it comes to saying 'what's what'. The Yams began to highlight a slightly diffuse centre stereo image, and a less than impressive depth perspective. When I say this, I mean in absolute terms; in £1,500 terms (for that is its price), the MF Audio was (and is) still a stunner.

The MF Audio Silver Passive Preamplifier is considerably pricier at £2,750; indeed you might be surprised at the price premium. Certainly from the outside, it would not seem to warrant it, even if there are some welcome detail changes. Indeed, I thought this looks a little like a 'cash in job' (trade off the reputation of the original and grab some serious profits for not much extra performance)... I have to say though, after three weeks of life with it, I couldn't have been more wrong.

## THE DESIGN

For those unfamiliar with the original design, it's essentially a transformer-based magnetic volume control featuring two attenuating transformers and Swiss made ELMA switches, point-to-point hand wired inside an aluminium case. It changes output level via passive control in multiple steps to control the volume of the line level input signal.

What distinguishes it from the fray is precisely the fact that it's transformer-based, in a world of preamps using resistive attenuation. Additionally, most preamplifiers use active electronics to 'amplify' the signal. Whereas the idea of passive preamps has existed for quite a while (if you want to try one, buy a 50k

instead of the standard copper.

The debate's still out on silver vs. copper; neither are absolutely better than the other, although silver is more expensive. Although this isn't always the case, copper can sound mushy and coarse in audiophile applications – almost akin to a transistor amplifier. Silver

"with superb ancillaries, the sense of scale is akin to standing atop the Grand Canyon, looking down..."

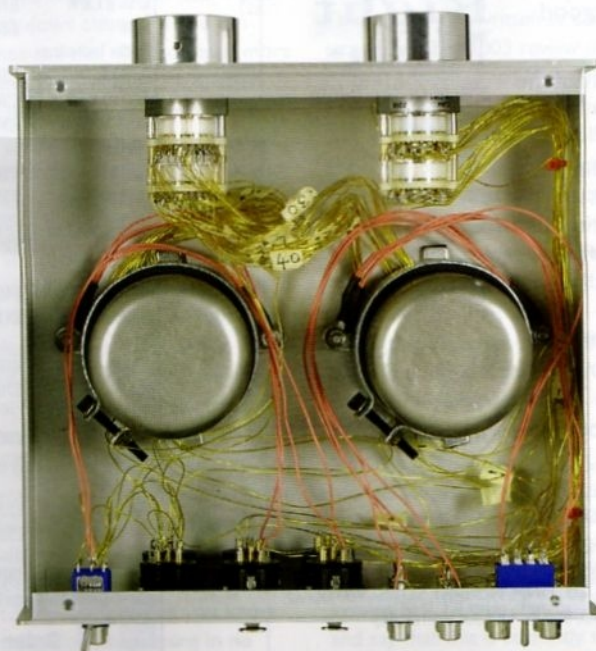
ohm stereo potentiometer from RadioSpares, or suchlike, and wire two pair of phono sockets on to it – and hey presto, you've got a passive preamp for a few quid!), transformer preamps are very rare.

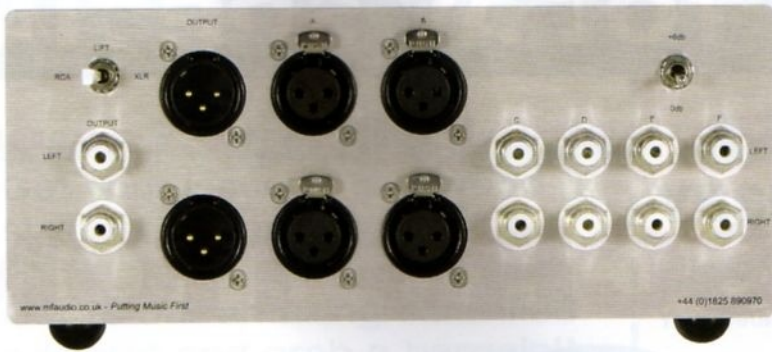
Conventional passives are simply resistive networks selected with a switch, or rotary variable resistors (i.e. a potentiometer). The problem with this type of device, asserts MF Audio is substantial mismatches of impedance either at the source or the load, coupled with a perceived loss of dynamics, which is a very real consideration.

By contrast, MF Audio's Passive Magnetic Preamplifier instead uses custom-made, hand-wound transformer said to feature the largest commercially available 80% nickel Permalloy core for maximum level handling and low distortion, plus a heavy duty Mumetal shielding can for protection from external magnetic fields. The Silver version adds, as you might expect, silver coated copper core wire windings

is always cleaner and smoother but has a slightly hazy, romantic quality and a tonality that's best described as, ermm, 'silvery'. I'm a firm believer in using a bit of both in any system, but generally silver – or silver plated copper (which you could almost say has the best of both worlds) can be used extensively with very positive results. I know this is a tad reductive (because it's not just about what wire you use, but how you actually wind it on a transformer, or what dielectric you use with it on a cable), but it's a useful working analogy.

This hand built preamp claims 100kHz bandwidth, regardless of the selected attenuation (50 Ohm source/ 47kOhm load), and the maker says it's flat to +/- 0.5dB (50 Ohm source/ 47kOhm load) all the way up from 10Hz. It has six inputs, four unbalanced and two balanced, plus balanced or unbalanced outputs. Round the back, there's a +6dB switch, which means the unit is passive with gain, so low gain amplifiers can be driven to their





## REFERENCE SYSTEM

Michell GyroDec/TecnoArm/vdH The Frog turntable  
 Whest Audio PS20/MSU20 phonostage  
 Naim CD555 CD player  
 MF Audio Passive Magnetic Preamplifier (copper)  
 World Audio Design K5881 (modified)  
 Yamaha NS1000M loudspeakers  
 Black Rhodium interconnects/cables

maximum efficiency by components that otherwise might require active boosting. All internal connections use 0.6mm silver coated solid core copper wire with PTFE insulation, hand wired. The best Neutrik and Deltron connectors, and Swiss made ELMA silver contact rotary switches, are employed. Also around the back is a three way grounding switch which allows any grounding issues to be addressed easily – if you have hum, just flick it!

## SOUND QUALITY

This preamp made rather more of an improvement to my system than I'd expected, and this is a system inside which the standard copper MF Audio Passive Pre had permanent tenure – and thus was already quite special. I've heard the cooking copper version deliver some quite superb sounds with all number of power amplifiers, so wasn't quite ready for what the silver one was going to do...

The basic character of this new version is similar to the copper version as you'd expect, but builds on it in a number of ways and doesn't detract in any. The first thing you notice is that switching from the stock pre to this brings quite profound improvements in stereo imaging and depth perspective. Funnily enough, I'd attributed the largest of the few deficiencies in my system to my NS1000Ms, which was only so-so image projection. Although they're a mirror image pair, they have a wide front baffle and if you listen to the received wisdom of the nineties, that's a bad thing for pin-point image precision. Although sublime in many ways, the Yams had been less than perfect in conjuring a vast, capacious stereo soundstage, often falling back to sounding like two speakers rather than a homogenous whole. At a stroke, the Silver removed this...

This new preamplifier has disarming spatial prowess;

instruments and vocals project with breathtaking ease from the recorded acoustic, and sit locked in place in space with a feeling of utter immutability. There's no sense of music struggling to get out of a box; suddenly it's right up there in front of you with tremendous authority and confidence – yet it doesn't just hang right in front of your face. Rather, there's real depth here too. The original MF Audio Passive Preamplifier was excellent in this respect; it didn't hang images around the plane of the speakers, but rather let them fall back when appropriate. Well, the new Silver version seems to add an extra twenty yards or so behind the speakers. The result is boldly projected images coming right out at you, yet other elements of the mix hanging way, way back. With superb ancillaries, the sense of scale and perspective is little short of standing atop the Grand Canyon, looking down.

The other dramatic improvement is in the area of tonality; put crudely, it feels like Silver Pre has just wiped your windows clean, and you can hear into the mix with so much more precision. Dull recorded acoustics sound duller, warmer ones warmer and brighter ones brighter. This new preamp scythes through the mix with remarkable sharpness, telling you everything about every instrument – and it's most profound in communicating tonality and textuality. The difference between Fender and Rickenbacker electric guitars is marked, the contrast between an original Fender Rhodes electric piano and a sampled, digitised one is plain to see (and hear). It's amazing to hear different albums from the same artist, and the massive changes effected by using different recording studios and vocal booths. The MF Audio just cuts right to the quick, letting you know everything that's happening in no uncertain terms.

Actually, I've heard a few high end preamps that do this – or some of it – but the genius touch of the Silver MF Audio is that all this wonderful textural and spatial accuracy in no way detracts from the core elements of the music – the dreaded 'pace, rhythm and timing'. The cooking MF Passive was excellent at this, and the Silver version is better still; whereas the former could be characterised as just a tad 'dark' (i.e. dull in the wrong system), the lighter, more spry nature of this one seems to hold dynamic accents back less; the result is a brilliantly lively, pacey sound. As I said, the standard version is indeed accomplished in conveying the music's ebb and flow, along with its drama, dynamics and visceral impact, but the Silver version seems all the more game. Music becomes disarming dramatic and poignant, while retaining all that wonderful spatial and tonality accuracy. In practice, this makes for little less than a stunning listening experience.

## CONCLUSION

This review was written as a 'sequel' to my October 2003 review of the original copper wired Music First Passive Magnetic Preamplifier, and so I've spared you all the hyperbole about the basic design; the fact is that this takes what was (is) one of the best preamplifiers around and substantially improves on it. The result is a truly special, brilliant even, design which – to my ears at least – does things that no other preamplifiers I've heard can. It is stunningly neutral, open, three dimensional and musical, and yet has no perceivable vices (to me). Indeed, its main crime is to show how the original (much cheaper) one was flawed. This makes me feel a fool, as the few imperfections it showed I attributed to the rest of my system. Still, I'll take that on the chin and say that this is currently the best preamplifier I've ever heard, bar none.

## VERDICT

The most transparent, self-effacing preamplifier we've heard by a large margin, this is nothing less than a landmark product.

**MF AUDIO SILVER PASSIVE  
 PREAMPLIFIER £2,750**

MF Audio  
 ☎ +44 (0)1825 890970  
 www.mfaudio.co.uk

## FOR

- remarkable transparency
- superlative stage depth
- brilliant tonal accuracy

## AGAINST

- nothing