

PHONO PREAMPLIFIER

Only a few soft tones, soft but forceful. It sounds like the horn player of the RSO Berlin playing the last verse of “September” of the Four Last Songs from Strauss is playing at a great distance. Only a few notes, but they teach me again that these few vibrations can mean the world. The music catches me and takes me to a better world with those few simple notes, in this moment all problems lose their meaning.

I spend a lot of time listening to music, but this intense an experience is rare. I have heard this LP often but never so captivating. What is the reason that some equipment brings you closer to the core or to the soul of the music? I guess the reason is not simply resolution or cleanliness; otherwise many other exquisite components would have captivated me the same way. I’m sure it has to do with the balance and integrity of the component. It’s impossible to achieve this balance by just using measurement equipment. It’s a very long way from an amplifier that works technically correct to an amplifier that captivates the listener.

It’s where Helmut Brinkmann feels at home, he regularly dives into the depths of his equipment during his listening sessions. The first time I encountered one of his turntables, I was astonished by the variety of materials he uses; copper, titanium, stainless steel – I had never seen this sort of meticulousness before. In fact by interchanging some of the screws I could hear slight differences in the sound. According to Helmut Brinkmann it’s the same in his amplifiers. There are big sonic differences between capacitors, that’s why the “listening” process takes a huge part of the development time. Brinkmann also states that sintered ceramic is a sonically problematic material. It gives the sound a special grey touch and graininess; therefore he avoids this material as much as possible.

Brinkmann fans were eagerly waiting his big phono preamplifier Edison. It



Review: Phono preamplifier Brinkmann Edison

No, it’s not about beer, but it’s about addiction: Brinkmann’s phono preamplifier Edison.

spent a long time in development because Helmut Brinkmann likes to let his components mature. Several prototypes were built, listened to, compared and set to aside for a while. All this took time.

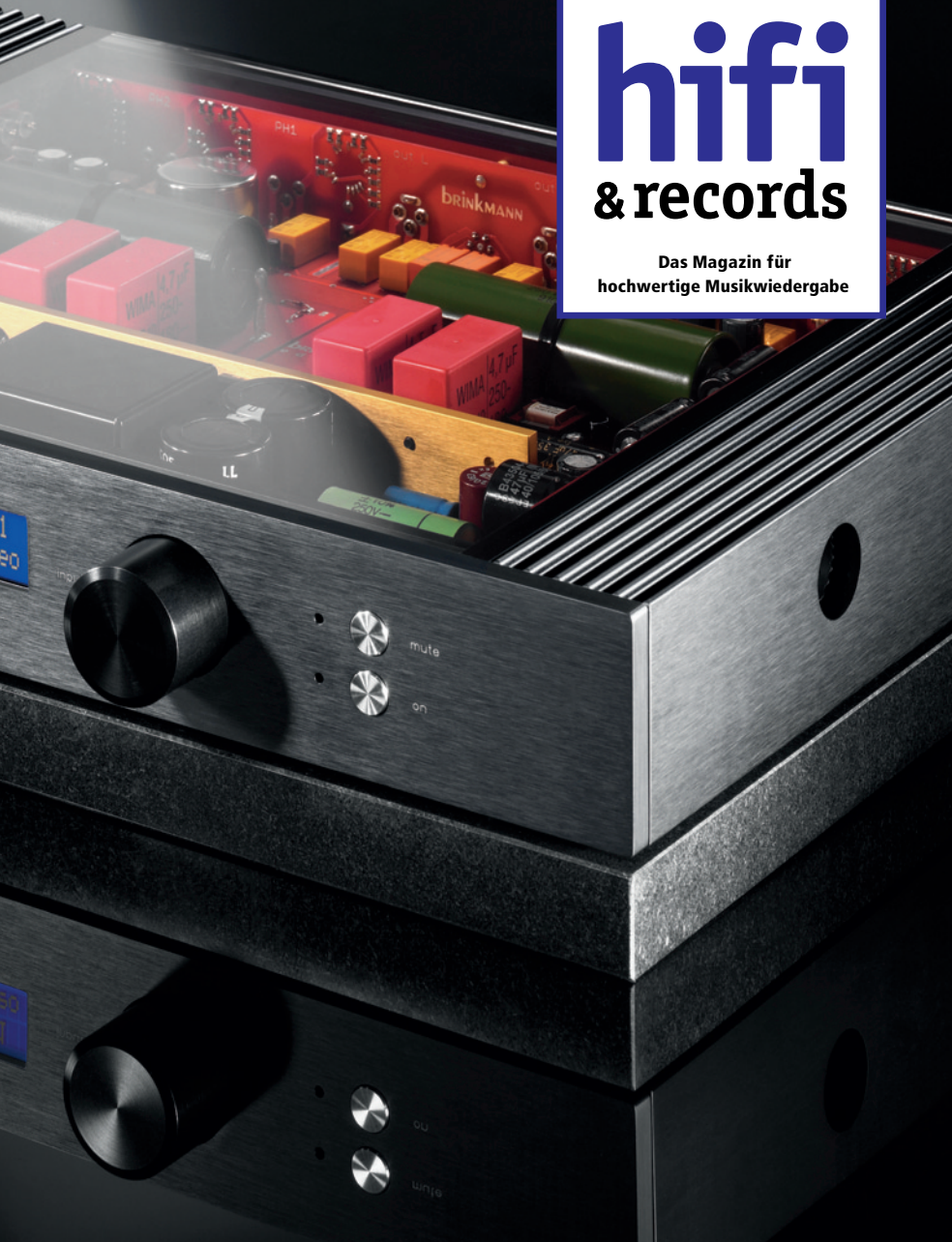
The result is a phono preamplifier with three adjustable inputs that optically resembles the Marconi preamplifier. Two of these three inputs can be connected with XLR and RCA and the third input only has RCA. Next to each connector is a small rotating dial for the input impedance /

loading which can be adjusted in 12 steps between 47 and 47.000 ohm. The amplification can be switched at the front panel in 16 steps up to 66 decibel. Unfortunately the dial for the input impedance is so small that it was impossible to mark the different steps, so the customer has to count through the different adjustments. This is only a problem when

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the cartridges are changed several times a day, like I do during a review. The planned option to switch between RIAA and IEC is not part of the serial model; not enough customers were interested.

Before the signal reaches the amplifier circuit, it passes, if selected by the customer, through the input transformer made by the famous audio supplier Pika-

tron. Brinkmann appreciates the sonic advantages of the symmetrical transformer, bypassing the input transformer is only to allow the use of MM cartridges. Then follows the two-stage amplifier circuit; where two-stage is a little misleading, because both stages are closely intertwined. Namely the transistor stage provides an amplified signal to the cath-

ode of the following tube and thereby acts as a kind of turbocharger. The advantage of this circuit is that the gain adjustment can be completely transferred to the transistor stage, while the equalization, done in the tube stage (a composite tube, originally developed for television), is not influenced. No relays are needed to correct the equalization networks, which is certainly advantageous to the sound. A small electronic brain (EPROM), stores the adjustments for each input such as gain, mono / stereo, or whether the input transformer is switched, which makes the use of multiple tonearms with different cartridges much easier.

I tried exactly this; the Edison had to amplify signals from vastly different cartridges such as the Denon DL103R, Decca Silver, Ortofon Cadenza Bronze, SPU Royal, Clearaudio Stradivari and Brinkmann's own Pi cartridge. By reading the introduction you might have realised that all these experiments were pure pleasure for me, the Edison could be adjusted easily according to the requirements of any of these cartridges. It's common knowledge that the adjustment of the load impedance can make big differences to the sound. If a cartridge is lacking in dynamics, you can help by adding a little more gain. Finally the input transformer offers an additional way to tailor the sound. In my experiments the input transformer always added a certain amount of finesse and a richer colour to the sound. This doesn't necessarily happen with all cartridges, but with most cartridges it makes the sun shine.

On two of its inputs the Edison also offers the use of balanced phono cables with XLR connectors. While listening to Strauss' "Elektra" (Solti, Decca) I could perceive side vocals and quieter sounds a

requirements

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little bit better when I used XLR connections. Especially towards the end of the opera when several storylines run parallel and some singers act in the background of the soundstage, they gain clarity and presence against the background noise. But cheaper XLR cables didn't beat RCA cables of better quality. This leads to the conclusion: first you pick the better cable and then, if possible, a symmetrical one.

I could describe the ability to bring out and emphasize single and even very quiet voices in the background as one of the most important traits of the Edison. It didn't matter which tonearm or cartridge I used or which LP I played: subjectively the background interferences were always pushed to the background, were less noticeable than with other good phono preamplifiers. I also had the feeling that music showed (especially at neuralgic passages: high, loud soprano at the inner grooves) noticeably less distortions. I know of course that this is nonsense; no cartridge that creates distortions can be corrected by a phono preamp. Nonetheless I had the impression that I easily listened to usually critical passages. A possible explanation would be that the musical experience with the Edison is so intense that I lost focus on these technical aspects. This experience actually leaves me a little bit clueless.

Is the Edison a euphonic flatterer that conceals details or harsh impulses? I very nearly had this impression when



I read my last lines, but I have to correct it considering the amount of detail that I heard: an equalizer that is capable of emphasizing quiet background voices so exemplary, swallows nothing. A short excursion to my Pop and Rock section showed me that the Edison also doesn't slur impulses. It always astonishes how much power this amplifier can deliver, especially in the lower octaves.

These are the conclusions of the wonderful time I spent with this phono preamp: integrity, purity, flow and rich colour are the aspects where I realised what's possible. I don't even want to start talking about high-end criteria like a stable imaging (goes without saying), wide and deep soundstage (effortless) or correct tonality (naturally) with this jewel.

Conclusion

The Edison sounds pure. And it is addictive. It lets the music shine so relaxed and at the same time involving, so colourful but also precise, an experience that I only had in rare moments before. Maybe there are competitors that play more precisely. Or better: competitors that appear to play more precisely. The Edison counters effortlessly with a musical flow and a fascinating integrity that is outstanding in my opinion. I rarely experienced such a direct and intense access to music. The various possibilities for adjustments and the three inputs ultimately make it an absolute dream for analogue lovers. *Stefan Gawlick* ■



Brinkmann Edison

WxHxD*	42 x 9,5 x 31 cm
Warranty	3 years
Price	8.990 Euros
Distributor	Gaudios
	Brandhofgasse 11
	A-8010 Graz
Phone	00 43 316 - 33 71 75

* Power supply: 12 x 8 x 16 cm