

# A preamp made to measure

HAND-MADE AND TAILORED TO ORDER IS THE APPROACH OF THE BESPOKE AUDIO COMPANY, AN AUDIO OUTFITTER WITH BUT ONE PRODUCT IN ITS INVENTORY



The £15,000 Bespoke Audio Company *Pre-amplifier* is a tour de force in the rare category of transformer-volume line stages: a virtually no-compromise component built to high standards of luxury. Launched five years ago by TBAC founders Lucy Gastall and Harry O’Sullivan, both formerly of Music First Audio, it can be seen as an upmarket evolution of the original MFA *Passive Magnetic* and its subsequent updates. Bespoke takes the sonic excellence of the Stevens & Billington preamps as the starting point, polishes that further and presents the result in a solid vault-like housing.

As ‘standard’, this is a simple six-input control unit with two outputs, featuring manual input switching and remote control of volume. Gain is adjusted with a 47-step rotary switch selecting secondary taps from fully-balanced line transformers, with a quiet stepper motor to move positions by remote handset when required. Remote input switching is also available as an option – although to date no customer has requested the facility.

The cabinet is assembled from 15 mm-thick milled aluminium sections, forming a 305 mm square box in plan view, cleverly constructed so that no screws or fasteners – and practically no seams – are visible from the front, sides or top. The case can be natural aluminium, anodised black or champagne gold – or indeed any other treatment the customer requests – with the precisely inset top plate can be finished in plain metal to match, or with a choice of exotic real-wood veneers.

Legends around the input and volume knobs are can also be personalised in wording and font, the test unit featuring inputs named One to Six, and (alas) no markings around the volume control. Control knob bezels can also be specified from a list that includes Black Nickel, Chrome and Rose Gold.

The customisable rear panel has been designed to accommodate up to six inputs of either XLR or RCA sockets, and up to three outputs. The review sample included three balanced and three unbalanced inputs, and one set each of balanced and unbalanced outputs.

Changes this year include an option to duplicate front panel legends exactly with rear-panel engraving, and a move from Neutrik to Furutech audio connectors. The Apple remote handset originally supplied, a sensible pairing, is now revised to a

custom design, while the external power supply for the remote electronics will be replaced with a non-switched linear unit as befits the purist philosophy.

After turning the solid 14 kg unit over, a single coin-slot screw can be loosened to remove the top panel, revealing the kind of painstaking point-to-point wiring that has become all but a lost art in audio electronics. Internal wiring is pure copper – no silver-plating here – with a double jacket of natural white cotton insulation plus contrasting black thread to neatly knit the loom together. Two large canned transformers, one for each channel, take centre stage, deeply embossed with the company logo.

Besides a tiny infrared window at front and associated power socket behind, the only extraneous features around the clean casework are two tiny toggle switches mounted discreetly under the left and right edges of the chassis. These are grounding switches for matching to partnering systems – typically a balanced audio connection to power amplifier will require the right-hand switch to be set to ground; or conversely the left switch for unbalanced setups.

There’s no attempt at adding positive gain, long superfluous with modern high-output source electronics, to this unit: the volume span stretches from unity gain at fully clockwise to –68 dB at the lowest 46th position, then mutes on a final 47th step. Every step is a nominal 1.5 dB apart, a decent compromise in dividing down the full span, and the lowest volume settings certainly proved amply quiet for late-night listening, with scope to adjust finely through a natural ‘law’ over the central spread from nine to three o’clock positions.

The transformers are individually hand-wound in pairs by Lucy, with startling levels of precision: channel matching was consistently within  $\pm 0.005$  dB over most of the volume range of the test sample, meaning a production Bespoke pre-amp can stand alongside laboratory instruments.

Construction follows the standard EI form, built around custom-specified bobbins and adopting seven layers of mu-metal strips to form the laminate core, while coil windings – all 1.6km of them – are enamelled oxygen-free copper, with a £6666 option of 99.99% silver wiring apparently popular in the Far East. The finished coils are potted not in the more common paraffin wax but natural beeswax, thought

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to enhance the long-term longevity of this crucial component. Switches from Swiss company Elma are employed for both controls, the preamp using a classic six-way A4 on the left for input selection, and newer A47 for volume.

The latter has a particularly silky feel in use, carefully balanced with just the right switching torque to approach the smoothness of a carbon pot, yet ratcheted with positive detents at every position around the dial. Both switches are specified with a 25,000-cycle lifetime, and Bespoke says it will clean or replace these if ever necessary as part of the product's lifetime guarantee.

### Sound Quality

The thought and care in the design and construction of the Bespoke preamp would be seen as an expensive case of window dressing if the final product didn't sound as good as it now looks and feels – but in fact, the premium presentation isn't even half the story.

The sound is marked out by a calm, easy tone, epitomising neutrality and self-effacement: there's never any departure from guileless transparency, palpable through the limpid midband and far out to the highest reaches of audibility. Given a top vinyl or digital source, string sections and quartets could sing out cleanly, devoid of synthetic lacquer or electric grain, and bass instruments are absorbingly textured and distinct within the mix, being rich and weighty while never overdamped.

The contrast was most evident when referring back to a solid-state preamp, which introduced a 'hi-fi' sheen to passages, whether busy or restful – the light fingerprint of transistors in circuit. And with the Bespoke pitted against the first-generation Music First pre-amp, the original TVC preserved most of the grainless clarity but also leaned toward the faintly brassy, embellishing upper treble with something like a mild but showy glitz. This is familiar sonic signature of the earliest model, now admittedly conciliated in later MFA revisions.

The Bespoke might appear almost sedate against pre-amps more determined to marshal the sound, sometimes by dampening decay, creating an exciting but unwarranted sense of urgency. Instead this preamp takes a more Zen-like approach, letting events unfurl at a natural, unforced pace. Slam may seem subtly understated against an active transistor or valve design, and here I struggle to justify why the Bespoke nevertheless still sounds 'right' in its presentation – perhaps it's a case of honesty rather than not over-egging the dynamics pudding?

Against any of my preamps the Bespoke reconstructs the stereo soundstage a half metre



further back, then extends the rear horizon into an apparent vanishing point far in the distance. Without recourse to artificial brightness to lift and highlight details – and here I wonder if the silver-free wiring *sans* plastic insulation is a hidden masterstroke – the Bespoke is clearly more resolving of natural acoustic cues. Into a black-as-pitch background the lingering tails of instrument decay and reverberation could be stretched quite engrossingly long into time.

Tonally the Bespoke appeared level and impartial from midrange to the upper reaches – but positively resplendent through the bass. While measuring no more or less ruler flat down to the infrasonics than any regular high-performance preamp, it seemed to impart more gravity to the lowest registers, while still keeping nimble when demanded.

Another accolade must go to its exceptional clarity in pitch reproduction – particularly in the bass again, but also apparent on instruments as diverse as piano and glockenspiel: musical notes were audibly well-tuned, and unsullied by complex distortion overtones at even the lower limits of perception.

Like most TVC pre-amps, but here to a remarkable degree, the Bespoke sounded quite phenomenal when playing records: as well as its superb resolution at low signal levels, I suspect this may in part be down to its dynamic headroom, and again the absence of high-order distortion products which otherwise turn an impulsive there-and-gone vinyl tick into a time-smearing distracting intrusion. Through the Bespoke and the Music First Reference Phono, trace surface-noise was always reduced dramatically, typically becoming to all intents inaudible.

### Conclusion

The Bespoke Audio Company Pre-amplifier is a landmark product in a wider world of that'll-do mediocrity. Where once TVC designs would sound better than they looked, Bespoke has raised the game in engineering and aesthetics – and then, for good measure, also uprated sound quality to eclipse even the newly arresting looks. With eyes closed, this is audio excellence exemplified.

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### Reference system

Michell *Orbe SE* with SME  
*309* and vdH *Grasshopper SLA-III*  
Music First Audio *Reference Phono*  
Apple *Mac mini*  
Synology *DS1512 NAS*  
Chord *Hugo TT DAC*  
CAD USB cable  
Music First Audio *Passive Magnetic* pre-amp  
Chord Electronics *CPA 3200e* pre-amp  
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