



One and Only

The best things in life come in small packages, finds Paul Rigby as he samples Fidelity Audio's single input Pre-120 preamplifier...

An Audio Research SPII this is not. You won't find a fascia festooned with fripperies, peppered with potentiometers and studded with switches. Inside, there's not the bird's nest of wiring that other, more esoteric designs feature. In short, the Fidelity Audio Pre-120 is a single source preamplifier with a single volume control adorning the front. So it's a passive then, like the Creek OBH-22? Ermm – surprisingly perhaps – no. Despite its modest £330 price tag, and its absolute economy of design, this is more than just a box with a volume control inside.

Confirming this, designer Brent Rowe confessed that, yes, "it only has one input and one set of outputs. Apart from vinyl or CD-only systems, it's also targeted at people who might use a DAC only, for example," said Brent. "These days, many people are not interested in a big preamp with multiple inputs and outputs. A lot of people I speak to don't even use their CD players anymore or vinyl, all they need is one simple input for their DAC which does all the digital switching. There's a lot of people out

there who just don't want to pay for multiple inputs that they'll never use. It keeps things simple for us too and it keeps costs down."

So, the Pre-120 flies the flag for the less-is-more brigade. It has a sort of a nineteen eighties minimalist sensibility to it, although it doesn't come in black box form (the fascia and rear panel are silver, although there's a choice of silver or black casework). It weighs in at 1.04kg and spans 104x56x245mm, making it wonderfully inconspicuous. "Inside, we've kept the signal path really simple, using the same philosophy as a passive preamp," said Rowe. "Some preamps really overcomplicate the circuits which affects the sound quality, which is one reason why passive preamps sound nice, because of their simplicity".

The Pre-120 shares some parts with Fidelity Audio's respected HPA-200 headphone amplifier, such as the high grade circuit board, capacitors and the same large transformer. "The gain is set differently," said Rowe, "and the buffered outputs for driving headphones have been removed too. We've used different resistors and we've gone for the better quality

op-amps. Because of the price range for the Pre-120, we initially were not going to feature them but they resulted in such a significant sound difference that we decided to put them in anyway."

Packing the components into such a diminutive casing was not a problem apparently, and because of the long-form design, it was possible to tuck the power supply away at the rear, so as to not interfere sonically with the other components. "Actually, you would get more interference with a phono stage because of the high gain, but not on the Pre-120. It even runs at a lower gain than a headphone amp. On that subject, we did contemplate putting the headphone amp and the pre in the one box but it compromised the sound quality of the preamp." Designed as a dual mono box and featuring a dual transformer with two windings, the wee Fidelity Audio sports "the best op-amp we've ever heard" inside.

SOUND QUALITY

As it sports passive preamp-like design simplicity, I brought in the excellent Icon Audio Passive Pre,

priced at around £260, to compare with the Fidelity to provide an ideal contrast, but also to show what differences could be discerned at this price point. It's certainly the closest rival in price terms to the Fidelity Audio, now that the Creek OBH-22 has been discontinued...

My immediate first impressions, playing Skunk Anansie's 'Hedonism', was the airy nature of the Fidelity's midrange which opened up a tremendous amount of detail, in comparison to the Icon, giving a far more impressive portrayal. The vocal presentation was more complex than the Icon too. That latter rather

it more approachable, but it couldn't compete with the Fidelity's sparkling presentation which took the form of a light, delicate treble. The splashing cymbals and trumpet solo that appeared early in the track, featured a notable reverb tail via the Fidelity that just didn't exist on the Icon. Bass also played a larger part in the Fidelity powered version, providing a bedrock for the music. The reedy sax on the Fidelity also helped to display the broad



track, 'Plas'. This atmosphere built rather more effectively via the Fidelity, whereas the Icon tended to smooth over such irregularities. Overall, the Fidelity combined a rumbling, tremulous bass with a textured midrange that really satisfied at the price.

CONCLUSION

Of course, the Fidelity Audio Pre-120 will not be for everyone – that's a no-brainer considering it has only one input! But if your listening revolves around one particular source, then this is a great solution for those wanting an inexpensive, high quality preamplifier that lets you budget more, perhaps, on a decent power amplifier.

Alternatively it's also ideal for a second system, possibly with active loudspeakers, placed in a bedroom or office/study. It has a surprisingly mature and smooth sound for the price, yet there's real insight – this preamp really signposted the subtle reverb of brass instruments and the timbre of voices for example, in a way that the rival passive preamp could not.

The Fidelity PRE-120 is surprisingly fresh faced and clean, offering a degree of clarity that is unusual at this price point. Highly recommended, then – perhaps it's time you thought about downsizing:

"a great solution for those wanting an inexpensive, high quality preamp that lets you budget more on a decent power amp..."

muffled this area but the Fidelity allowed the full spectrum of tonal complexity to spew forth. The voice is a complex machine, full of subtlety and nuance and, while the Icon had some trouble tracking it, the Fidelity did so with aplomb, even to the extent of recognising a subtle multi-voice dubbing in the mix. This feature added a previously unheard depth to Skin's delivery that included a gentle side to her often aggressive tones.

The Icon certainly did provide heft and weight to the bass regions, more so than the Fidelity, but the latter offered a better balanced rendition supplementing the rhythmic gait of the track with a sprightly pace that compared well with the sometimes slower demeanour of the Icon. The open nature of the Fidelity Audio's mid, and the better integrated bass, gave the music a superior balance — the Icon sometimes felt like it was a little lopsided with lower frequency tones too often in the ascendancy. By contrast, the broader soundstage provided by the Fidelity contributed to a near-epic presentation.


Pushing the volume up to eleven in true 'Spinal Tap' fashion, there was a measure of midrange hardening from the Fidelity. This was not unexpected but it was a little surprising that, for the price and compared to other solid state contemporaries, the effect was far less imposing and grating than usual.

Moving to jazz and Horace Silver's 'Cape Verdean Blues' on XRCD, the Icon's lack of dynamic realism was less evident here, making

soundstage, reaching towards the sonic boundaries.

Moving to vinyl, and Ella Fitzgerald's rendition of Cole Porter's 'Love For Sale', and analogue playback was smooth and approachable with a sweet tone on the Icon. But the Fidelity was more incisive in its examination of the music and its attendant sonic elements. Fitzgerald's voice, for example, was given far more attention by the Fidelity whose dynamic range was extended, roping in some extra emotion. It was as if her voice had more room to manoeuvre. Bass grooved at a great pace, taking hold of the song by the scruff of the neck and adding control to what was a rather wayward direction via the Icon. Backing brass offered greater texture while orchestral strings held further promise of romance as the midrange tonality revealed superior realism.

Swapping vinyl discs for Cluster's 'Cluster II' CD, which is instrumental krautrock awash with vintage analogue synths, and the Fidelity Audio Pre-120 offered more bite to the midrange than the Icon, which was benign and too well behaved by comparison. The Fidelity added a tension to the presentation with the slightly aggressive blend of analogue synths available on the

VERDICT 
Compact design provides an open, dynamic presentation at a bargain price.

FIDELITY AUDIO
PRE-120 £330
Fidelity Audio
+44 (0)1302 739998
www.fidelityaudio.co.uk

FOR
- upper mid insight
- tuneful bass
- efficient design

AGAINST
- limited connections
- basic facilities

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

This is a simple silicon chip based preamp that, like most, overloads at 10V output, this being plenty enough for all power amplifiers, most of which need 1V. Gain has been set to a modest x2.5 that, when feeding a 1V input power amp equates to 400mV input sensitivity – low. To be of broader use, especially in matching low gain phono stages to power amps, more gain is needed. For silver disc players it is fine.

Input noise was on the high side at 2.4µV (1µV is possible) but at -104dB below 1V out will still be inaudible.

Frequency response was 1Hz-100kHz and flat at all volume control positions. Distortion measured 0.00006%, not the 0.00003% thd + noise quoted, which is just about impossible to either achieve or measure.

The Pre-120 will do its job well, but

it has practical limitations. NK
Frequency response 1Hz-100kHz
Separation 78dB
Noise 2.4µV
Distortion 0.00006%
Gain x2.5 (8dB)
Overload 10V

DISTORTION

