



First direct

Nick Tate test drives a purist stereo preamplifier with a difference and can't help but be supremely impressed

My design philosophy for a preamplifier is to keep all selectable audio signals perfectly preserved and buffered, to ensure they are not contaminated in any way from each other, or from external or internal radio-interference. And to make it enjoyable to use, of course." There you have it, straight from the horse's mouth so to speak, that's what Chord Electronics' John Franks set out to achieve with the Ultima Pre 3.

Newcomers to the brand will think of this Kent-based company as a DAC specialist. That's hardly surprising considering the huge success Chord has had, since the launch of its ground-breaking DAC 64 nearly two decades ago. Yet the company started up in 1989, to make high-end pre and power amplifiers.

Company founder Franks says the new preamplifier is largely a clean sheet design that's deliberately devoid of 'bells and whistles' like DACs, streamers, etc. To this end, he has specified very high-quality components and adopted audio engineering best practice. "It uses

some of the most advanced high performance amplifier circuits that we have ever assessed and measured".

We're talking high-quality multi-layered circuitboards with screening and special low-noise switching power supplies. Despite the obvious attention to detail on the Ultima Pre 3's electronic design, its styling and ergonomics will really raise the eyebrows of prospective purchasers. To Franks, the user interface and

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aesthetics are just as important. It looks and feels special. The fascia sports a circular power on/off sphere with the company's trademark polychromatic lighting. To the left of this is a combined volume and input selector and to the right a combined balance and AV bypass control. There is nothing else on the fascia apart from this, making it refreshingly

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Chord Electronics
Ultima Pre 3

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
Preamplifier

WEIGHT
12.7kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
480 x 130 x 340mm

FEATURES

- Inputs: 2x XLR; 3x RCA
- Outputs: 1x XLR; 1x RCA; 1x AV; trigger

DISTRIBUTOR
Chord Electronics

WEBSITE
chordelectronics.co.uk

sparse and minimalist to look at. It's nice to use, too. The dual function selectors toggle between modes easily enough – although some users will prefer standard selectors. Nice as it is, there's always a sense of having to 'learn' a Chord product before using it becomes second nature. In terms of connectivity, there are five analogue inputs, two balanced XLR and three unbalanced RCA – plus a separate AV bypass input. The dual signal BUS seen on the Ultima 2 has gone. The quality of build and finish is what we have come to expect from Chord Electronics – in a word, superb.

Sound quality

It isn't very hard to assess a preamp – just give it a really good source and see how much it takes away. To cut a long story short, the Ultima Pre 3 does very little of this at all. The result is an extremely enjoyable musical performance, regardless of the type of music. It dissolves into the system and really gets to grips with what's played.

Don't be fooled by its lavish build quality or characterful styling – in outright sound terms this preamp is truly top-tier – it just gets on with the job of making everything sound great, as well as making the rest of your system sound better. Especially via the balanced connections, it isn't about adding an attractive character to the sound, but rather stepping out of the way to let you hear what's really on the recording.

Take the way it handles a mediocre recording, for example. The Associates' *Club Country* is a classic slice of indie

rock from over 40 years ago, but it's hell on earth for any hi-fi that's tasked to reproduce it. Indeed, it's so bad that many would rather play it through a Sonos. It can sound brittle, midband-forward, opaque and murky; there's very little to commend its recording quality. Yet with the Ultima Pre 3 when driven by Chord's own Hugo TT2 (HFC 468) DAC, the different layers in the mix seem to gently unpeel, so it's suddenly possible to identify and follow all the respective instruments.

That's a sign of great transparency, a preamp that adds nothing in terms of brittleness or tonal edge, and instead cuts through the mix to tell the listener what's really going on. This is evident with Billy MacKenzie's distinctive, almost operatic vocals. Tonally they're hard and steely, and can really grate – especially when he belts out choruses. Yet the Ultima Pre 3 just gets on with things, letting that stark-sounding voice push forward

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and up, out into the room. It sounds icy alright, but not nasty.

At the same time, there's no hint of nasal congestion; the Ultima Pre 3 is gentle, measured and forensically detailed. Play some mid-Seventies rock from The Eagles, such as *New Kid In Town*, and from the first bar you're able to feel the song's natural analogue warmth as well as the lovely rich timbre of the instruments. The Chord's neutrality means that the full flavour of the recording is allowed to flood out. Everything from the Fender Rhodes keyboards to the crispy sounds of the different electric guitars is clear to hear. Vocal harmonies are just lovely, so redolent of a sadly now-vanished time in music when they were considered wonderful things in themselves.

Despite this sun-drenched Seventies sound, there's a lot of energy going on



Costing £12,000, Townshend's *Allegri Reference* isn't a direct price rival, but is arguably one of the very best-sounding preamps going. It's a passive transformer-based design with what's effectively active electronic volume control – which is very unusual. The result is something that sounds far more intricate and defined than traditional passives, but with great transparency. Yet the Ultima Pre 3 holds its own, coming close to its superlative sound at half the price. Just an ever-so-slight upper midband 'sheen' from the Chord offering really distinguishes them.



Around the back are five analogue inputs, two balanced XLRs and three unbalanced RCAs – plus a separate AV bypass input

and the preamp conveys this too – both in the dynamic crescendos of each chorus and the tight syncopation of the musicians. There's no sense of the track sounding slow or laboured whatsoever. Such rhythmic alacrity makes modern dance music huge fun. Set against my reference MF Audio Passive Pre, the Chord seems livelier and more fleet of foot when asked to play back classic nineties techno like K Klax's *Rhythm Is A Mystery*.

This 'banging' house track comes over with great speed and motive force. The Ultima Pre 3 gives a nimble, lithe sound that never sounds slow out of the blocks; it's well able to get into the groove and party. That's thanks in no small part to the preamp's very taut and dextrous bass; it delivers the song's synth bassline with great zeal and perfect timing. Further up the frequency spectrum everything is perfectly in time too; this preamp sounds seamless and self-effacing throughout the entire listening programme.

It's hard to pick faults. I have heard some designs, at significantly higher prices, sound more translucent with an even larger stereo soundstage than the Ultima Pre 3 is able to muster. Yet I don't think anything at or near its price comes close to its overall ability. You need to go to something with a radically different design – such as a top valve preamp or passive – to improve on it, and even then it's debatable.

Conclusion

Combining class-leading sound quality with an attractive and distinctive visual look and feel, Chord Electronics' Ultima Pre 3 preamp is – in three words – hard to beat. It's a real class act which, although expensive, still offers great value for money. If you're in the market for a product such as this, it's an essential listen ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★

FEATURES
★★★★★

OVERALL
★★★★★

LIKE: Superb sound per pound; design; build quality

DISLIKE: User interface not for everyone

WE SAY: Great value premium purist preamp

