

## CLASSE AUDIO DR-5 PREAMP

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For literature, circle No. 95

I have never made any particular secret of my passion for the high end, and one of the major joys of being a reviewer is having the opportunity to make extended trials of top-price components I would never otherwise be able to afford. At the same time, I find it amazing to see how close some of the more affordable high-end designs can come to the ultimate reference designs which are three or more times as expensive. The Classé Audio DR-5 pre-

amplifier is a case in point. It costs approximately \$2,000. This is scarcely cheap by mid-fi standards, but it is very affordable by high-end standards, and the DR-5 comes close enough to the ultimate reference preamps to be a serious rival.

Unlike many top high-end preamps, the Classé DR-5 comes on a single chassis which contains both the audio components and the power supply. The styling is attractively functional, and the control features are excellent. You have a choice of phono, tape, or three high-level inputs. There are the traditional balance and volume controls, and switches for tape monitor, phase inversion, and muting. Unlike a number of preamps, this unit also gives you a full-featured selection switch so you can choose between left or right only, stereo, reverse stereo, and mono.

The DR-5 is very definitely configured for outstanding reproduction of analog phono—something which is only optional in an increasing number

of competing high-end preamps. It has one of the best moving-coil gain stages I have ever encountered; this preamp is self-matching to the impedance of an MC cartridge, a feature which saves experimentation with MC phono loading. The DR-5 seemed to be able to get the best from given MC cartridges, rivalling the selectable impedance features of my reference pre-amplifier.

The DR-5 offers 11 different levels of gain, from 20 to 40 dB, in order to ensure that the phono level will match that of the high-level stages and have the gain which suits a given MC cartridge. The Classé also has switchable 47-kilohm loading and 35 dB of gain for MM cartridges.

Other important phono-stage features include a passive RIAA network and zero feedback in the phono gain and equalization stages. For purists, there is a phono bypass switch which eliminates the input-selector, tape, and mode switches from the signal path. This bypassing has a small but audible



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effect in allowing you to get the best possible performance from a phono cartridge.

The other inputs and outputs are relatively conventional, except for the tuner input and the provision of balanced outputs. The tuner input is padded down, or attenuated, by 6 dB. Tuner outputs are usually higher than those of other audio front-ends, and this allows you to maintain a constant level between components. Alternatively, it would be equally useful with one of the higher output CD players.

Balanced outputs are rapidly becoming the rule in high-end preamps and amps. They do, however, require very careful engineering to ensure that the balanced circuitry does not alter the sound of a unit and that the potential benefits in S/N ratio can actually be realized. The Classé is one of the few preamps I have heard in which using a balanced line does not significantly alter the sound character of the unit. While my system is not noisy enough to make the use of balanced lines important, I did find through experiment that the balanced output will sharply reduce interconnect noise if long interconnects are used or when an interconnect is placed near a transformer or other source of line noise.

As for technical specifications and features, the DR-5 joins virtually all modern high-end transistor electronics in setting frequency and distortion standards which are so demanding that detailed comparisons of specifications are largely meaningless. The S/N specs do, however, provide an indication of why the DR-5 has exceptional transparency: With A-weighting, S/N is 80 dB at the phono stage for both MM and MC cartridges and 90 dB at the high-level stages. The output impedance is also exceptionally low—only 1 ohm—allowing the use of long interconnects with minimum problems in terms of hum and noise.

The circuit features include a large toroidal transformer which is fully copper shielded and has eight times the power needed to drive the circuit. The power supply has eight stages of regulation and 73,200  $\mu$ F of filter capacitance. The Classé's power supply and all power-line inputs and accessory outlets are in a separate shielded compartment.

As with all good high-end components, the internal construction is something of a work of art, and careful attention is paid to both components and circuitry. While I make no claims for being able to distinguish the sonic effects of individual technical features, the manufacturer provides an impressive litany. All controls and switches have silver- or gold-plated contacts. All resistors are 1% metal film, and polystyrene and polypropylene capacitors are used in the RIAA equalization and bypass circuitry. There is a single printed circuit board, with oxygen-free, deposited copper sealed with solder mask. In addition to the phono-circuit features discussed earlier, the manufacturer emphasizes "streamlined" signal paths and "a true balanced high-level section" that finishes with "an ultra-high beta (current stage) which results in the preamplifier having an output of 1 ohm."

Anyone who buys a high-end preamp does so for its ability to provide a degree of transparency and musical realism unavailable from mid-fi components. These qualities seem to have little to do with ordinary technical measurements, since many relatively cheap preamps yield performance—in terms of frequency response and distortion measurements—which is so good that it should theoretically make the differences between such preamps and their higher priced cousins inaudible.

In practice, however, preamps differ sharply in the details of their sound quality, and only a few provide the kind of transparency and realism available in the DR-5. In fact, if this unit has a special sound quality, it lies in its ability to reveal an astounding amount of musical detail at every level of dynamics.

Anyone who compares a preamp like the Classé DR-5 to a good mid-fi preamp in a high-resolution, high-end system will immediately be struck by the extent to which the DR-5 reveals details in top-quality recordings that the mid-fi preamp cannot. This may take the form of new data about the soundstage, an added degree of realism in male or female voices, or a sudden ability to distinguish individual choral voices or massed string instruments. It may also take the form of a sudden increase in the life and appar-

ent speed or dynamism of rock music and jazz, particularly in piano or other percussion instruments. The difference is roughly equivalent to the difference between a picture taken by a run-of-the-mill viewfinder camera and one taken with a top-of-the-line Nikon or Pentax: There is a major increase in "focus."

The DR-5 also has the special merit of providing this detail in a musically natural way. A number of high-end preamps tend to provide transparency that almost seems etched, and the additional detail eventually seems unnatural. Other preamps provide musical sweetness but do so at the expense of transparency. The DR-5 gets the balance right to a degree that few preamps in its price range have yet approached.

The DR-5 also has an exceptionally low apparent noise floor. Many preamps whose measured S/N is exceptionally good, nevertheless seem unable to reproduce all of the low-level detail in classical music and jazz; they make soft passages sound muted or dull. The DR-5 has an outstanding ability to provide lifelike and musical sound in soft passages. You may be a bit shocked to realize that a superior ability to reproduce low-level musical information can contribute at least as much to your listening enjoyment as the ability to handle music peaks.

In terms of frequency balance, the Classé has a slightly "forward" sound, with a bit more upper-midrange data than other top high-end preamps such as those made by Conrad-Johnson, Krell, or Jeff Rowland. It is closer to the Mark Levinson No. 26 in terms of midrange and treble balance, although it is not quite as smooth or transparent. The DR-5 does an excellent job of reproducing the lower midrange and upper bass. It has none of the warmth of tube preamps but little of the leanness of some transistor preamps. The mid and lower bass of the Classé are outstanding, although detail and control are emphasized over power and dynamics.

The soundstage is slightly forward, and you have more of a feeling of moving slightly further toward the concert hall stage than you do with many other high-end preamps. At the same time, the right-to-left imaging is excellent. The soundstage seems to extend to



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the right and left of the speakers without any loss of center fill. Instruments are well placed in terms of depth and from right to left, and the imaging is stable and musically realistic. There is no unnatural expansion or contraction of the image, and the bass and upper-midrange imaging are fully consis-

tent—qualities which are rare in even the very best high-end preamps.

Dynamics and transient information are very good up to very loud listening levels. The Classé does not, however, handle symphonic spectaculars, massed voices, or other loud complex music quite as well as its top competi-

tors. This effect is minor, however, if you pay careful attention to your choice of interconnects. You want interconnects that stress frequency range and detail, rather than coherence or smoothing of the sound.

The DR-5's high-level inputs are also exceptionally clear of residual levels of coloration. While the Classé is not perfectly neutral, it does a much better job of maintaining neutrality than any of its mid-fi counterparts, and it rivals many much more expensive high-end units. You can hear this neutrality for yourself at any good high-end dealer. Simply listen to a system where the power amp is directly connected to a top CD player or decoder with preamp controls, like the Spectral SDR-1000 or Theta DS Pre. Then insert the DR-5 into the signal path and make sure the levels are matched. The "sound" of the DR-5 is barely audible compared to that of all but a handful of reference-quality preamps.

The phono stages of the DR-5 do an equally good job of getting the best from a moving coil. A few audiophiles may bemoan the lack of opportunity to play around with different loadings, but most will find that the DR-5 sets the impedance for an ideal combination of upper-octave smoothness and sound-stage detail. The Classé preamp also produced a very low phono noise level with a wide range of different high-end tonearms, including several that often produce hum or noise problems with other preamps.

Even one or two years ago, I doubt you would have been able to find a rival to the Classé DR-5—at any price. It reveals an exceptional degree of mastery of both the science of electronics and the art of listening. It also has outstanding ergonomics, providing the kind of real-world features a true audiophile needs in an easy-to-operate and logical form. There are now a few superior preamps, but few rival the Classé at anything like its price. Given the high-quality balanced outputs, the DR-5 is also well equipped for the latest fad in high-end electronics, although the standard RCA outputs worked just as well in my system. All in all, the Classé DR-5 offers superb value for the money, without forcing you to mortgage your home.

*Anthony H. Cordesman*

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