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Doshi Evolution Line preamplifier – is it the best?

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Doshi Audio Evolution
Line Preamplifier

Ed Selley

Preamplifiers possess the peculiar tendency to be slightly more than the sum of their engineering. Two designs with appreciably similar engineering can yield radically different performances, and some specific models may prove to be considerably more than their theoretical components. Doshi Audio has established a strong reputation in this field since its founding nineteen years ago. The Evolution Line Preamplifier is part of a small range of components produced by the company.

At first glance, the recipe for the Evolution Line Preamplifier appears straightforward. However, like those deceptively simple dishes encountered in high-end restaurants, it is both more complex than it initially seems and composed of exceptionally high-quality ingredients. It utilises a single ECC99 valve per channel, with no negative feedback employed at any point, and the design intention is to maintain a low output impedance in all use cases. Adventurous users can experiment with NOS/NS 12BH7 types for subtle tonal balance changes. The tubes are run conservatively and are expected to provide years of service.

Transformer-coupled

The volume control of the Doshi is transformer-coupled (manufactured by the venerable UK firm of Sowter/Carnhill) and features 31 steps, ranging from 'mute' to 'max'. At first glance, this appears to be a relatively low number of

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increments; however, when used in conjunction with various partnering equipment, it has proven to be entirely sufficient, prompting me to reconsider how many increments are truly necessary. The emphasis of this system lies in isolation; it effectively buffers both the input and the output, mechanically, galvanically isolating them from one another. This ensures that common mode noise present at the input is stopped from affecting the output. The differential design ensures that source equipment grounds are always isolated from the outputs.

This theme extends to the power supply arrangements. The power supply is external and housed in a smaller chassis, featuring a power switch on the front. Inside, there is a large toroid combined with extensive current filtration and capacitance. Every aspect of the PSU is over-specified compared to the nominal requirements of the preamp to ensure it is never momentarily inconvenienced.

The power supply and preamp are connected via a custom-made umbilical cable designed and built to Doshi's specifications. While the two units have been given a shelf of separation for most of their testing, they were initially positioned somewhat closer together, with the power supply situated behind the preamp. Even under these less-than-ideal conditions, they have remained entirely silent.

The connectivity is solid rather than truly spectacular, featuring four line inputs that lead to two outputs. One commendable aspect of this arrangement is that you can order your own Evolutional Line Preamplifier with any »

» combination of input and output in either XLR or RCA. This is highly convenient, as it allows you to select all connections in a way that suits you rather than having to settle for a standard configuration. The transformer volume control of the Doshi acts as a balanced device. Nevertheless, company owner Nick Doshi emphasised during a brief chat in Munich that the preamp itself is entirely indifferent to whether what comes in or out is balanced or single-ended.

Twofold exertions

The final element of the design is the physical construction of the unit itself. The preamp and power supply chassis are constructed from 14ga stainless steel. Stainless steel is used for its strength and because it is non magnetic thus preventing eddy current propogation. It features an isolated sub-chassis to which all components are mounted and connected by point-to-point wiring. The sub-chassis is suspended from a constrained layer damped aluminium top plate, which, in turn, is decoupled from the main chassis. The result of these efforts is twofold. Firstly, the Doshi feels solid and distinct from some of the other devices in this price range. This isn't the ostentatious sort of 'well built' where the emphasis is on creating a unit that feels solid and overengineered. Instead, it is constructed in the manner of equipment that is required to function reliably without fanfare, upon which crucial outcomes depend. Secondly, the Doshi appears entirely unaffected by placement, which is relatively uncommon for a preamp, particularly one featuring valves.

In the black finish of the review sample (a silver finish is also available that looks a touch less utilitarian), the Doshi is understated to the point of dullness; however, it is entirely straightforward to use and live with, thanks to a pair of displays that show volume and input (oddly, both display the same information rather than one indicating input and the other showing volume) the two displays indicate volume levels for each channel and should you decide to adjust the balance, the displays will show each individual channel. (They also make a four-channel unit) and a well-made remote control that allows all functionality to be accessed from the seating position. It is completely drama-free, and this total absence of—being blunt for a moment—strangeness has increasingly appealed to me as I have been using it.

Undoubtedly, the true source of Doshi's appeal lies in its auditory experience. This product stands out in a select group that begins strongly and only gets stronger from there. It has also shown remarkable consistency. It has been paired with the hARt Lab Tune Three, which I reviewed in issue 243, before connecting to my resident Chord Electronics TToby power amplifier, and then changing direction entirely, being matched with a pair of Linn Klimax Solo 500 monoblocks. These amplifiers with varying impedances and other characteristics. The Doshi has proven to be an impeccable partner for all of them.

Reliability

What Evolution achieves, with the reliability of a Japanese rail network, is balancing the reflection of its qualities in the connected equipment upstream and downstream, while gently imparting a touch of sonic magic—all the effort expended on the power supply results in a preamp that is entirely free of constraint. Listening to Kessoncoda's startlingly vivid Outerstate [Gondwana] with the Doshi in the replay chain led me to realise that what has been considered an uncompressed take on the drum strikes in 'KTO' has been gently constrained.

This means the Doshi produces serious bass; not large dollops of uncontrolled low-end wobble, but an invigorating degree of borderline subsonic force that gives those drum strikes a visceral, room-filling presence. With every power »

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» amplifier I've used with it, into the same pair of Kudos Titan 505s, it has consistently generated more bass and integrated beautifully into the broader frequency response.

That frequency response is, as you might expect from a piece of kit designed by someone with a background in professional audio, exceptionally balanced. Within this fundamental accuracy, the Doshi still possesses some tricks up its sleeve. The combination of TToby and Titan works well but is slightly unforgiving. Listen to the title track of Rival Sons *Pressure & Time* [Earache], and you will find the experience pleasingly intense yet a bit edgy. Insert the Evolution between the TT2 DAC and the TToby, and suddenly there is a sweetness and cohesion that simply wasn't there before. The Doshi opens up this dense recording and introduces a small but noticeable level of forgiveness to the top end, making for a considerably more enjoyable listen.

No FX

Crucially, this is achieved without the Doshi ever feeling like an effects box or indeed anything other than a fantastically accurate device, simply one that can take my periodically less than magnificently mastered music library and ensure it is always listenable. Buried at the end of *The Tipping Point* by The Roots [Island] is a one-take jam session that is as dense and chaotic as anything I can remember hearing. The Doshi never undermines the spontaneity, energy, and rawness of the track. Instead, it utilises the enormous bandwidth it possesses to allow it to flow better and then, for good measure, delivers some frankly absurd low-end shove to underpin it. You can then put on Talk Talk's *Spirit of Eden* [Parlophone], and the result is every bit as audiophile as you'd expect it to be.

This is one of those rare preamplifiers that possesses a degree of magic in its operation, going beyond the unquestionably excellent engineering it features. What has captivated me about the Doshi is that this magic isn't a constant, attention-grabbing aspect of its function. It's transparent, utterly tractable, and built like a lorry. Still, when your equipment might typically struggle to resolve everything as logically as you would hope, it steps in quietly and unobtrusively to enhance the experience. This is a truly magnificent preamplifier that will deliver outstanding results across a wide variety of systems. +

Technical specifications

Stereo Inputs: Four in total, which can be specified in any combination of RCA and XLR

Stereo Outputs: Two in total, which can be specified with either RCA or XLR connections

Home Theatre Bypass: XLR Balanced or RCA

Tube/Valve complement: 2x ECC99/12BH7

Gain: Maximum Gain 12 dB, internally adjustable for lower gain

Signal to Noise Ratio: At least 100 dB below 1V, unweighted

Finish: Natural Anodised Aluminium or Black Anodised Aluminium

Dimensions (WxHxD, preamp only): 44x14x46cm

Weight: 17.7kg (Preamplifier + PSU)

Price: £26,000, €29,950, $29,950

Manufacturer Doshi Audio

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