

THE RECOMMENDED
COMPONENTS ISSUE

497

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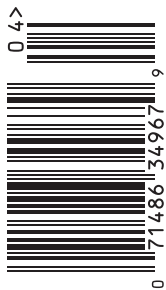
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Engström Monica Mk3

LINE PREAMPLIFIER

Have you ever walked through fresh snow in the woods with all your senses heightened? When I did, shortly before the New Year, it was as if I was seeing nature for the first time, through a fresh lens. Never had white-coated surfaces appeared so white. Nor had shapes seemed so magical. It felt as if I had happened upon a pristine landscape unexplored by human or beast.

Those mesmerizing moments were precipitated not by nature but by spending several previous hours listening intently for differences between three stellar preamplifiers: the solid state D'Agostino Momentum HD (\$40,000 US), which is my reference; the solid state darTZeel NHB-18NS (\$53,000 US), which had entered my system several months before; and the tubed Engström Monica Mk3 (\$60,000 US), which is the subject of this review and the most expensive preamp to ever enter my system. All three preamps are two-piece designs, power supplies connected to their preamp sections via umbilical cords.¹ All were auditioned using the same Nordost Odin 2 cabling and Wilson Pedestal equipment supports.

I was listening so intently—wholeheartedly engaged with the music—not because distinctions were difficult to hear but because

¹ Note that the Monica Mk3's "Power and Control" umbilical cord serves two functions: to transmit power, and to control functions split between the two units. More on this follows.



The soundstage was ideally wide, the sound beautiful and believably warm, the essential foundation provided by period-instrument cellos and basses full and firm.

SPECIFICATIONS

Description Fully balanced stereo tube line stage preamplifier with mono switch, separate power supply, and app-based remote control. Tube complement: Philips ECG 5687WB (4) in the analog line stage, JJ Electronic ECC83 (1) and Philips ECG 6080WC (1) in the power supply unit. Inputs: 3 pairs balanced (XLR), impedance 40k ohms; 3 pairs single-ended (RCA), impedance 40k ohms. All inputs transformer-coupled.

Outputs: 2 pairs balanced (XLR), impedance 75 ohms @1kHz, 400 ohms @20Hz; 2 pair single-ended (RCA), impedance 43 ohms @1kHz, 80 ohms @20Hz. Maximum input level: 12V. Maximum peak output level: 10V. Frequency range: 10Hz-40kHz. THD+N: 0.03% at 10V RMS output. Noise: -120dBV. Gain: 6dB or 12dB balanced (0dB or 6dB unbalanced) at customer request. Channel separation: 90dB at 10kHz. Power require-

ment: 120V or 240V, 50-60Hz (factory-set). Power requirement: 85W.

Dimensions Each unit 19" (480mm) W x 12" (300mm) D x 6" (155mm) H. Weight: Amplifier, 30lb (14kg); power/control unit, 33lb (15kg).

Finish Black/gray.

Serial number of units reviewed 0154/0155. Manufactured in Sweden.

Price \$60,000. Approximate number of US dealers: 2.

Warranty: Two years, six months on tubes.

Manufacturer

Engström & Engström AB, Sankt Petri Kyrkogata 10, SE-222 21 Lund, Sweden. Tel: +46 733 705151. Web: engstromsound.com. US distributor: Musical Artisans, 8335 N. Keeler Ave., Skokie, IL 60076. Email: rreyes@musicalartisans.com. Web: musicalartisans.com.

they were so major. I didn't expect the three preamps to sound so different from each other, and I didn't expect opening my auditory senses this way to supercharge my other senses and refresh my wonder at the beauties of nature. But it did.

The gateway to this experience opened 12 years ago, when I first encountered Engström's Lars 1 monoblocks at AXPONA 2010. That's where I met Timo Engström, who runs the company alongside his designer uncle, electrical engineer Lars Engström. John Atkinson was at my side. We heard a system that also included the Scaena Model 3.2 loud-speaker system (\$54,000/pair), the dCS Scarlatti digital playback system (\$70,000), about \$60,000 worth of Silversmith Palladium cabling, Critical Mass Systems racks and stands, three Nordost QX4 Quantum noise purifiers, at least one Nordost Odin power cable, and a custom music server.² I recall the visual impact of those tall, elegant, plastic-encased monoblocks with their many glowing tubes. I wrote in my report, "I was immediately impressed by the compelling sense of acoustic space the system conveyed. Listening to cymbals, I was awed by the complexity of colors in a single cymbal clash, then by the enrapturing sense of air surrounding it and the other instruments playing simultaneously. ... I left the room feeling that the system was truly special, and capable of making many who could afford it very, very happy."



More than a decade later, I was about to audition an Engström product in my home system. No glowing tubes here—not from where I was sitting. All I could see when room lights were low was the glow of a blinking green light on the control board, which shone through an opening on the bottom rear of the chassis, indicating that the motorized step volume control was functioning to spec.

² See stereophile.com/axpona2010/the_lars_meets_scaena/index.html.

MEASUREMENTS

I measured the Engström Monica Mk3 with my Audio Precision SYS2722 system,¹ checking some of the results with the magazine's top-line APx500. (I made sure that the inputs were set to Stereo, as indicated on the front-panel display.) The volume control appeared to operate in approximate 1.5dB steps at the top of its range and 1dB steps at lower settings. The maximum gain was 4.8dB at the balanced outputs for both the balanced and unbalanced inputs. The gain with the single-ended inputs at the single-ended outputs was -1.2dB, ie, 6dB lower, as specified. With its input toggle switches in the down position, the preamplifier preserved absolute polarity (ie, was noninverting) with both balanced and unbalanced inputs and outputs.

The Engström's balanced and unbalanced input impedances were 20k ohms at 1kHz and 20kHz, and inconsequentially lower at 12k ohms at 20Hz. At higher frequencies, the balanced output impedance was very low, at 36 ohms at 1kHz and 44 ohms at 20kHz. However, it rose to 300 ohms at 20Hz, presumably due to the use

of an output transformer. The unbalanced output impedance was even lower, at 72 ohms at 20Hz, 14 ohms at 1kHz, and 18 ohms at 20kHz.

The Monica's frequency response, measured at the balanced outputs, is shown in fig.1. (Both the response and the excellent channel matching were identical with the single-ended inputs and outputs.) There is a small (+2dB) bump at the very bottom of the audioband into the high 100k ohm impedance (blue and red traces), but more puzzling is the rise in response above the audioband. This reached +4dB at 100kHz and +23.4dB at 204kHz, the highest frequency setting of the APx500's signal generator. This rise is very much lower with the low 600 ohm load (green and gray traces), and the low frequencies now start to roll off below 30Hz, but with the input impedance of 95k ohms that I measured for JVS's Dan D'Agostino Progression M550 amplifiers, the boosted ultrasonic response will be present—as will the boosted response at low frequencies. I am not sure what will be the consequences of the ultrasonic behav-

ior, but the Engström preamplifier might be susceptible to picking up RF interference.

The Engström's channel separation was superb, at >120dB, L-R, and >110dB, R-L, below 5kHz. The Monica's wideband, unweighted signal/noise ratio, measured at the balanced outputs with the unbalanced inputs shorted to ground and the volume

¹ See stereophile.com/content/measurements-maps-precision.

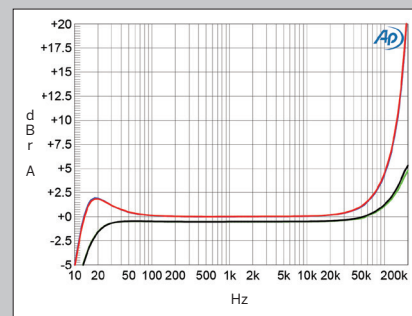


Fig.1 Engström Monica Mk3, frequency response at 1V into 100k ohms (with volume control set to the maximum) (left channel blue, right red), and into 600 ohms (left green, right gray) (2.5dB/vertical div.).

Basics

Apart from tubes, two things are shared by the Lars (now Type 2) and Monica Mk3: the origin of their names and the uncluttered simplicity of their aesthetics. The Lars is named after its designer, Lars Engström³; all other Engström products bear names of Swedish musicians: the Eric, for choral conductor Eric Ericson; the Arne, for jazz saxophonist and clarinetist Arne Domnérus; and the Monica, for legendary Swedish jazz vocalist Monica Zetterlund, who made a second version of *Waltz for Debbie* with Bill Evans.⁴

The Monica Mk3's chassis is made from bead-blasted aluminum and coated with Engström's new ceramic finish. In the standard issue, the top is silver, the front coating cobalt, and the knobs tungsten. Timo told me by email that you can get the front and knobs in "almost any color you wish," with additional charges for high-gloss piano, ceramic satin, or powdercoat.⁵ The height-adjustable aluminum feet, which contain ceramic ball bearings, are made by Franc Audio Accessories.

On its front, the fully analog preamplifier module is adorned with the Engström logo—nothing else. Its insides hold only the



line-level circuitry—nothing more. Three pairs of RCA inputs, three pairs of XLR inputs, two pairs of RCA outputs, two pairs of XLR outputs, and a "Power and Control" umbilical adorn the rear panel; beneath each input is a ground-toggle switch intended to reduce any hum that could result from suboptimal grounding arrangements. Another toggle switch moves output polarity between noninverted and inverted.

The front of the power/control module contains, in addition to

3 Lars fine-tuned the circuit and designed the power supply, layout, and much more. Monica Mk3 is his baby.

4 See youtu.be/BoSpkQz4jXo. All Monica Mk3 buyers receive a vinyl copy of the album.

5 Timo sent a photo of a topaz-colored ceramic satin Monica Mk3 prepared for Engström's UK distributor. The color contrast with its silver knobs and top makes for quite a handsome product.

measurements, continued

control set to its maximum, was a good 81.6dB in the left channel and 83.1dB in the right, both ratios ref. 2V output. Restricting the measurement bandwidth to the audioband increased the S/N ratio to 95dB, left, and 102dB, right, while switching in an A-weighting filter further improved these ratios to 107.9dB and 114.6dB, respectively. To check that the S/N ratios were not being affected by the control/power supply chassis on which it was sitting, I inserted a stack of 2×4 s between the two and repeated the measurement. The ratios were identical.

Fig.2 shows the preamplifier's low-frequency spectrum with the two chassis separated. The left channel's noise floor

(blue trace) has a higher level of supply-related spurious than the right's (red), though the level of the random noise floor is low in both channels. This graph was taken with the volume control set to its maximum; the spectrum was identical with the volume control set to -20 dB, as it was when I connected a wire from the ground terminal on the power supply chassis to the analyzer's ground. The highest-level spurious in the Monica's output lay at -100 dB ref. 2V (0.001%), so I would not expect them to be audible. Nevertheless, I note that JVS found that with his sensitive Wilson speakers, "a slight hum was audible from the listening position."

The THD+noise in the Monica's right-channel output reached 1%—our definition of clipping—at a high 11V into 100k ohms (fig.3), and the level of distortion below 2V was very low. This is commendable for a design that does not use negative feedback, especially as the clipping voltage into 600 ohms wasn't much lower than it was into 100k ohms. With the change of THD+N with frequency, I wasn't surprised to see that the percentage increased at low frequencies (fig.4). This will be due to the onset of core saturation in the Engström's output transformers. However, I was surprised to see that the distortion at higher frequencies was higher in the left channel

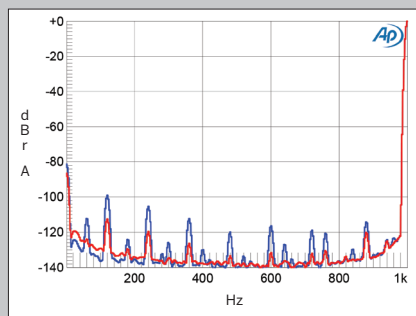


Fig.2 Engström Monica Mk3, balanced input/output, spectrum of 1kHz sinewave, DC-1kHz, at 1V into 100k ohms with volume control set to the maximum (left channel blue, right red) (linear frequency scale).

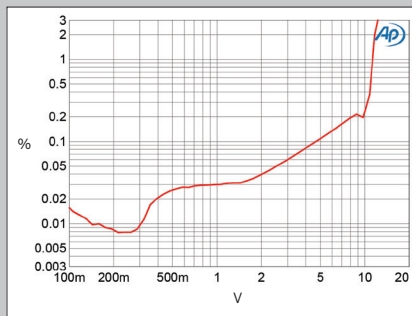


Fig.3 Engström Monica Mk3, balanced input/output, distortion (%) vs 1kHz output voltage into 100k ohms.

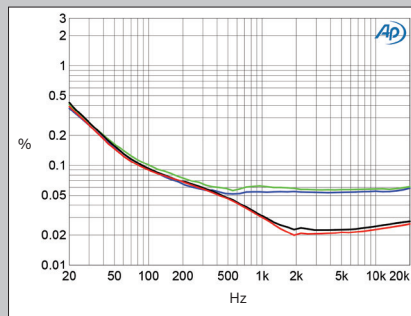


Fig.4 Engström Monica Mk3, balanced input/output, distortion (%) vs frequency at 1V into 100k ohms (left channel blue, right red) and 600 ohms (left green, right gray).

the Engström logo, a small OLED display that indicates volume, stereo/mono, and mute. To the display's right are two large selector knobs. The leftmost is a six-position input selector that, when pushed, causes the preamp unit to switch between stereo and mono. The right knob connects, via the umbilical, to a 48-step volume control in the preamplifier module, allowing volume adjustment between -63dB and 0dB , with 2dB steps for the quieter half of that range and 1dB steps for the louder half. Pushing this knob engages the Mute function.

The power supply/control unit's rear panel contains four items of significance: the umbilical connector, a ground connector for a source that has a separate ground cord, a 15A IEC connector, and a power on/off switch.

During a Zoom interview and subsequent email exchanges with the two Engströms, Timo offered insight into the division of function between the two units: "The power supply unit houses all the dirty stuff: Bluetooth, the remote stuff, and small computers. All the signaling stuff as well as the volume control are in the analog preamp chassis. All voltages are stabilized in the power supply unit. ... All control units are in the power supply unit, but all relays for mute, mono, inputs, and volume are in the analogue preamp unit. The knobs on the power supply unit only act as remote controls that send signal by [umbilical] wire to the analogue section. Confusing, maybe, but from a sound perspective, very good."

The most obvious indicator that the Monica Mk3 is a 21st century product is the absence of a remote control; the preamp

is controlled by Engström's iPhone/iPad app. Once you open the app and select "Monica," you can adjust volume, mute the music, move between mono and stereo, or select an input—all by tapping, touching, or sliding your finger on the device screen. It's easy to switch between stereo and mono with a casual tap—perhaps too easy—so if you start wondering why an unfamiliar recording's soundstage is unusually narrow, check to see if you've inadvertently switched to mono.

The app's "Settings" screen currently offers just one option, "Mute on call," which, when selected, turns down the music when a call comes in on the device running the app. When I'm listening to music, I'd rather mute the call and notifications, but I recognize the potential value of such a feature. Tapping "Support" provides access to user manuals and the Engström website and lets you send an email to Engström.

The major differences between the earlier Monica and the Mk3 version are in the volume control and the tubes. The first volume control was based on "very good" Japanese relays and used only three active relays in the signal path—alas, those relays were discontinued. "When we switched to other relays, they started clicking," Timo said. An alternative, single-ended volume control, also discontinued, had a transformer before and after, which, Timo said, "wasn't very good for the sound." The Mk3's volume control, sourced from Poland, uses a silent stepped motor made in Germany and a 48-step rotary. Lars says that sound quality should be exactly the same at all volume settings.

measurements, continued

(blue and green traces) than it was in the right channel (red and gray traces). This may well be due to the left channel's tubes not being as well-matched as the right channel's.

At low frequencies, the second and third harmonics were similar in level in both channels (fig.5), at close to -60dB (0.1%) each. At 1kHz (fig.6), the second harmonic was almost 10dB higher in the left channel (blue trace) than it was in the right, again suggesting that the tubes carrying the hot and cold signal phases were not as well-matched in that channel. (Perfectly matched balanced operation eliminates even-order harmonic distortion.) Higher-order harmonics were all very low in level in

both channels.

The fact that the Engström preamplifier's distortion signature predominantly comprises second and third harmonics works against it having audible consequences at the levels I found. However, this will only be true if the distortion signature doesn't result in excessive levels of intermodulation distortion. With an equal mix of 19kHz and 20kHz tones at a peak level of 2V into 100k ohms, the second-order product at 1kHz lay at -66dB (0.05%) in the left channel (fig.7, blue trace) and at -74dB in the right (0.02% , red trace). The higher-order products at 18kHz and 21kHz were at the same level in both channels, -87dB (0.004%), and while more high-order products were

visible in the left channel's spectrum, these are all at a very low level. The picture didn't change when I repeated the spectral analysis with the punishing 600 ohm load.

The Engström Monica Mk3's measured performance is dominated by the designer's decision not to use negative feedback. The higher levels of noise and distortion in the left channel than the right may well have been due to that channel's tubes not being optimally matched, perhaps due to age. However, the levels of spurious are still low in absolute terms. I was impressed by the fact that the preamplifier was not fazed by driving low impedances, but I remain puzzled by the boosted response at ultrasonic frequencies. —John Atkinson

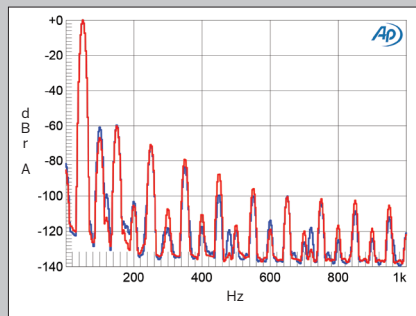


Fig.5 Engström Monica Mk3, balanced input/output, spectrum of 50Hz sinewave, DC- 1kHz , at 2V into 100k ohms (left channel blue, right red; linear frequency scale).

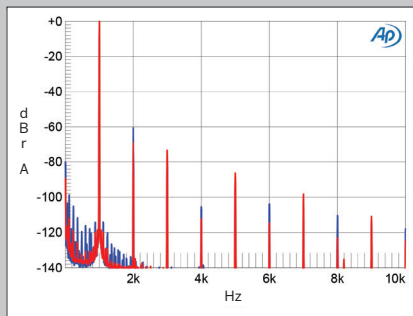


Fig.6 Engström Monica Mk3, balanced input/output, spectrum of 1kHz sinewave, DC- 10kHz , at 2V into 100k ohms (left channel blue, right red; linear frequency scale).

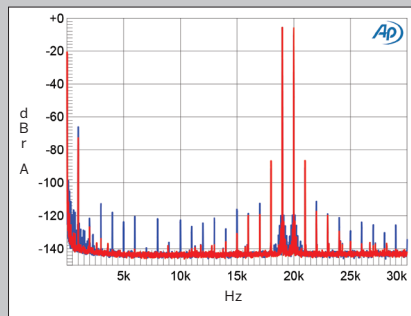


Fig.7 Engström Monica Mk3, balanced input/output, HF intermodulation spectrum, DC- 30kHz , $19+20\text{kHz}$ at 2V into 100k ohms (left channel blue, right red; linear frequency scale).



The earlier Monica used Russian 6H30Pi double-triode tubes. “Because a lot of the tubes we bought we could no longer match, we switched to new old stock E182CC and sometimes 5687WB, depending upon what we can find. These tubes have nearly the same data as 6H30Pi but are of better quality.” Today, the 5687WB tubes are preferred because they’re less microphonic than the others. My review sample of the Mk3 Monica uses four NOS 5687WB preamp tubes.

The power supply unit uses ECC83 and 6080WC tubes, one each, newly manufactured by JJ Electronic.

According to Lars, the Monica, which employs Teflon and tin foil capacitors, is a rarely used design included in a booklet from Glassware, a company that makes software for tube amplifiers. “It uses two totem poles in a balanced configuration, with four triode elements in each channel. A totem pole is a kind of push-pull circuit where a single common voltage feeds two tubes. It’s a good circuit, with low distortion, high gain, high input impedance, and low output impedance. It is so sensitive to load that it requires a step-down transformer. The load on the amplifier is mainly the result of an internal resistor, and the outside load doesn’t affect the amplifier very much.

“Nothing is really new, but the way you put it together creates a unique mix. I don’t think the design has been used because it’s pretty special and difficult to execute properly. It’s a dream circuit that requires quite an even load.”

No negative feedback is employed. “An amplifier should have low output impedance,” Lars wrote. “This is important to be able to drive loudspeakers or for a preamplifier to drive cables. Low output impedance can be obtained with negative feedback. While negative feedback may look good theoretically, it requires infinite amplification, bandwidth and dynamics. This is not possible. In reality, negative feedback blurs the transients. Instead, we use tubes with low inner resistance.” When ordering, customers can specify either 6dB or 12dB (balanced) of gain. (Single-ended gain is 6dB lower.)

When queried about design goals, Lars replied that Engström prefers more of a Scandinavian or German sound that is “detailed, airy, flowing transparent, and very vivid. It needs to be very fast and controlled, not romantic. We prefer to listen to dynamic recordings. None of our products are designed for listening to hi-fi effects; they need to create a musical sensation, with a rightness of tone. I like to almost forget about the music and merge with the flow so the room and everything disappears a little bit and the sound becomes transparent and vibrant. I listen less with my ears and more with my body. I can feel when it’s right.”

Setup

The Monica Mk3 arrived in a single, easily dismantled wooden crate held together securely by removable plastic clamps. The Monica Mk3 comes with tubes installed. The quality of the tube sockets, I was told, ensures that the tubes never fall out during transport.

Timo gave the okay to plug the Monica Mk3 into the Audio-

Quest Niagara 7000 power conditioner, which I use with all components unless a manufacturer suggests otherwise. Timo also gave the go-ahead to support the preamp with either the attached ball bearing feet or footers of my choice. After experimentation, I used, under the Monica’s analog preamp chassis, the same Wilson Pedestals I use under the D’Agostino and darTZeel preamps. I separated the preamp chassis from its power supply chassis sufficiently to prevent noise contamination. Interconnects were balanced Nordost Odin 2 between the dCS Rossini DAC, preamps, and D’Agostino Progression M550 monoblocks; power cables were also Nordost Odin 2.

Oopsie

Upon delivery, the Monica Mk3 emitted a hum through my speakers, loud enough to make quiet listening impossible. Working with Editor-in-Chief Jim Austin, I tried everything to reduce the hum: cheater plugs, flipped ground switches, new cables, careful placement—even new amplifiers. Following a Zoom conversation with the Engströms, a replacement Monica was sent. The new unit was *much* quieter. I proceeded with the review with confidence.

Smiling

I proceeded with joy, because everything I heard through the Monica Mk3 elicited from me an affirming *yes!* Rather than sounding overtly tubey, as in warm, sweet, and mushy, Ms. Monica sounded neutral, color-saturated, and fast. Bass was excellent, and soundstaging was wide, deep, and airy. The only overt indicator that the Monica Mk3 was a tube product lay in the subtle glow and luscious ripeness of its sound.

I began with one of the most colorful issues I reviewed in 2021, the Akademie für Alte Musik’s Harmonia Mundi recording of Bach’s *Brandenburg Concertos* (24/192 WAV). The soundstage was ideally wide, the sound beautiful and believably warm, the essential foundation provided by period-instrument cellos and basses full and firm. In the 5th concerto, the recorder sounded heavenly, surrounded by air.

Jumping several centuries, I turned to the Boston Modern Orchestra Project’s recording of *Matthew Aucoin: Orphic Moments* (24/44.1 FLAC, BMOP/Sound, Qobuz), which I reviewed for the March issue, and cued up *Exodus for Tony*, a searing setting of James Merrill’s elegy to his friend who died of AIDS. The Engström nailed the low rumbles at the start of the piece and sang eloquently in all octaves. I wasn’t in a mournful mood, but curiosity led me to the prerelease stereo files of David Chesky’s *Excommunication Mass* (24/48 WAV). I chose “Matthew 2:1 Open the Gates for Him,” a tribute to the late Matthew Shepard, the University of Wyoming student who lost his life to anti-LGBTQ violence in 1998 at the age of 21. Metropolitan Opera mezzo-soprano J’Nai Bridges’s gospel-like delivery was touching; trumpet soloist Hugo Moreno and the uncredited bass soloist were equally eloquent. In “Ally 1:7 Sing to Your World,” the emotion in Brandie Inez Sutton’s wonderful soprano bathed me in sadness. The Monica Mk3 does

not hold back on emotion.

On another recording I reviewed for the March 2022 issue, the United Strings of Europe's *Renewal* (24/192 FLAC, BIS-2549), I renewed my love affair with the wonderfully innocent and pure soprano voice of Ruby Hughes. On Osvaldo Golijov's *Three Songs for Soprano and String Orchestra*, the Monica Mk3 extracted every iota of loveliness from Hughes's marvelous instrument. Ideal dynamics flattered the sound of cello and bass just as much, and strings sang as if only beauty mattered. It came as no surprise that veteran soprano Sandrine Piau sounded gorgeous on "Piangerò la sorte mia" from Handel's *Giulio Cesare in Egitto*, from *Enchantress* (24/96 WAV, Alpha 765). If any artist could convince me that there's a way to sing this aria other than the way Beverly Sills recorded it for RCA Victor more than 50 years ago, it's Piau.⁶

Thanks to the Qobuz *Stereophile* playlist assembled by my fellow writers, I ended up on Martin Garrix's *Animals* (16/44.1 FLAC, Tidal/Qobuz). Bass on this club track sounded fabulous. Ever one for contrasts, I turned to my latest earworm, the great Cecilia Bartoli's irresistible 2013 performance of Mozart's "Non temer, amato bene," on *Unreleased* (24/96 WAV, Decca 485 2093), and sat mesmerized by the eloquence of Maxim Vengerov's meaty violin obligato and the presentation's uncanny depth and marvelous dynamics. Then I played it again and whistled my brains out over Mozart's brilliance.

I would have liked to have remained forever in a state of bliss, but a glance at the day's headlines led me to Pt. 1 of *Dialog: Ich und Du* from January's Recording of the Month, *Sofia Gubaidulina's Dialog: Ich und du, The Wrath of God, The Light of the End* (24/96 WAV, DG), performed by the Gewandhausorchester under Andris Nelsons. Vadim Repin's violin sounded gorgeous, the background black, and knockout percussion fast, sharp, and correct in timbre. Lest I get too mired in misery over the human condition, it was on to "Bubbles,"⁷ the sense-tickling electronic opening track from Yosi Horikawa's 18-minute EP, *Wandering* (16/44.1 FLAC, Tidal/Qobuz). "Bubbles" begins with the astoundingly realistic sounds of various balls bouncing and rolling on a clear surface. Imagine yourself trapped in a pinball machine and taking exquisite pleasure in having your brain cells scrambled for five minutes and 47 seconds. To soothe what was left of my consciousness, I headed to Rhianon Giddens's "Calling Me Home" from *They're Calling Me Home*⁸ (24/96 MQA, Tidal) and enjoyed the soulful strength and beauty of her indomitable voice.

Comparisons

I began to turn equipment off and on, switch cabling, and listen to many of the same tracks on the D'Agostino Momentum HD and darTZeel NHB-18NS preamps. The darTZeel accommodates balanced interconnects, but the designer favors, first, the company's 50 ohm, impedance-matched, BNC-terminated Zeel interconnects and after that the single-ended variety.

Every time I switched out preamps, the differences were consistent. Through my Wilson Alexia 2s, the D'Agostino Momentum HD was the quietest. The darTZeel emitted a soft hiss through my Wilson Alexia 2s, and with the Engström a slight hum was audible from the listening position 12' away.

The D'Agostino Momentum HD preamp offers a soundstage that's just as wide and deep as the Engström Monica Mk3's, its attack as fast, its timbre as convincing, its bass at least as strong. But it has a lovely softness at its musical core, more pastels than primary colors.

The darTZeel preamp is something else entirely. Its ability to resolve low-level detail is in a class of its own. Don't even ask how frighteningly real those bouncing balls sound in "Bubbles" or how tempting it is to speculate on the size and composition of each of those different-sounding spheres. Images are more forward than

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Digital sources dCS Rossini DAC and Clock; Synology 5-bay 1019+ NAS, Roon Nucleus+ music server, Uptone Audio EtherRegen with AfterDark Giesemann Emperor Double Crown Master Clock, Small Green Computer Sonore opticalModules (2) and Deluxe opticalModule, Linksys routers (2), and Arris modem, all powered by HDPLEX 300 (3) and HDPLEX 200 linear power supplies (3); Apple 2017 iPad Pro and 2017 MacBook Pro laptop with 2.8 GHz Intel i7, SSD, 16GB RAM.

Preamplifiers Dan D'Agostino Momentum HD, darTZeel NHB-18NS.

Power amplifiers Dan D'Agostino Progression M550 monoblocks.

Loudspeakers Wilson Audio Specialties Alexia 2 with Acoustic Diodes.

Cables Digital: Nordost Odin 1, Odin 2, and Valhalla 2 (USB and Ethernet); Frey 2 (USB adapter); Wireworld Platinum Starlight Cat8 (Ethernet), OM1 62.5/125 multimode duplex fiberoptic cables. Interconnect: Nordost Odin 2. Speaker: Nordost Odin 2. AC: Nordost Odin 2, AudioQuest Dragon, Dragon HC, and Thunderbird. Umbilical cords for HDPLEX LPses and NAS: Ghent Audio Canare and copper.

Accessories Grand Prix Monza 8-shelf double rack and amp stands, 1.5" Formula platform, Apex footers; Symposium Ultra Platform; Nordost QB8, QX4 (2), QK1, and QV2 AC power accessories, QKore 1, 3, and 6 with QKore Wires, Titanium and Bronze Sort Kones, Sort Lifts; AudioQuest Niagara 7000 and 5000 power conditioners, NRG Edison outlets, JitterBugs; Tweek Geek Dark Matter Stealth power conditioner with High Fidelity and Furutech options; Wilson Audio Pedestals; A/V RoomService EVP Equipment Vibration Protectors; Resolution Acoustics and Stillpoints Clouds (8) and Aperture 1 (2) and 2 (2) acoustic treatments; HRS DPX-14545 Damping Plates; Stein Music Blue Suns, Blue Diamonds, and Quantum Organizer; Bybee Room Neutralizers; Absolare Stabilians; Marigo Aida CD mat.

Room 20' L x 16' W x 9' H.—Jason Victor Serinus

with the Engström and D'Agostino preamps, with less of an airy concert hall halo. The presentation is up close and personal. If you enjoy hearing details that only fine mikes and engineering can capture, the darTZeel can offer a pathway to bliss.

As for the Monica, its tonal saturation and completeness sounded 100% right. Time and again, it offered pleasure upon pleasure. Which preamp is best is a matter of taste and associated components.

Conclusion

Engström's Monica Mk3 preamplifier is as complete a musical instrument as I've ever welcomed to my music room. It doesn't hit you over the head with its strengths; rather, it unfailingly seduces with the inherent rightness of its sound and presentation. Every time I played music through the Monica Mk3, I felt so satisfied as to affirm to myself that, if the responsibility of reviewing for a source as trusted as *Stereophile* did not impel me to perform an aural dissection in every review, I could easily curl up before the Monica and find myself transported into bliss. It's an expensive class act, but a class act it is. ■

⁶ Note to self: Thanks to prompting from Jim Austin, it's time to listen to the entire album before packing up the Monica Mk3 and shipping it to John Atkinson for measurement.

⁷ Thank you, Steve Zettel.

⁸ Thank you, Jim Austin.