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POSITIVE FEEDBACK ONLINE - ISSUE 25

hardware

# cary audio

## SLP-05 preamplifier

as reviewed by Dave Clark



DAVE AND CAROL CLARK'S SYSTEM:

**LOUDSPEAKERS**  
Reimer Speaker Systems Tetons (with the Hi-Vi Isodynamic Planar tweeters and series crossovers) heavily treated with Marigo VTS Dots, with Townshend Audio super-tweeters.

**ELECTRONICS**  
Clayton Audio M100 monoblock amplifiers, Sutherland PhD phono stage (treated with Marigo VTS Dots), Blue Circle BC3000 preamplifier w/Tunggram tubes and BCG3.1 power supply.

**SOURCES**  
Cary CD-306 SACD player treated with Marigo VTS dots and Shakti Onlines and Stones. Transrotor 25/25/60 Leonardo turntable with a Shelter 901 MC cartridge w/Marigo dot. Sony

Ever had that strange feeling the creeps over your *being* that something has happened before? You know, that peculiar feeling of doing something or visiting some place that just seems so oddly familiar, and yet, you just know that this *has* to be the first time. The French have a word for this feeling: *déjà vu*, which means more or less to "see it again". Even though we do not commonly speak French, we use this word, and other French terms, to describe events or things in our daily travels. When we are stuck at the end of a street that should have kept going, people frequently say, "cul de sac". This loosely translates to "gather or place things in or around the confines of a sack"—like houses on a sack shaped street. Other times when we dip salty fried strips of potato into ketchup, we like to say "French fries." This though is really an oxymoron, as the French much prefer sautéed foods to those that are fried.

A long time ago, dear friend Larry Fisher and I returned from a day of *audiocakesniffing* at various haunts for audiophile\$ with a demo Cary SLP-30 preamplifier. Giddy with excitement and curiosity as to what a tube preamplifier would reveal to us when compared against our Reference Line 3000 passive, in it goes and ... *what is this?* Music! Music you say? Tube presence, tube dimensionality, and tube drive?! Well, not so much tube drive, just that fact that an active preamplifier versus that of a passive will get you a lot more drive and dynamics. We liked. I liked. Carol not so much liked. The Cary exhibited an audible (to her) high frequency something or other that drilled deep into her beautiful little head. Zilch for either Larry or me, but Carol could not stand (or sit) to listen to it. Well, there goes that. Sorry to see you go Cary. Hey, nice to have you around Reference Line. Hey now, no hard feelings okay?!

Ever had that strange feeling the creeps over your *being* that something has happened before? You know, that peculiar feeling of doing something or visiting some place that just seems so oddly familiar, and yet, you just know that this *has* to be the first time. The French have a word for this feeling: *déjà vu*, which means more

RCD-W1 and Magnum Dynalab MD-90 tuner. Sennheiser HD540 headphones and Meier Audio HA-2 headphone amplifier. Polk Audio XM receiver.

#### CABLES

Kubala-Sosna Emotion (when running balanced), Audio Magic Clairvoyant 4D, Soundstring, Dual-Connect, and Silver Sonic Revelation interconnects, and Kubala-Sosna and Audio Magic Clairvoyant 4D speaker cables. Kubala-Sosna Emotion, Soundstring, Elrod EPS2 Signature, and JPS Aluminata (amps) and Kaptovator AC cables.

#### ACCESSORIES

Audio Magic Transcendence power conditioner, Nanotec Nespa #1, Furutech RD-2 demagnetizer, Bybee Slipstream Magic Bullets, Blue Circle BC86 Noise Hound (amp circuit) and Audio Prism QuietLines (throughout the house). Dedicated 20 (amplifiers) and 15 amp (everything else) AC circuits. Tons of Shakti Stones and On-Lines, and Original Cable Jackets (frig's AC and on DSL phone line). Various Marigo VTS Dots used extensively throughout the system and room (window behind listening seat). EchoBuster acoustical treatments and Shakti Hallographs. BDR cones and board (turntable), BDR cones and Jumbos (under speakers) Blue Circle Cones, DH Jumbo cones, Stillpoints, Vibrapods, Mondo racks and stands, and Townshend Audio 2D (amps) and 3D Seismic Sinks (CD player, preamp, and Transcendence). Walker Audio Ultimate High Definition Links and SST. Various hard woods placed here and there along with numerous [Peter Belt](#) treatments. audioexcellence az AudioDharma Cable Cooker for all cables.

or less to "see it again". But there are times that, while events seem to elicit that feeling of déjà vu, that feeling may pass as one continues to *experience* whatever it is that one is *experiencing* and realize that this is not like some other experience; it is new and different. Ah... like the Cary SLP-05, it is so, how do you say... it is a *nouveau modèle*.

Flash to the present day and Cary Audio shows off their new SLP-05 balanced preamplifier at CES—actually at a couple of CESs prior the preamplifier is ready for prime time. The SLP-05 is very cool and is designed to run balanced (as is the 306 SACD player and the Clayton M100 amplifiers ...can you see where I am going with this?). After waiting and waiting, a black SLP-05 shows up on our doorstep.



Like all things in life, there will be people who either go along or go alone. Meaning either you will like the two-boxed Cary SLP-05's styling or you won't. In recent years, Cary has migrated towards a more *retro-ish* design slant with their tube gear—the tubes are on top for all to see (minus the ubiquitous stack of transformers sitting like some sort of cubist housing project, which being absent on the SLP-05, creates an attractive, yet austere look). Along with the visible tubes, the preamplifier features automotive-grade paint and just enough switches and knobs to keep things simple, yet completely functional.

You get a remote controlled (you can also do it the old-fashioned way—by hand if you are so challenged) volume knob, two (L and R) input/balance attenuators, a selector switch (clearly marked for the two XLR and three RCA inputs), along with tape select and mute/operate switches. Cary has seen the foresight to add a headphone amplifier (tube driven) and a Preamp/Cinema bypass switch that allows a source to pass through the Cary un-tethered by whatever is going on inside the preamplifier. This is a very cool option for the HT crowd and any reviewer who wants to review other preamplifiers without having to *switch* out the Cary—though one can simply do just that!



Yes, it is a two-boxed unit—power supply in one box and preamplifier proper in the other. The power supply cabinet is designed with indentations on its top for the preamplifier's supplied soft-shoes (they look very similar to those from long gone Mod Squad; the power supply features them as well)—meaning that the two can be stacked if you got the room. Problem is that when one stacks the two units, it requires a good 12" of space. Unfortunately (or fortunately—who knows if it makes any difference) I had to send them off to separate shelves! I used a Townshend 3D sink under each box, which did help to mitigate a to great degree tube micro-physics and other *vibrationally borne* ills. Additionally, I found that I could fit a BDR #3 cone into each of the soft-shoes allowing me to go that extra distance in *tweekdom*, but more on that later!

From The Cary site:

*The preamplifier has eight (8) 6SN7 dual triodes. Four (4) of the 6SN7's act as the true balanced main line section. Two (2) of the 6SN7's are operating in the front end ahead of the gain stage as balanced plus/minus 180 degree input buffer stage. The remaining two (2) 6SN7's function as a class A push-pull zero feedback headphone amplifier. This headphone section amplifier has two on board output transformers to transform the high impedance of the 6SN7's to low impedance for driving the headphones.*

*The volume control is a motorized remote controlled Alps potentiometer. The inputs along with outputs are all controlled by hermetically sealed gold plated relays. There are two balanced inputs per channel along with three single-ended RCA's. The power supply is vacuum tube rectified and has a 5AR4 vacuum tube rectifier lying on its side inside the unit. The 5AR4 tube has a separate cathode from the filament so any position of mounting is proper. It was chosen to place it horizontal to keep the power supply the same height as the preamplifier.*

*The two meters on the front of the power supply indicate the B+ plate voltage (210 VDC) along with the plate current (60 ma.). You will always know at a glance if all is OK with the operating conditions.*

For the *tube-circuit-nut* reading this, well that is all so very nice and cool. The preamplifier does have the appearance of a *continuation*—or dare I say—an *evolution* of the SLP-98, which was, until the SLP-05 came along, King of the Cary hill. Cary has been around since the late 80s during which they have released 15 or so preamplifiers. It is interesting to note that a tube-based company first launched with a passive preamplifier, the PD-1 as opposed to a tubed product! Even so, it is interesting to see the evolutionary process of their preamplifier designs, as they simply got better and better till the release of the SLP-05. Cary does list about 100 different production models of various amps, preamplifiers, and CD players over these 17 years or so ...which does not include their various versions ...and if we did, the number would be like closer to a 150 products ...dudes, you people are way too driven!

Nevertheless, all of this means *what* in terms of the SLP-05? Well, I could bore you over the next few paragraphs by going into all the audio-dribble about how the SLP-05 has a really, *really* big presence about it. That it presents a soundstage that is considerably deeper, wider, taller, and more spacious and airy than our regular preamplifier (though not perhaps anymore so than what one would hear from say the Joule-Electra LA-150). Images have a great sense of space and dimensionality about them—and as such, are very much more real and believable, as opposed to the *ever-so-more-so-ambiguous* 2-D cardboard cutouts we are used to hearing.

I could bore you with how this really, *really* big presence is all about being bold and dynamic with a startling sense of slam. One that possesses a *confident swagger about it*, giving the listener a sense of satisfaction with their musical choices that few other products can do so well. Solid and definite, that is what the SLP-05 is about. No hesitation—*he who hesitates is lost I tell you!* No the SLP-05 does not hesitate in getting the music across with speed, articulation, and transparency. The SLP-05 is detailed, yet never in your face. It is more revealing than anything I have experienced, and yet never in a ruthless way that screams analytical and cold. It is natural and warm, but not dark or euphonically rich or *tubey*. It is light and airy, yet

solid and rich; rich in *that reach out touch me because I can offer you a plethora of tactile delineations of notes and whatnot* sort of way we all love.

Should I continue prattling on and on about how the SLP-05 can pack a real wallop with its powerfully deep and solid bass? One that is deeper and more dynamic, faster and more articulate; while being more *tantalizingly tactile and room-be-a-shaking rumble-liciously-mind-freakingly-fun* than anything we have experienced before! I could also mention the deliriously deliciously wonderful voices being presented as grain free figures standing steadfast between the speakers. That the SLP-05 possesses an *etchlessness* to its sound that is quite captivating—never getting hard or glassy as the volume goes up and up. That there is a beguiling sense of pace and rhythm to the music resulting in men who can not dance, to at the very least, assume the head-bobbing-foot-a-tapping dance so found of us solitary audiophiles? Its ability to *really* swing with the music.

Do you really want to know that the SLP-05 offers you the best balance of tube and solid-state virtues—sort of the best of both worlds—that I have ever heard? That when compared to the Joule-Electra LA-150, that Joule comes across as being considerably more tube-like: rich, dark, lush with a palpable presence to die for, more laid-back than upfront, and softer dynamically. That the BC3000 is heard as leaning closer to the solid-state preamplifier camp: fast, clean, more upfront than laid-back, dryer, and dynamic. That the SLP-05 falls somewhere between these two very nice preamplifiers? Do I really need to tell you that?

I could go on and on about how the SLP-05 goes loud and quiet very quickly. *Things* can get very scary ...mighty, mighty fast. That is, the SLP-05 swings micro- and macro-dynamics like a lunatic from North Carolina. No reservations, no hesitations. Sit back and listen. Relax. Enjoy. But be Ready! The SLP-05 has a jump factor times 10.

Nah, instead of going into all that, what I really wanted to say about the SLP-05 is that with it in the system I tend to listen to a lot more music, buy a lot more music, and enjoy a lot more music a lot more than I used to with any other preamplifier that has been here before. Now that means a lot. All the other stuff is just stuff that we use to connect the dots. Truth is, either it plays the music in a way that we like *more* (for whatever reason) or it *doesn't*. The Cary SLP-05 simply gets us to a place where we have not been in a long while. All the bits and pieces become rather meaningless. The SLP-05 makes our music more fun. More involving. More of what we *want* to hear. Now. Here in our room.

Whatever we toss at it, the SLP-05 gets us into the *groove* ...the music simply flows and flows. From Macha, to Calexico, to Laswell, to Yello, to Lambchop, to Low, to NIN, to him, to the Notwist, to Kraftwerk, to Godsmack, to the Cure, to whatever ...it really gets their *musical* idea across—the spirit, the inner drive, the *essence*. It all comes together in way that we love.

Is it an issue of getting tired of the same old same old? No doubt that plays a big part in all of this. We have had the BC3000 preamplifier for like 10 years or longer. It, along with the Claytons and Reimers, has been a mainstay here and as such, is starting to show its age. As good as it is (or *was*, depending on where one stands), things move on. Things have moved on. We have moved on to wanting, no *needing*, something different. But *better* different. The Cary has really made us aware of how things have become rather ho-hum and static around here. Perhaps it *is* time to make a change.

Oh, did I add that the SLP-05 is dead quiet and after several months of use, has shown not one odd blip, blink, or burp? This thing is quiet, runs cool, and appears to be rather maintenance free. Would hate to bore you with that part, but this is a nice change from the stuff that hums, buzzes, and simply does not play well with others.

However, as good as the Cary SLP-05 is in stock mode, well, let me add a few words as to what has been done with the SLP-05 to get it to where it really, REALLY excites our music-bone. [The above comments refer to the stock SLP-05 as supplied by Cary. The following tweaks simply build upon this allowing me to *flavor* the preamplifier to my taste.] As I said earlier, Townshend 3-D sinks make a nice difference by mitigating tube micro-physics and whatnot (though they have been replaced with a new and improved model—what hasn't). Consider also something like the Equa Footers—equally as good. Especially the new and improved version

that superseded those that I commented on in the last issue of PFO. Ditto using BDR cones in conjunction with the supplied soft-shoes under each of the SLP-05's cases. The BDR cones added a nice flavor to the mix by providing a sense of *rightness* to the music—things had more air and solidity or a *tonally correct presence* if you will ...they made recorded music sound more like what we want our recorded music to sound like. Now ain't that what it's all about?



Since the SLP-05 is balanced and moving to a balanced preamplifier based on the 306 SACD and Clayton M100s, we needed to go the balanced interconnect route. The Audio Magic 4D Clairvoyants are single-ended/RCA's and my bank account does not allow for Jerry to either re-terminate/configure these to be balanced, or to send me a duplicate balanced set. So what is an audio reviewer to do? Well, how about the Emotions from Kubala-Sosna—balanced and single-ended? Well spoken of by the audio-community and interesting to boot! I inquire as to a review set-up and they agree. A comparison ensues, and yes, while the AM cables being as good as they are, and they are good, very good, they simply are not the *right* cable for the SLP-05 in *my* system. With the balanced Emotions, we have a match made in heaven. A tad less detailed and dimensional than the AMs, the Emotions bring to the table a *saucy sense of musicality* that is hard to equal at any price. The Emotions possess many of the same sonic/musical attributes as that of the SLP-05—this was determined by using the AM and Emotions (both single-ended) with our regular BC3000 preamplifier, as well as the SLP-05 and Joule-Electra LA-150 preamplifiers. While these characteristics were consistent from preamplifier to preamplifier, I still love the AMs on the BC3000 and Joule where their sonic traits really shine. Ditto the Emotion AC cord—a better match on the SLP-05 than the Elrod, which is quite wonderful on the BC3000 and Joule. Simply put, on the SLP-05 the Emotions speak musical truth with no exaggeration or emphasis—no hype. Very, very nice indeed.



Toss in some NOS Pope tubes from Kevin Deal at Upscale Audio and one can go that extra euphonic mile—more air, more dimensional richness, more musical pleasure. Not anything overly dramatic, but enough that raises the happy bar a few notches higher. Problem is, the 6SN7 Popes (Phipps of Holland) are extremely rare and don't come cheap—yeah, what NOS tubes do? Kevin told me that he felt like Indiana Jones when he saw these in Europe and just had to have them. [FYI from the Upscale Audio site: Pope, Valvo, Adzam, AmpereX, Mullard, Miniwatt Dario, and Radiotechnique were all names owned by Philips Holland. The respective names sometimes operated factories. Mullard - England, Valvo - Germany, AmpereX - USA, Radiotechnique - France. In the case of Adzam and Pope they were names used to export Philips products into other markets.] These tubes are really, really cool, and while the supplied Electro-Harmonix are quite good, the Popes are almost god-like. I am only using the Popes—due to the costs and availability—for the four the 6SN7s in the balanced main line section. I would like to try two more Popes for the two Electro-Harmonixes used in the input buffer stage, but will have to wait. Naturally, choosing an NOS tube all is a matter of taste or preference. What works for one, may not work for another.

When I added Herbie's SuperSonic HAL-O 27 tube rings to the Popes, well things started to get interesting. A bit quieter, bit more detail, perhaps a touch less air, but I liked it just the same. The Popes tend to be just that much more micro-phonic—not a bad thing—than the Electro-Harmonixes, which do not sound as good with the HAL-O 27. With the Electro-Harmonixes, we have too much suppression of the micro-phonic—a bad thing. Toss on a few Shakti Stones and an Online here and there, and you can tweak this baby till cows come home!

Quibbles? A few. The user's manual is not happening in terms of all that one needs to know. Does the preamplifier invert phase? The Cinema/Bypass took a while to figure out, though I did get it working. The tubes came numbered, the diagram shows the sockets with identical numbers ...so are they biased as such? What happens when one replaces them? Would be nice if the remote also adjusted the balance. Then again, do the balance controls affect the sound? It would be nice to offer some degree of attenuation for more/less-sensitive amplifiers and speakers, as I am limited to the first 1/3 of the SLP-05's volume range.

With the SLP-05 things are simply magical. Music is fun and that is what this is all about. It is very, very good. Yeah, mine is tweaked a bit, but the nice thing is, you can get within spittin' distance with a stock SLP-05, so why bother unless you are tweaked *yerself*?! Now what can I do next...? Hey, headphones.... **As highly recommended as I can highly recommend anything! Dave Clark**

### Specifications

- Circuit Type: Class A Triode ZERO Feedback Preamplifier Design

- Output: 2 volts rated, 23 Volts maximum
- Overall Gain: 12 dB
- Rated Distortion: 0.03 % THD
- Noise and Hum: -90 dB below full output
- Input Impedance: 50,000 Ohms - RCA, 100,000 Ohms - XLR
- Output Impedance: 400 Ohms
- Frequency Response: 5 Hz to 163,000 Hz
- Vacuum Tubes: 8 ea. - 6SN7 octal tubes for the balanced, headphone and gain stages
- Power Transformer(s): EI Laminate, 200% Duty Cycle
- Resistors: 1% Metal Film
- Capacitors: Polystyrene, Film and Foil, (Optional copper oil and foil capacitors)
- Power Supply Capacitors: 4 ea. - 560 $\mu$ F@400 VDC
- Weight: 20 lb. preamplifier, 20 lb. external power supply
- Dimensions: 5" H x 17" W x 12" D

**SLP-05 preamplifier**  
Retail \$7500

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