



# MOON LP5.3

**W**e know it's been a long time, but when we think of Simaudio and phono preamps, we think of how tough it's been for the company to get any respect. Power amplifiers? Terrific, and they have been for years. Preamplifiers? They were in gestation a lot longer, though a Simaudio preamp (the Moon P-8) sits in our Omega reference system, which kind of says it all. Phono stages? Didn't they used to be kind of noisy and indistinct?

But Simaudio says it has it right this time. The LP5.3 is the more expensive of the company's two phono stages, and even so it is part of the company's "Classic" series, rather than belonging to the Renaissance class which gave birth to the P-8 and the W-8 power amp (which we also own).

Because phono stages are considered by many to be accessories, the difficulty of building one is often grossly underestimated. A phono stage must be able to deal with signals thousands of times smaller than those handled by line stage preamplifiers, and do it with minimum distortion and noise, but that is only the beginning. The problem of *equalization* is

one that had bested even some of the top designers. That calls for explanation.

Though we expect recordings to exhibit flat frequency response — that is, reproduce all frequencies at the level at which they existed in the live performance — they aren't recorded that way on LP (nor on analog tape). Rather, the highs are boosted by more than 30 dB (in terms of energy, that's *one thousand times!*) whereas the lows are reduced. That's because musical low frequencies typically contain so much energy they would cause unmanageably wide groove excursions, whereas real-life music has much less energy at higher frequencies. What's more, upper octaves contain more noise than lower octaves. And so we can simply equalize the playback, to make everything flat again, thus reducing the noise considerably.

Only it's easier said than done.

**Phono amplification was once this company's weak point. Not anymore!**

The traditional method of equalizing was by placing, as the first stage of a phono preamp, an operational amplifier, called simply an op amp, with a frequency-dependent feedback loop. The loop samples the output of the amp and brings it back to the negative input of the op amp, so that it cancels some of the signal at the output. If the loop contains the appropriate filter, it will cancel more of the high frequencies than the low frequencies, and the signal will come out as it should. Easy, right?

Of course there's what seems to be an obvious problem: how can you possibly correct a signal that is already at the output? If the op amp is too slow, and perhaps even if it isn't, the leading edge of the signal will barrel out of the preamp with its high frequencies perhaps a thousand times too "hot."

There's a second problem. An op amp with that sort of feedback loop will have a strange input impedance, and a phono cartridge will not work well feeding it. That was once a problem with all phono preamps, even expensive ones, and it greatly affected the quality one could hope to get from an LP.

Let's see, then, how else can we do this?

We could use a purely passive filter, made up entirely of capacitors and resistors, and place it before any amplification takes place. A number of phono preamps are made this way, and indeed the first Sima phono stages (before the company was renamed Simaudio) used this technique too. But the signal from a phono cartridge is already very small, and it's not a good idea to lower it even more by scrubbing off energy right at the input. The result might be very clear sound, but there will be excessive noise accompanying it.

Here's another way, then. At the front end we use an amplifier stage with flat response, and we place a passive filter *after* that stage, where it will have a larger signal to work on but will be isolated from the cartridge. Fine... except that this amplifier stage will need tremendous headroom, able to handle the hottest unequalized signals. That's a challenge!

It is, however, the challenge that

the Simaudio engineers have taken on. The first amplifier stage is followed by two filters, one of them active (for the lower frequencies), and the other passive. Neither equalization network affects the phono pickup, which “sees” only the first amplifier stage.

Giving that input stage the huge headroom it needs means feeding it enough power, of course. The LP5.3 has a toroidal power transformer right at the front, which looks to be up to the job, with the power section taking up about a third of the chassis, but there is another option. If you happen to have a Moon P-8 preamp, as it so happens we do, you can use the optional XLR power cable to get DC power directly from the P-8’s massive power supply. We tried it, and indeed there was a subtle but noticeable difference, which we will get to shortly.

We broke in our brand new LP5.3 using the special Granite Audio CD, and then prepared to set it up. There are no external controls, not even an on-off switch, which means all adjustments require removing the cover. That cover is held on by eight screws (an Allen key is included), and if the power cord is not removed there is potentially lethal AC within easy reach. What’s more, there are no switches inside either. Adjusting gain (to correspond to the cartridge output), or altering load resistance and capacitance, means moving jumpers from place to place. The operation is best done with tweezers, which should be supplied but aren’t. Worse, the poorly-illustrated manual is of limited help. Our offer: if Simaudio gives us one of these for free, we’ll rewrite the damn book for them.

The LP5.3 comes adjusted for a moving magnet cartridge. That’s not what our London Reference cartridge is, but it uses the same settings as an MM pickup, so we didn’t even need tweezers before placing the unit in our Omega system.

That system includes an Audiomat phono stage, the Phono-1.5, which we had bought because of the sheer magic it gives to music. Though the LP5.3 comes with the usual junk power cord, we used a GutWire B12 cable to plug it into our MaxCon Squared power filter. Our first



observation: the LP5.3 is quiet. No, not quiet, *silent*.

We picked out five LPs, starting with the Reference Recordings *Beachcomber* wind band album, from which we selected the *Chorus Line Medley* (RR-62). This is a tough album to reproduce, with huge dynamics most CDs can only suggest, and with a complex arrangement of instruments large and small. The Moon preamp took it all in stride, convincing us that its clarity was fully up to its silence. The entire band of frequencies was clear, from the almost scary lows to brash, sparkling highs. The impact of the passages for full orchestra was impressive, as was the tympani solo (Keith Johnson has a talent for recording them). However the impact did not come at the expense of the natural smoothness of even the busiest sections. This was a *really* good beginning.

For the next recording we went to the opposite extreme: soft music with tremendous low-level detail. We often use Susann McDonald’s magnificent harp recording, *Caprice*, a CD on the Klavier label. However the original recording was done by none other than Keith O. Johnson, and the selection we often use, Tournier’s *Vers une source dans le bois*, was included on an early LP (RR-7), *Professor Johnson’s Amazing Sound Show*.

The quality of the reproduction took our breath away. “What beauty!” exclaimed Albert. “Everything is right, balanced, evocative. The notes are a

series of pearls against a black background.” Added Reine, “It gives the impression that each note was played with an effort to make it as perfect as possible, and yet you don’t feel the effort. It is a poem for the soul.”

With this recording we tend to concentrate on the delicate passages that are sometimes just above the threshold of audibility. Often, *too* often, passages get lost in the fog, not a fog of noise but rather one of confusion. No such fog here. At the same time, this poetic piece also includes passages which remind us that the harp has power, and that its mighty sound board can move air as effectively as that of a piano. The LP5.3 did justice to those passages as well.

Our third selection was one we often use, *Comes Love*, from the Opus 3 *Showcase* LP. Properly reproduced, this piece has the sort of dynamics that are a reminder of what is lacking in CDs.

The LP5.3 did very well with this recording...and, not to keep you in suspense, it would do well on everything we would try. The rhythm was strong and just swept us up. The instruments — piano, banjo, sousaphone and Kenny Davern’s awesome clarinet — were in excellent balance. This was good rollicking fun. The image and depth, which are particularly good on this piece, came through beautifully. Full marks!

We only occasionally use rock records in our tests, if only because we tend to favor acoustic music recorded

in a natural milieu, which is not exactly what the rock'n'roll revolution was all about, but we included one this time. It's an older LP by Burton Cummings, who did the self-titled album after leaving the fabulously popular Canadian Group, The Guess Who. That album includes one of Cummings' hits, *I'm Scared*.

The song was very well reproduced both by our own phono preamp and by the Moon, but we couldn't help noticing that with the Moon the lyrics were easier to follow. And that is a challenge, because there is reverberation behind Cummings' voice, and his band is pretty active as well. "His voice is powerful and pure, like a cry," said Reine. The percussion, always important in rock music, added energy, but without covering up what else was going on. Very good.

We ended with *Send in the Clowns* from Barbra Streisand's *Broadway Album*. All three of us think of this as *the* version of this fine song.

The LP5.3 was close to perfect in its reproduction of the song. Though this is not a pure stereo recording, the mix has been done with skill and the impression of depth was excellent. Streisand's

diction was virtually perfect, allowing all of the emotion of the song to shine through, and leaving the lyrics clear.

Albert had some reservations, finding a touch too much insistence on the higher frequencies in the voice, just enough to bother him.

It was then that we repeated the song, but this time disconnecting the LP5.3 from the power line, and instead tapping into our P-8 preamplifier's power supply (Simaudio had lent us a 3 m long cable). There was a subtle difference, with perhaps a little more substance in the bottom end. The highs seemed emphasized too, and that was perhaps not a good thing. Still, we did eventually

### SUMMING IT UP...

**Brand/model:** Simaudio Moon LP 5.3

**Price:** \$1500

**Dimensions:** 20.2 x 28 x 8.3 cm

**Most liked:** Very quiet circuits, magnificent performance

**Least liked:** Awkward, poorly-documented adjustments

**Verdict:** Nearly alone in its class

## CROSSTALK

This is an irresistible product for the knowledgeable audiophile.

It projects a space that is welcoming not only laterally but in depth and even height, for an image that reveals a multitude of subtleties, inflections, and all the other elements that make listening to music so satisfying. It has a great capacity for reproducing faithfully music of all types, as well as the virtuosity of the artists and their emotions.

I was struck by the richness of the bottom end, the beauty of higher frequencies, and in general by an exemplary spectral balance. Instruments are warm and natural. Woodwinds are downright exquisite. The stunningly delightful sound of the clarinet in one recording still rang in my ear long after the end of the session. Add to that a female voice that is full and caressing, a male voice that is powerful and pure, and words that are always easy to follow. Plus powerful percussion, shining brass that come together to bring us brilliance and contrast. Ardent,

pulsating or gentle, the rhythm always pulls you in.

I recommend in the warmest terms this high end product.

—Reine Lessard

This is a very serious challenger for our magnificent reference phono preamp. I remember so well the wonderful quality *that* unit added to the reference system when we first tested it, and I didn't expect to find anything coming close to it. And yet, there it was.

I listened intently to each selection and kept thinking repeatedly "could it really?" Did the music sound so sweet, so refined before? Yes, it's at least as great as it was, or does it sound, sometimes, even better? Naah. *Could it really?*

When I find myself in such a dilemma, it is the unmistakable sign that we have just tested a unique product. You're going to want to try it, no doubt, if you love music and cher-

agree that, if this phono preamp were ours, we would run it from the P-8.

As you can see from the photo on the previous page, the LP5.3 has balanced outputs, and of course our P-8 preamplifier has balanced inputs. It had been our intention to try the phono stage with balanced cables as well (that would, by the way, increase volume by 6 dB). However by then we were using the Atlas Mavros cable between the phono stage and preamp (you can find its review in the pages ahead), and no balanced cable immediately available to us could stand up to it. A balanced cable could, however, be a good choice.

One detail bothered us. We've mentioned that Simaudio's literature classifies the LP5.3 with its lower-priced "Classic" series, which includes the W-5.3 and the I-5.3 integrated. It's not part of the "Renaissance" series, which includes both our P-8 preamp and our W-8 amp. Does that mean that, at some point, the Renaissance line could include a phono preamp even better than this one?

If so, the engineers have their work cut out for them.



ish LPs. I envy you that moment of discovery when you first get a hint of the treasures you never suspected you had, embedded in those dark, shiny grooves.

—Albert Simon

I'm disturbed, perhaps more than my colleagues, by the awkward maneuvers needed to make even a minor adjustment to this phono preamp. Yes, I know the designers didn't know how else to get this level of performance.

On the other hand I thank them for the performance. The quietness of the LP 5.3 is great, but there are lots of mediocre preamps that are quiet. This one puts together near silence with a musicality which, for want of a better word, I shall call thrilling.

This is not a cheap product by most standards, but listen to it with a good turntable and compare to the best of the competition. It doesn't seem so expensive, does it?

—Gerard Rejskind