

hi-finews

THE HOME OF REAL HI-FI

& Record Review

130+
REVIEWS
SEPARATES,
VINTAGE
& MUSIC

ULTIMATE HI-FI 2012

We reveal the year's finest products
and essential music

164 pages

Equipment

Over 50 standout
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Vintage

The audio heroes
of yesteryear

Music

Your guide to the
best LPs, CDs and
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Opinion

Our columnists'
hi-fi high points

• **TURNTABLES, TONEARMS & CARTRIDGES** Air Tight to Thorens • **OUTBOARD DACS** Arcam to T+A
• **DIGITAL DISC & MEDIA PLAYERS** Burmester to TAD • **TRANSISTOR & TUBE AMPS** Anthem to VTL
• **LOUDSPEAKERS** Cabasse to Wilson Audio • **VINTAGE** B&O, Electrocompaniet, KEF, Sony and more

UK £4.50 US \$10.99 Aus \$10.50



AUDIO
FILE

S/PDIF & USB DAC with balanced preamp output
 Made by: Audio Research Corp, Minnesota, USA
 Supplied by: Absolute Sounds Ltd
 Telephone: 0208 971 3909
 Web: www.audioresearch.com; www.absolutesounds.com




Audio Research DSPre (£6998)

As Audio Research's first analogue preamplifier to feature an on-board DAC, the DSPre represents a landmark in the company's history (albeit the logical development from earlier ARC digital offerings like the DAC8).

Those simply wanting to play compact disc can connect the analogue output of their CD player to the DSPre using balanced or unbalanced cables – as with any normal preamp. But why not connect the player's digital output to one of the S/PDIF inputs and use the DSPre's high quality 24-bit DAC? This more direct signal path also offers two options for better sound quality: a choice of two filter types,

'Switching to "Sharp" brought a crisper attack and greater immediacy'

and the ability to upsample CD's native 44.1kHz to 176.4kHz.

The USB2 input allows access to music stored on a computer hard drive at sampling rates between 44.1kHz and 192kHz. But you must set this manually on your computer.

Love it or hate it, ARC's Classic 'Lab' styling is intrinsic to the brand. ARC favours fairly lightweight construction, and casework is

aluminium throughout, with a handsome 10mm-thick brushed front panel. All controls have a solid, confidence-inspiring feel, and the large illuminated display keeps you informed of all important settings.

The DSPre's volume control is electronic – a readout from 0 to 103 enables you to set levels with absolute precision. There's also a hidden stereo balance control accessible via the remote handset. Other useful functions include Absolute Phase Invert, Stereo/Mono, and Mute.

EFFORTLESS DETAIL

As an analogue preamp, the DSPre impresses with a combination of clarity and clear, open neutrality – it sounds truthful. Those secretly hoping for a preamp that adds a certain 'magic' might be disappointed that the DSPre doesn't exhibit any obvious personality.

An SP10 it isn't! But by connecting our Musical Fidelity AMS CD player's digital output to the S/PDIF input, the sound did change: it was not a massive difference, but overall a tad cleaner and more detailed.

Playing CD via S/PDIF, the DSPre automatically defaults to 44.1kHz and Soft for the filter mode. Switching to Sharp brought a crisper transient attack and

greater immediacy. At once, the scrape of bows on strings became more palpable, and percussion had increased transient attack. It brought an immediate 'that's better' gut reaction, but Soft would be easier to live with long-term – its comfortable ease and relaxed smoothness was very seductive.

Upsampling CD from 44.1kHz to 176.4kHz resulted in noticeably increased sharpness and top-end detail. Brass instruments had more rasp, and the overall sound seemed wider-ranging and more dynamic.

The DSPre really clarified complex, 'busy' recordings such as Jethro Tull's *Songs From The Wood* [Island]. Voices and instruments were beautifully separated, yet the overall production remained impressively cohesive, with clean tight bass, natural-sounding vocals, and excellent timing.

We found that 96kHz USB material demonstrated an openness, with effortless fine detail, that CD (good as it was) didn't quite match. The Linn recording of Handel's *Messiah* sounded so deliciously open and natural we wanted to increase listening levels. Doing this highlighted the wider dynamic range of the high-res download, so making the musical experience more real and involving.

VERDICT

Regardless of whether you're keeping faith with CD, or venturing into the brave new world of hi-res, ARC's DSPre offers definite benefits. It rejuvenates your silver disc collection, liberates your CD player, and lets you experience the joys of hi-res media. It also delivers improved sound quality from CDs ripped to a computer hard drive. ☺

ABOVE: The DSPre retains traditional ARC 1960s 'Lab gear' styling. Illuminated display shows all major functions and options selected. At the rear single-ended (RCA) and balanced (XLR) preamp outputs are joined by AES/EBU (XLR), S/PDIF (RCA, BNC and optical) and USB2.0 inputs

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Maximum output level (Balanced)	3.90Vrms at 245ohm
A-wtd S/N ratio (S/PDIF / USB)	104.5dB / 104.5dB
Distortion (1kHz, 0dBfs/–30dBfs)	0.0055% / 0.0002%
Dist. & Noise (20kHz, 0dBfs/–30dBfs)	0.035% / 0.0045%
Freq. resp. (20Hz-20kHz/45kHz/90kHz)	+0.0dB to –0.5dB/–1.8dB/–6.3dB
Digital jitter (48kHz/96kHz/USB)	130psec / 190psec / 20psec
Resolution @ –100dB (S/PDIF / USB)	±0.2dB / Undefined
Power consumption	25W
Dimensions (WHD)	480x146x356mm