



OEHLBACH®

SMALL AMP, BIG SOUND!

lite-magazin 5/2015

- + Sound: **1.1**
- + Practice: **1.0**
- + Configuration: **1.0**
- + Overall score: **1.1**
- + Price/Performance: **VERY GOOD**
- + **UPPER CLASS**

lite Test result 05/15
1,1
Upper Class
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Amplifying the weak signals from an analogue pickup is no easy task. This is better left to a specialized phono preamplifier such as Oehlbach's XXL Phono PreAmp Ultra, which we are currently putting to the test.

Are you one of the music lovers who is in a fortunate position of still owning a turntable and lots of records? Or are you just getting into the wonderful hobby of collecting vinyl? Whichever category you fall into, you will need to deal with a pressing issue sooner or later: i.e. how to adequately amplify the „tiny“ pickup signals. While reasonably priced amplifiers are now often equipped with a phono input, they can rarely hold a candle to an external, specialized solution in terms of sound quality and adaptation. All the better, then, that there are more and more dedicated phono preamplifiers like Oehlbach's XXL Phono PreAmp Ultra, which we've managed to have a really good look at.

Oehlbach: 40 years of experience in the audio sector

Oehlbach, the renowned accessory specialist, is probably familiar to anyone who has ever had any experience with high-quality consumer electronics, both in the audio and visual sectors. Primarily though, it's more than likely you will have encountered their extremely high quality, and sometimes high-priced, cables that are supplied around the world from North Rhine-Westphalia. A small but selected range of high-quality electronics for various applications, which are designed to make hifi life easier and more rewarding, is relatively new to the company's portfolio. This includes, for example, the Oehlbach XXL Powerstation 909, which delivered an outstanding performance in our test. The XXL Phono PreAmp Ultra, which promises outstanding quality at an extremely reasonable price, now wants to follow in its footsteps and enjoy a similar level of success.

Solid workmanship with a well thought-out design

When you open the box and prise the small amplifier from its secure and rather handsome packaging, it soon becomes clear that this is a device that certainly fulfills the high demands made by the manufacturer in terms of workmanship. The small black box (which is also optionally available in silver) does not exhibit any form of weakness with regard to its tactile quality. The compact housing measures just 15.5 x 5.0 x 19.5 cm, meaning it can be easily accommodated in even smaller hifi racks and its stately weight of around one kilogram is surprising. The high bulk is primarily due to the material used. Due to the tiny signals it is designed to handle, the sensitive electronics inside the amp are extremely sensitive to interference and must therefore be shielded against external influences by a solid metal housing. And it actually works pretty well, because even though I placed the amplifier on various other devices I wasn't able to detect any form of hum pickup. The front panel is arranged neatly in a manner typical of such a device: A small switch and a pleasing subtle, blue-lit LED, which provides information about the amp's current status, is all there is - and there really isn't anything else needed.

There's more to discover at the rear: Naturally our eyes are initially drawn to the solid, gold-plated RCA jacks, which could hardly be of a higher quality and simply reinforce the high standard of this device. To the left is the terminal for connecting the pick-up arm earth, which should be used if possible, because an annoying hum can also develop at this point. Better safe than sorry. Even the power supply unit is outsourced to - you guessed it - prevent any interference from being caused by AC voltage. The associated power supply unit itself is connected to the small socket located at the right-hand side of the rear panel.

Why a phono preamplifier?

A first indication of why a special phono amplifier is needed is the small switch that is hidden away between the RCA jacks: It enables the amplifier to be adapted to the two possible types of pick-up, namely MM (Moving Magnet) and MC (Moving Coil). This is necessary because moving magnet systems (which, as the name suggests, move a small magnet in a stationary coil via the needle) deliver a significantly higher output voltage compared to their moving coil counterparts (which move the moving coil in a magnetic field). But no matter which system you choose, both types deliver such low voltages that a conventional amplifier simply cannot amplify them to audible volume. This is the first reason why a special preamplifier is essential for owners of a turntable. Of course, both MM and MC systems have their advantages and disadvantages. The higher voltage of the MM pickup has already been mentioned as an advantage, because a stronger signal doesn't need to be amplified as much, thereby resulting in less distortion. MC pickups, on the other hand, have a lower mass, which should be conducive to a more dynamic and further refined sound. The second reason for using a special phono amplifier can be found in the so-called RIAA curve. This refers to a standard that was developed in 1952 by the „Recording Industry Association of America“. Taking this standard into account, it should be possible to accommodate the complex musical signal, which contains frequencies ranging from 20 to 20,000 hertz, on a record in a space-saving and lossless manner. Without this deliberate distortion of the signal, deeper frequencies, which are lowered due to the curve, would require much wider grooves and result in a significant reduction in the playing time of the record. Higher tones, however, which are raised according to the RIAA curve, would disappear without this adjustment in the groove noise. In order to reverse this distortion and make the music audible again, it requires an amplifier which contains the inverse RIAA curve and is able to „straighten out“ the signal again (to put it simply).

In practice

Setting up the Oehlbach XXL Phono PreAmp Ultra is child's play: After finding a suitable location, you simply need to connect your turntable to the input and your amplifier to the output of the small miracle box. Then set the pickup switch to the correct position for MM or MC and connect the phono preamplifier to its power supply unit. Now switch it on and you're done.

After warming up for a few minutes, the preamplifier now needs to prove how good it really is in our hifi test. What strikes me first is the amazingly low ambient noise. Even when cranked up to full volume my speakers stay as quiet as a mouse. That's how it should be. I quickly find a suitable record for the test: Miles Davis' acclaimed live album „We Want Miles“ from 1982. This is a particularly dynamic album that immediately draws you under its spell with catchy melodies. The XXL Phono PreAmp Ultra reflects this from the very outset with flying colors! The small amp reproduces bass tones with a precision that makes even the finest details such as the striking of strings audible, while crystal clear trebles provide the sound pattern with the necessary presence. This, in turn, particularly benefits the trumpet played by the protagonist. The supporting drums and percussion instruments are also reproduced in a dynamic and differentiated manner, which creates a harmonious overall sound pattern.

The test continues with the no less captivating „Who Knows“ from the live album „Band of Gypsies“ by Jimi Hendrix, which was recorded at a New Year's concert in 1970. Hendrix is accompanied by a customary small ensemble (but a new band on this occasion), which provides him with subtle support and allows his guitar riffs to fully unfold.

And that's exactly how Oehlbach's PreAmp Ultra makes it sound: The band plays in the background and the guitar takes center stage. Last but not least comes „Mono Masters“ by the Beatles. This proves a really interesting compilation, as the tracks are very different in terms of recording quality. Some are so good that they wouldn't be out of place on a regular album, while others sound more like demos. The Oehlbach Pre reproduces these subtleties in an exemplary manner. While it doesn't dissect the recording, which would make listening somewhat arduous, all the subtleties and nuances are discernible. Even the degree of spatiality and spatial depth that is much acclaimed in mono recordings is managed by the PreAmp Ultra without any great exertion. When you bear in mind that the units used for the test (i.e. a Linn LP12 with Audio Technica AT-33 pickup) cost a significant amount more than the small amp, it is astonishing that the PreAmp Ultra is able to stand out among the big guns of analog devices. Despite its reasonable price, the PreAmp Ultra leaves the entry-level category in its wake.

Conclusion

The compact Oehlbach XXL Phono PreAmp Ultra is suitable both as an extension for an amplifier that isn't equipped with its own phono input, as well as an upgrade if there is a phono input that isn't of the required quality. The small XXL PreAmp exhibits excellent workmanship and, thanks to its compact dimensions, can be accommodated anywhere. However, don't be fooled by its small size. The XXL Phono PreAmp Ultra is mature in terms of sound and lives up to its „big“ name.