

The Rogers PA-1A
Phono Preamplifier

Incredible!

By Jeff Dorgay

PEAK OUTPUT VOLTAGE



LEFT



RIGHT

Rogers

POWER



MUTE



Last year, we had a ton of fun listening to the Rogers EHF-200 MK2 integrated amplifier, which combines high-tech design, tubey goodness, and old-school American build quality. And it comes at a price commensurate with its components and performance.

Roger Gibboni's newest creation is a phono stage that takes his design ethos a step further. While it's no small feat to produce a great amplifier, the minute signal that a phono stage has to work with is a challenge for *any* designer. And the Rogers PA-1A exceeds all of my expectations in terms of sound quality and the absence of noise.

Immediately Great

The PA-1A has me pinned to the listening chair from the first track of MoFi's recent remaster of Los Lobos' *Kiko*. Insert your favorite adjective here, and maybe add *very* in front of it. In short, if you don't need more than one MC phono input, your search ends here. It's that good—and it's only \$7,400.

Having lived with the \$65,000 Indigo Qualia and the \$55,000 Vitus phono stages, I admit that you don't need to spend anywhere near that much money to achieve analog nirvana. We've been through a pile of excellent phonos-

tages from Audio Research, Pass, Simaudio, Naim and Burmester, to name a few. As great as these all have been (and the Burmester, Pass and ARC all offer two inputs, a definite advantage for those with multiple tables or tonearms), the Rogers raises the game for what is possible without taking a second mortgage on your house.

To look at it another way, for the \$60K that one of those top-of-the-mountain phono stages will set you back, you can pick your favorite \$30K turntable/tonearm combination, a great \$10K cartridge and the Rogers for \$7,400.

That still leaves a lot of cash left over to add some great records to your collection.

Of course, \$7,400 is not pocket change, but for someone taking a run at a state-of-the-art analog front end, this is incredibly reasonable. It's like getting a tricked-out Porsche GT3 for the price of a Boxster. I knew I was in for something good when discussing the Rogers with Harry Weisfeld of VPI; we share a similar aural aesthetic and Harry knows great analog when he hears it. *(continued)*

Plus, we both have a similar amount of respect for the Lyra Atlas cartridge, which we both use as a reference transducer. Bottom line, when Harry is excited about something, my ears perk up.

I was not disappointed in the least when firing up the PA-1A for the first time. The review sample had been burned in for a while at the factory, so I did not notice much of a change in its sonic character during the review period.

Wow, Wow and More Wow

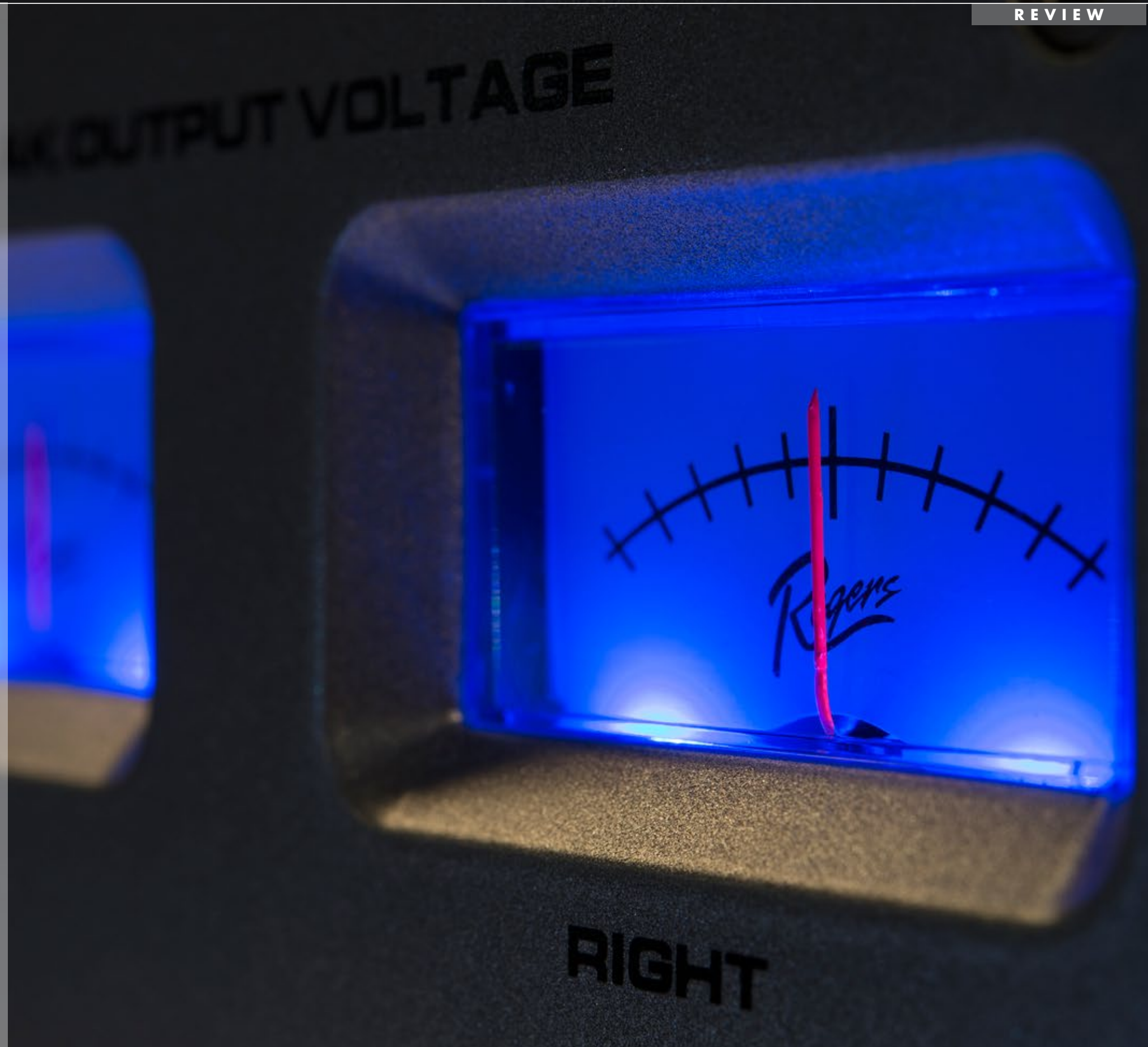
What puts the PA-1A in the world-class neighborhood is the ease with which it paints the sonic landscape. Spinning the new MoFi 45 RPM two-record set of the self-titled Rickie Lee Jones album is spectacular. While a certain amount of kudos go to MoFi for producing the quintessential copy of this classic, playback comes alive through the Rogers and in the space between the Dynaudio Evidence Platinum speakers—they themselves masters of pinpoint-imaging performance. This is the quality I noticed most with the Vitus and Qualia stages: the way they allow the music to swell and diminish with such seamless tonal gradation, and the Rogers does the same. It's analog at its finest.

Moving up tempo to Laurie Anderson's *Big Science*, I find the level of micro detail revealed to be amazing. The little percussion and synthesizer bits that are slightly obscured via my Audio Research REF Phono 2 SE now float around the speakers, whereas they all lined

up on one flat plane before. Anderson's voice has more body and her quirky vocal inflections are now more pronounced than before, while at the same time the main synthesizer line is firmly locked in place. Fans of pace, rhythm and timing will freak out at the massive picture painted.

Again, the word ease just keeps popping into my consciousness. If you've ever had the chance to drive the Z06 and standard versions of Chevrolet's Corvette, you know what I'm talking about. Both cars effortlessly cruise along at 100 mph and lunge with nearly equal enthusiasm when you put the pedal down, but that extra horsepower offered by the Z06 makes the experience of speed surreal, where the standard car is still working a bit to go from 100 to 150 mph.

No matter how much great tribute bands try to cover Led Zeppelin, they just can't recreate the nuance, sonic complexity, or the sheer *texture* with which Jimmy Page plays, even though the correct notes are often hit. This is the final piece of the analog puzzle that the Rogers unequivocally nails. The reverse tracks on the Beatles' *Magical Mystery Tour* are sublime, almost dilating in the way they separate from the rest of the mix. The bell in "Penny Lane" is not only correct in terms of timbre, but the width and height information is so stunningly reproduced that it feels like there's an actual fire truck in the room ringing its bell. *(continued)*





Three Flavors

The PA-A1 uses three tubes per channel, a 6GH8, a 12AX7 and the final gain stage uses either a 12AX7 or 12AU7. Rogers supplies both so you can adjust the gain to your taste. With the 12AU7, the PA-A1 has 58 dB of gain, which will be more than enough for MC cartridges having an output of around 0.5 mV. The 12AX7 provides about 10 dB more gain, but it's slightly noisier, so it is a tradeoff.

Don't hang too much on the ultimate gain figures, though; take total system gain into consideration before dismissing 58 dB as "not enough gain." When using the Robert Koda K-10 preamplifier and the ARC REF 5 SE—which both feature 6 dB gain via the single-ended inputs (the PA-1A is a single-ended design)—I find myself cranking the volume a bit higher than I would normally with the ARC REF Phono 2 SE, but both of these linestages have a very low noise floor. The Burmester and CJ linestages at my disposal have 18 and 21 dB of gain, respectively, so the PA-1A's 58 dB is enough even with low-output MC cartridges.



However, there is a Goldilocks solution. That second tube can be substituted for the NOS 12AV7, which offers a bit more gain than the 12AU7 and a lower noise floor. "The 12AV7 is a great tube," says Gibboni, "but I didn't want to build a product around tubes that are not readily available. I can sell you a pair of 12AV7s for about \$90 while my supply lasts."

All three variations sound good, so those leaning more towards the OCD side of the fence will probably be driven to madness trying to decide on the *ultimate* choice for that third tube. The 12AU7 proves excellent as a daily driver, and the 12AV7 is very

intriguing in my system, offering a touch more top-end extension. The Clearaudio Goldfinger is a perfect partner for the 12AV7, while I prefer the stock 12AU7 with the Lyra Atlas. The slightly forward Lyra Titan i pairs well with the 12AX7's warmer sound, especially when swapped for a pair of NOS Telefunken. Crazy good fun I say, but it is nice that analog aficionados can really fine-tune the sound exactly to their liking. Gibboni says you can probably expect that the tubes will last 5,000 to 10,000 hours with this phonostage, so try and settle on something you like, and buy a second set! (continued)



Good with MM too

While the PA-1A technically has one input, if you were using a second table with a moving-magnet cartridge, you could plug two tables into the PA-1A—which is exactly what I do. Going vintage with the Thorens TD-124 turntable, SME 3009 tonearm and Ortofon 2M Black provides an excellent alternative to my reference table.

Thanks to front-panel loading and capacitance adjustments, it's a snap to dial your favorite MM cartridge to your liking. The heavier presentation of the vintage Thorens is a natural for the tubey goodness of the PA-1A. Tracking through a number of the current Blue Note remasters from Music Matters Jazz is wonderful.

Though the Atlas provides a clearer picture, the Thorens/Ortofon combination is warmer, with perhaps even a bit more jump on these jazz classics. Horns have a little more attack and cymbals linger a bit more and have more smokiness—not necessarily correct, but a

ton of fun. It's a great option to have, whether you decide to use that second table as a tone control, or just an option to save wear and tear on your megabucks cartridge.

Very Enthusiastically Suggested

We're keeping the PA-1A here as a permanent reference component to run through its paces even further. We'll report back in a year, with a long-term follow-up once we've had time to do a little more tube rolling and try some additional cartridges. It should be a great journey.

As high-end audio continues to get higher priced, it is refreshing to find a company that is offering world-class sonics and state-of-the-art build quality at a reasonable price. Every Rogers component is built by hand, lovingly packaged, and even includes a nice card from the person who built it. The Rogers PA-1A is a great reminder that quality manufacturing is not dead in America. ●

Rogers PA-1A Phonostage
MSRP: \$7,400

MANUFACTURER
Rogers High Fidelity

CONTACT
www.rogershighfidelity.com

PERIPHERALS

Turntables

AVID Acutus REF SP, TriPlanar arm; Thorens TD-124, SME 3009 arm; SME 10, SME V arm

Cartridges

Clearaudio Goldfinger, Lyra Atlas, Lyra Titan i, Lyra Kleos, Ortofon SPU, Ortofon 2M Black, Dynavector 17D3, Grado Statement 1

Preamplifiers

Burmester 011, ARC REF 5 SE, Robert Koda K-10

Power Amplifier

Pass Labs Xs300 monoblocks

Speakers

Dynaudio Evidence Platinum

Power

IsoTek Super Titan