

Dan D'Agostino Master Audio Systems Momentum Phono Stage Preamplifier A championship phono stage from living legend Dan D'Agostino. Review By Tom Lyle



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Dan D'Agostino Master Audio Systems
Momentum Phono Stage Preamplifier

A championship phono stage from living legend Dan D'Agostino.

Review By Tom Lyle

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When I heard that I would be reviewing the \$28,000 Dan D'Agostino Master Audio Momentum phono preamplifier for this issue of *Enjoy The Music*, I was a very happy audiophile -- on account of the time I spent with the **\$50,000 D'Agostino Momentum Lifestyle integrated amplifier that I reviewed** earlier this year. If this phono preamplifier had any of the sonic characteristics of the MLife, I suspected I was going to hear my records through a state-of-the-art phono preamp, or at the very least one that was very close to state-of-the-art. When writing about their MLife integrated amp I declared that not only have I never heard an integrated sound so marvelous in my system, I never have I heard one sound as marvelous *anywhere*. So again, I was looking forward not only to hear what the Dan

D'Agostino phono preamp sounded like in my system, but to also take advantage of its ease of use and flexibility, as all its settings can be adjusted by controls on its front panel. Spoiler alert: The D'Agostino phono stage sounds *incredible*.

Swooned By The...

The Dan D'Agostino Momentum Phonostage Preamp's appearance has a family resemblance to the D'Agostino integrated amplifier that I swooned over in the January 2017 issue. Like the MLife integrated amp, the phono stage has a power supply that is about two-thirds the size of the main chassis. And also like their integrated amp, the main chassis sits atop the power supply using four coned feet that fit inside dimples on the top plate of the power supply. When speaking of the power supply, Dan D'Agostino mentions that he "gave the Momentum Phonostage what may well be the cleanest AC power supply ever created for a phono preamp". In addition to the large power supply that the main chassis sits upon, there is another smaller power supply that attaches to the main power supply via an umbilical. The relatively small transformer box is intended to rest on the floor, away from the main power supply which houses the power rectification and regulation circuits. This arrangement isolates the phono preamp's circuits not only electrically, but also by distance.

The D'Agostino phono stage's cabinet is gorgeous, made from aluminum, and polished to a luxurious sheen. The side panels are copper, adding to its lavish appearance. Above all, this phono preamplifier is a pleasure to use, mostly because setting the phono preamp's gain and loading options are a cinch. Those upgrading from a phono preamp where one must futz with rear or bottom plate DIP switches, or heavens forbid, must access the cabinet's interior to change the phono preamp's setting will appreciate the super-convenience of the D'Agostino's front panel controls.



Here's a technical description of this phono preamplifier in a nutshell: The Dan D'Agostino Momentum phono preamplifier has four pairs of inputs via balanced (XLR) and unbalanced (RCA) inputs, 2 for moving coil (MC), and two for moving magnet (MM) phono cartridges. These inputs are selectable from the phono stage's front panel. This phono stage has one pair of balanced outputs. The default gain for moving the moving magnet input is 50dB, the gain for moving coil cartridges is 70dB. The gain is adjustable, as one can raise or lower the gain of any input by 6dB from the front panel. There are 16 selectable resistive loads for both the moving magnet and moving coil inputs. The base of the Dan

D'Agostino phono preamplifier is where the "critical" power supply rectification circuitry is located, while a third chassis contains the power transformer, which pretty much guarantees that maximum isolation from AC generated EM (electromagnetic) fields, which translates to lower background noise from the phono preamplifier.



There are five selectable equalization (EQ) curves that one can choose from the unit's front panel – the standard RIAA, and four others that are used by record labels produced before around 1950, FFRR, RCA Orthophonic, Columbia, and DGG. Choosing a curve for each record spinning on one's turntable is a feature we're seeing on more and more phono preamps these days, especially on premium models. Since all records released since the mid-1950s started using the RIAA curve, it's likely that this is where the selector will remain. Yet there are some audiophiles that play 78rpm records and some other discs made before 1960 that will be able to take advantage of these curves. For a while there were some that questioned the above, insisting that other curves were used after these dates, but I can imagine that the argument was sparked by a single audiophile, and this misinformation spread to others. Thankfully this controversy has been put to rest. And so, the RIAA curve will be sufficient for most of us.

Enjoying The Best In Vinyl LP Recordings

The easiest way to describe the sound one gets when playing records with the Dan D'Agostino phono preamplifier would be to say it is the best, and leave it at that. But, believe it or not there are other phono preamplifiers within this phono stage's price range, and above. And some audiophiles might want to consider these other phono preamps. I'm sorry to report that my only experience with those other units have not been in my listening room, not playing my records, and not connected to my system. And so, those experiences are disqualified from consideration in this review.

I have no problem with that, as I'm just as happy telling you about how the D'Agostino phono preamp performed in my listening room, playing my records, and through my system. I already described how the set up and use is a piece of cake, made easier by the fact that the internal components of the D'Agostino phono preamp are so precise that when switching to other load settings, those that did not suit my cartridges sounded horrible. Most often there was only one setting, and occasionally two, that sounded good with the phono cartridges that I used. The other settings seemed drastically wrong.

Perhaps "drastically wrong" is overstating things a bit, and I'm exaggerating to make my point, but with the D'Agostino sounding so good with the proper setting others stuck out like the proverbial sore thumb. When the setting was correct, the D'Agostino phono preamp sang. And sing it did.

One would assume that anyone who is considering the Dan D'Agostino phono preamplifier will not only have an analog set-up that is deserving of such a high-quality phono stage, but a system to match. My reference system is very good, although I think it just squeaks by as one that warrants a phono preamp as good as the D'Agostino. Others might disagree. That's OK. The good news is that I heard large sonic differences between the phono preamps I have used in the past and the this one. My mid-priced Pass Labs XP-15 is a very decent unit. But it is sonically dwarfed by the performance of the D'Agostino.

During the review period I was lucky enough to also have a [**Merrill Audio Jens phono preamplifier**](#) in-house, and even though the Jens costs less than the D'Agostino its performance demands that it is placed in the same class. Ron Nagle reviewed this phono preamplifier in the April 2015 issue of *Enjoy The Music*, and not only did he say that this phono stage has a "micro resolution that results from a new vanishing low noise standard" and "best preserves the original performance", he awarded it a Blue Note Award, and an *Enjoy The Music* 20/20 Award. I wasn't using the Jens in my system so I could directly compare to the D'Agostino, but it was nice that I was able to have some perspective other than just my memory of some high-performance phono stages in other's systems.

The Needle

Mere seconds after I dropped the needle on the first album I played through the Dan D'Agostino phono preamplifier, it was obvious that its sound quality set a new standard for phono playback, at least in my system. I'm confident that the rest of my analog set-up brought out the best in the D'Agostino phono preamp – my Basis Audio Debut V turntable was purchased a while ago, but it started out as a Debut Gold and was updated by Basis Audio's AJ Conti himself in his New Hampshire shop to a model V (five). This included a great deal of work to modify the more than 3-inch-thick acrylic plinth of the turntable so it could accept its upgrade from a turntable that was DC powered to one that uses an AC synchronous motor. The newer Model V turntable's power cable can be connected to an outboard power supply, which I started using soon after the turntable was returned to me.

The power supply I use produces a near perfect AC sinewave which can be set to 60 Hz to play 33.3 rpm records, and set to 81 Hz to spin 45rpm discs – making it so I no longer must relocate the belt on the motor's pulley every time I need to change the speed. My Tri-Planar 6 tonearm was built by Herb Papier, the original owner of Tri-Planar tonearms around the turn of the century when his shop was in a Maryland suburb outside of Washington, DC. The tonearm was upgraded a short time ago by Tri-Planar's current owner Tri Mai in his Minneapolis atelier where the tonearm's old wiring was swapped out for new, and some changes were made to the headshell. Lastly, I had three phono cartridges on hand during the review period. Both the Van den Hul Crimson Stradivarius and the Gold Note Tuscany performed wonderfully during this period. I also mounted my older Lyra Kleos for a while. Even though this lower priced cartridge performed surprisingly well during the audition period, it couldn't compare with the more refined, newer cartridges.



The sound I heard when playing records through the D'Agostino phono preamp was amazing, no doubt a good part of its sound is due to the lack of it. To say that its background is silent is an understatement. It was so silent it was as the unit wasn't connected to the wall outlet. As I stated earlier, the D'Agostino has two power supplies, a large one under the main unit, and another a few feet away from the preamplifier, and it is obvious that this power supply set-up has paid big sonic dividends. One could ask of the background, "How much more black could this be?", and the answer would be "None more black". Spinal Tap quotes aside, there are very few audiophiles who aren't aware that a silent background will lead to better sound, none more significant than the fact that the brain is not being distracted by this noise, regardless of how faint it is, which can draw one's attention away from the music that is playing on the record.

Many say that low background noise will increase a component's ability to reproduce everything from micro and macro-dynamics, detail retrieval, transparency, frequency extremes, and more. But I'm convinced that these traits are improved because of our brain's inefficiency at multitasking. One cannot hear the music as well if there is a patina of noise underneath. Of course, the Dan D'Agostino phono preamplifier is also adept at reproducing music with more than excellent micro and macro-dynamics, detail retrieval, transparency, frequency extremes, and more due to the preamp's amazing build quality, and this black background is just one of its very impressive published specifications.

The Dan D'Agostino phono preamp has so many other positive sonic qualities that discussing them one by one could easily be the subject of a series of follow-up reviews for the rest of the year. Although, in my listening notes, after a while I began repeating myself, my notes centering on the fact that each record I played sounded the best I've ever heard it. Familiar titles sounded "new" again, and those less familiar titles let me hear what I imagined to be the exact intentions of the musicians, producers, and engineers on each of them. What I enjoyed much more than dissecting the D'Agostino phono preamp's sound was simply playing records, and enjoy them as much as I could for as long as this phono preamp remained in my system.

One of these records that I played more than once was Pink Floyd's *Meddle*, released in 1971. I feel that one of the characteristics of a great record is longevity, and as this Pink Floyd record is one that I've been listening to since I was a teenager, it easily fits into this category. I've gone through many copies of this LP over the years, my current best sounding copy is an original Harvest/Odeon pressed in Japan the year of the album's release. It is a thick, perfect sounding slab of vinyl that is comparable to the original UK release on Harvest in every way, except that the Japanese copy's surface noise is non-existent. The first track on side one is "One Of These Days", which starts out with the sound of wind, and then dual bass-guitars enter, one in each channel. Through the D'Agostino phono preamp the sound of this tune is breathtaking. As I said, I've been listening to this record all my adult life, yet pardon the cliché, it was as if hearing this track for the very first time. Before I played this record this time I was well aware that each of Roger Waters's two repeat-echo laden basses that were playing – one

in each channel, but this time each of the basses had not only greater definition due to the D'Agostino's amazing transient response, it was as each bass occupied the lower half of my listening room, with what sounded like cushions of air around each bass.

After a while some of Rick Wright's backwards Hammond B3 organ swirls and David Gilmour's fuzz-guitar enter, as Roger Waters gives us what only can be describes as a space rock bass solo, Nick Mason's kick drum knocks at heaven's (or hell's?) door. The D'Agostino doesn't just reproduce a low frequency mush of a bass drum, quite the opposite. This was a kick drum sound that the staff at Abbey Road Studios must have obsessed over for quite a while, with the low frequency response reaching so low I could only feel it, combined with a "woof" sound in its midrange, and a slight "click" on top once again displaying a part of the phono preamp's transient response prowess. Of course, immediately after this bass drum announcement, an ogre recites "One of these days, I'm going to cut you into little pieces". The band grooves for the rest of the tune. One might wonder why I'm describing the track as much or more than I'm describing the sound of the D'Agostino phono preamp, it's just by this time in the review period it started to dawn on me that I was hearing the most transparent, true to the source phono preamplifier I've ever heard. Describing the sound of the Dan D'Agostino phono preamp is describing the sound of the records. Period.



Soon after the experience of playing the Pink Floyd and others that I consider quintessential rock albums from my collection, I turned to classical albums, not only because I enjoy listening to some of the great classical albums in my collection, but because it was such a joy listening to the D'Agostino reproduce what was hidden in the grooves of these LPs, and played them back reproducing the sounds of the instruments and voices with the most lifelike sound I ever heard. These records are what sealed the deal. These records confirmed that I was not hearing the sound of a component; I was hearing the sound of a recording of an orchestra.

Some were better recordings than others. But what I heard through my speakers were the decisions of the engineers and producers that made these records. Judged on sound quality alone, the D'Agostino proved once again that the records on Decca and RCA from the "golden age" of the late 1950s are some of the best. Also some recorded by EMI during the late 1960s into the 1970s. Of course, there are others, as there are good sounding classical records throughout history. There are also some poor sounding records. This is not to say I couldn't enjoy "poorly" recorded albums, in fact those were some of the most enjoyable spins during the audition period, as I could clearly hear what the intentions of

the recordists were, and it was made clear that no one intentionally records and releases a poor sounding record. It must have sounded good to someone during the playback session. And I could swear that the D'Agostino phono preamp was allowing me to hear what they heard.

Investing On The Very Best

Yes, \$28,000 is a great deal of money to spend on a phono preamplifier. It's a great deal of money to spend on *anything*. I know for a fact that there are audiophiles that would consider the D'Agostino phono preamplifier a bargain, at least when it is compared to some others -- since one can spend twice as much on a phono preamplifier if they want. Still, it seems to me that the D'Agostino Master Audio phono preamplifier is reasonably priced when one considers what went into designing this preamplifier, when one considers what goes into building this phono preamp, and especially when one hears what this phono preamplifier is capable of when playing one's records through it. If I had the money I would purchase this phono preamp without a second thought. It isn't perfect, as it lacks a remote control and only has one output. The Dan D'Agostino is the current champ, though, and therefore is highly recommended to all that can afford it. And even to those who can't.

Manufacturer Reply

Thank you Tom for the wonderful review on our Momentum Phonostage. You are correct, I haven't designed a phonostage in quite some time but analog playback has always been a passion of mine. I am thrilled to see its resurgence and be able to participate with a product. The Momentum Phonostage is an all out assault on the category and my team and I pulled out all the stops on the signal and power supply designs. I am glad you liked the result. Thank you again.

Dan D'Agostino

Tonality	
Sub-bass (10Hz - 60Hz)	
Mid-bass (80Hz - 200Hz)	
Midrange (200Hz - 3,000Hz)	
High Frequencies (3,000Hz On Up)	
Attack	
Decay	
Inner Resolution	
Soundscape Width Front	
Soundscape Width Rear	

Soundscape Depth Behind Speakers	
Soundscape Extension Into Room	
Imaging	
Fit And Finish	
Self Noise	
Value For The Money	

Specifications

Type: Solid-state stereo phono stage for MC and MM phono cartridges

Inputs: Four pair XLR and RCA, two Moving Coil (MC) inputs, two Moving Magnet (MM) inputs.

Outputs: One pair XLR balanced outputs via XLR

Gain: 70 dB for Moving Coil, 50 dB for Moving Magnet

Input Clipping: 1kHz typical for 70cm/sec recorded velocity, gain trim at "0"

MC 6mV

MM 6mV

Equivalent Input Noise, 20 Hz to 20 kHz < 60nV

Equivalent Input Noise Current: None

Gain Adjustment: +/- 6dB and is selectable from the front panel.

Equalization Curves: Five selectable available from the front panel. These include the Standard RIAA equalization curves and 4 alternatives used by various record labels. The available curves are:

RIAA, FFRR, RCA Orthophonic, Columbia, DGG. Frequency response represents the above curves +/- 0.2 dB from 20 Hz to 20 kHz.

Loads: 16 selectable resistive loads for Moving Coil and Moving Magnet

16 selectable capacitive loads for Moving Magnet inputs.

Power Supply: The base of the phono stage houses critical power supply rectification circuitry while a third chassis houses the power transformer for maximum isolation from AC-generated electromagnetic fields.

Dimensions:

Main: 15.5" x 12.75" x 3.5" (DxWxH)

Power Supply: 13.5" x 11" x 2.5" (DxWxH)

Transformer Box: 10" x 4" x 2" (DxWxH)

Price: \$28,000

Company Information

Dan D'Agostino Master Audio Systems

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