

AUDIOPHILE AUDITION

Sonneteer Sedley Phono Preamplifier

Simply the best phono preamplifier I've heard near this price so far.



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SRP: \$1250 standard version (\$1625 with USB)

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Basic Description

Phonograph preamplifier for MM (44 db gain) and MC (64 db gain) with optional built-in USB connection for recording to/playback from a computer; selectable input impedance (1k, 47, 100, 220 ohms or parallel combinations of); selectable input capacitance (10 pF, 47pF, 100pF, 220pF or parallel combinations of); 17" W x 11" D x 2.5" H; two-year warranty; 14.5 pounds.

Associated Equipment

[Marantz TT-15S1 Turntable](#), Musical Fidelity A5.5 Integrated Amplifier, Bowers and Wilkins 803S speakers, Audioquest cabling, Dell Studio 15 running Windows Vista 64.

Software

[LP Recorder.](#)
[Audacity.](#)
[Foobar.](#)



Setup

The Sedley is a standard-sized component and was heavier than I thought it would be. There aren't any controls on the front although there is a switch underneath (not all that convenient) to switch to playback mode from a computer. I was anxious to try this for my laptop vs. the lousy output I was using (due to lack of a decent set of analog outputs on the computer). There are a series of dip switches in the back to set the unit for MM/MC, loading, and optional warp filter. The switches are

mirrored but are not reverse numbered, so you have to be careful in setting them correctly.

Since I was using an MM cartridge, I left all the resistive loading switches up (which automatically selects 47K ohms for MM). Then I selected the RIAA curve and low gain (MM). The Clearaudio Virtuoso has a suggested capacitive loading of 100 pF, so that is what I set on the Sedley. The manual suggests experimentation, so if the sound is too soft, then reduce the loading and if it is too bright, then increase it. That's it! Pretty simple as far as these components go.

Sound

My initial impressions with the Sedley were extremely positive, so I was anxious to give the phono section a full listen. I started with "Peg" from Steely Dan's *Aja* LP. Right away I sensed there was something special happening. While some of the preamplifiers I auditioned were (as Goldilocks would say) too hot or too cold, the Sedley was just right. It was quiet, had good sense of space, nice top end without hiss or excessive sizzle, and images were appropriately sized and didn't sound congested or obviously colored in any way. Soundstage wasn't too wide or too narrow and image location was excellent as evidenced by the track "Home At Last." This is the first preamp that I've had under review that I could honestly consider using for the long term. This is not to say it's perfect and there is nothing better, but only that it doesn't have any egregious flaws. I felt comfortable sitting and just listening (and without the feeling I was missing something or the music was being edited by the equipment).

The next critical listen was "Rise" from Herb Alpert's LP of the same title. Bass was punchy and deep but not overly full. There was a nice decay to the claps. Horn was sweet and all the ambient sounds integrate nicely into the whole mix. Tonally this preamp gets it right. I have to say that I had to be reminded I was working on a review and try to critically listen as I continually lapsed into just enjoying the music--as it should be! The other thing I noticed was that although the LP wasn't in perfect shape the imperfections became less noticeable when the music was this engrossing.

The guitar from "From The Beginning" off Emerson, Lake and Palmer's *Trilogy* was just awesome. I cranked the sound way up (beyond what makes sense from the standpoint of how loud a real guitar would sound) and it was invigorating like one of those embarrassing soap commercials when the woman on the airplane is moaning and shouting in the bathroom and another passenger says in a deadpan voice, "I'll have what she's having." The result was just right. I let the record run so I could hear the pounding drums in the next tune. The vocals in the background sounded way back in the soundstage making the presentation sound very three-dimensional.

I listened to record after record expecting the enthusiasm I had for the Sonneteer to wear off, but it didn't. This was the first phono preamplifier where I experienced the urge to put record upon record on and just listen to more music for the fun of it.

My audiophile friend tested the unit for a month (while I was working on another review) with a Benz MC cartridge and was extremely happy with its sound. When he had to give it back and reinstall his old phono stage, he kept commenting on how much he missed the Sedley.

USB Recording

The version of the Sedley I requested had the USB option installed. Any unit can be upgraded to USB and will work with both PC and MAC. The component came with Audacity (a freeware program) and LP Recorder (a trial version). To purchase LP Recorder (and LP Ripper which you'll want) you are looking at about \$72. You can download the most recent beta and trial versions of these programs from the Internet.

I have used Audacity before and always found it to be somewhat difficult to use. The manual includes instructions (with diagrams) specifically for use with the Sedley. Once the USB cable was connected the software driver install took about 20 seconds. I tried a few tracks, but according to Foobar (my playback software) and visually looking at the waveform I could see clipping. With Thomas Dolby's "She Blinded Me With Science" from *The Golden Age of Wireless* there was no way to eliminate massive amounts of clipping. I read through the help file and played with the mixer level to no avail. I note that one of the suggestions is to lower the output level of the source--which, of course, there was no way to easily do. I moved on to LP Recorder.

LP Recorder is extremely easy and user-friendly. Just select the "Auto Level" function, slide the

volume all the way and play a loud portion of what you are going to record (like the old days of cassette recording!) At peaks, the program will reduce the level to insure that there is no clipping. There is even a counter at the bottom that shows how many times the signal is clipped (if at all). When you are ready to record, just click and there she goes! Unlike Audacity which allows you to select an output format, you are stuck with a WAV file. If you want to compress the signal (or change to a lossless format) you need to use another program (of which there are many). Recordings I made with LP Recorder from Linda Ronstadt, Grover Washington and Chicago peaked right at or below 0 dB according to Foobar.

USB Playback

I found that it was easiest to just lift the unit up a bit to gain access to the switch underneath for USB playback. When engaged, the light on the front of the Sedley changes from blue to magenta. This is a pretty cool feature! I was able to play anything from the computer through the Sonneteer to the amp via USB. I didn't have any separate DACs with USB inputs for comparison, but the A5.5 Integrated Amp does have a direct USB input. The sound from the Sedley seemed a bit softened (focus-wise) in comparison to the direct input on the A5.5. However, most stereo pieces don't have USB inputs, so in that case it would have been perfectly acceptable. The big benefit is for recording- the playback capability is just a bonus.

I compared the tracks I recorded from LPs using the two software programs and aside from some level differences (and the clipping issues) they sounded comparable. Either would do a nice job of transferring analog to digital to the computer for burning or portable use. I didn't do A/B with the records themselves, but part of the fun of LPs is actually playing the discs.

Conclusion

I have to admit I'd never even heard of Sonneteer until I started scouring the Web for phonograph preamplifiers to review. Boy, am I glad I did. The review blurb they have on their website is from over 10 years ago, but this piece is still a contender. Usually this is the section where I summarize a product's strengths and weaknesses. With the Sedley the only complaint I have is the slight alteration of sound with USB playback. I'll be the first to admit that I haven't heard all the products that are between \$1K-\$2K, so there may be some other good options I don't know about. Otherwise, this is simply the best phono preamplifier I've heard near this price so far. Highly recommended!

-- [Brian Bloom](#)