



SONNETEER SEDLEY USB

Is it our imagination, or are there more and more phono preamplifiers on the market? Certainly there are more and more turntables. LP sales, once considered a phenomenon of a bygone era, are soaring (sort of). What do you get when you plug a turntable into most amplifiers? Nothing. That just won't do.

Sonneteer is a British company that makes, among other products, the BardOne, those twin modules that use radio waves to get sound from here to over there (they were reviewed in *UHF* No. 73). It was also one of the first to offer digital power amps, which have since become a fad. The Sedley is totally different from what we've seen before from the company.

To be fair, this is the second Sonneteer phono stage bearing the Sedley name (Sir Charles Sedley was a 17th Century dramatist, and Sedley is also a very small town in Saskatchewan — we leave it to you to figure out the likely inspiration). The original Sedley is still made, but this one has an extra feature that is right in tune with the times. We'll get to it in a moment.

It's a mystery to us why so many of those new phono preamps, even those with plump price tags, can accommodate only high output cartridges, those with a nominal output voltage of well over a millivolt. Any customer for an expensive phono preamp is also a potential customer for a low-output moving coil cartridge, and may have one already.

Fortunately, the Sedley will handle pretty much any cartridge. A series of tiny DIP switches at the rear allow you to select the gain (MM or MC), the input resistance, and even the capacitance. To match our Goldring Excel cartridge, we selected the MC position and a 100 ohm load. The "correct" capacitance depends on how much capacitance the cable from your turntable already has. Since ours has a two-metre cable, we figured we didn't need to dial in more capacitance.

The typical phono preamp is half-sized, about 25 cm wide, the better to tuck it away where it won't be noticed. The Sedley USB is a full-width component, the size of the typical integrated amplifier. It is in fact the same size as our Audiomat Phono-1.5 phono preamp, though it is a good deal heavier. There's a reason for the extra size, and it has everything to do with the "USB" designation. The Sedley actually contains both a digital-to-analog converter and an analog-to-digital converter.

You can probably guess what they are for. The ADC converts your turntable's signal to digital data, which can then flow into your computer via a USB connection, and be recorded digitally. You can then burn a CD of the music, and you can also import the music into

iTunes for transfer to an iPod. As for the DAC, it can grab music from your computer hard disc and turn it into analog for your music system, with quality that is undoubtedly much better than the usual sound card can manage. Changing from one function to the other requires nothing more than flipping a switch, hidden under the unit but easy to find nonetheless.

We had initial misgivings about this arrangement, worrying that putting what is essentially a computer board into the same chassis as very sensitive analog circuitry might not be a good plan. Sonneteer has figured a clever workaround. The two digital USB circuits are powered by your computer, not the Sedley's own power supply. Pull the USB plug, as you can when you're enjoying the joys of analog, and they shut down. Of course that means you need to use one of the computer's own USB ports, not an unpowered hub. (See the sidebar *Hooking it All Up* on the next page).

The included CD contains two programs that allow recording on a Windows PC. One is a trial version of LP Recorder, and it will let you record only four minutes unless you pay US\$35. The other is the open source Audacity. We like Audacity, as we have mentioned before, and if you use it we recommend downloading the latest version. There are versions for Mac OS X and for Linux as well as Windows. Of course if you have some other favorite recording software, you can use it.

**A phono preamp, yes,
but one with a nod to
the computer age**

HOOKING IT ALL UP

The basic setup is obvious. Plug the turntable's cable into the input, and run an interconnect from the output to an input on your preamp or integrated amp. If the turntable also has a ground wire, connect it to the black post at the rear of the Sedley (if it *causes* hum instead of reducing it, disconnect it).

Then set the little white-on-blue DIP switches at the rear according to the instructions.

For an MM cartridge the load resistance needs to be 47 k Ω . For an MC cartridge a resistance of 100 Ω is probably right, unless the cartridge manufacturer says differently. The load capacitance is something you may have to set by ear, but don't be too surprised if you have trouble telling the difference.

Then connect the included USB cable from the square plug at the rear to a USB port on your computer.

You should see the Sedley showing up on your desktop under the name "USB Audio Codec." Fire up some recording software (two of them are included with the Sedley, and select the Sedley as both the input and the output. You can then record your LPs as they play. By flipping a switch which is located on the bottom but easily locatable from the front with a fingertip, you can listen to your recording through it.



In our Alpha room, where we did the listening, we had difficulty getting the Sedley as quiet as we would have liked, but that is common in that room, which was soundproofed with (unfortunately ungrounded) sheet lead. Still, careful dressing of the cables gave us quite reasonable results. The Sedley was much quieter in our Omega room.

We began with an especially dynamic wind band selection, the *March* from Gustav Holst's *Suite in F* (Reference Recordings RR-39). This recording is full of energy, and that was the way it emerged from the Sonneteer. The impact — and Holst knew all about impact if anyone did — was phenomenal. The plentiful transient attacks, which can be downright deadly on too many phono preamps, were just right, neither artificially enhanced nor too dull. The multitude of details in the complex woodwind passages was clear and attractive. All of the instrumental timbres were gorgeous.

Was the bottom end diminished by comparison with our Audiomat reference phono preamp? Gerard thought it might be, though certainly the sound

could not possibly be described as thin. There was nothing *noticeably* missing, though our own preamp added a bit of body, of richness, that is difficult to define. "You know," said Albert after we had discussed this for a bit, "if you had a muddy-sounding system this could be just what it takes to clean it right up."

We had a second wind band piece, with the same orchestra, the Dallas Wind Band, with Frederick Fennell on the podium this time. The album is *Beachcomber* (Reference Recordings RR-62), and the selection was the suite from the musical *A Chorus Line*.

Though there was an inevitable similarity to the first recording (same orchestra, same recording engineer) we found hardly anything to complain about this time. Once again the impact was flawless, with both energy and accuracy. There was an attractive spaciousness, and a galaxy of fine detail, with clean timbres. The percussion, which varied from a large drum to tiny high-pitched instruments, was gorgeous.

"I don't think the big drum is quite as powerful as with our reference," said Gerard, "but there's a nice dry snap to

the sound of the mallet on the drum surface, and that's great."

The Sedley did wonderfully well with *Take the 'A' Train* from the LP version of the Ray Brown Trio's prodigious *Soular Energy* album. Brown's thundering bass had plenty of bottom end energy, but at the same time it was transparent enough that it never hid softer sounds, such as the gentle brushing of the snare drum, or the subtle shimmer of the cymbal. The piano, like the other instruments, had a realistic timbre even when Gene Harris reached for the keys at the extreme right of the keyboard. The rhythm was communicative, the image rock solid. "There's a good balance," said Albert, "and the musicians don't wander around, they're rooted to the soil."

We know that a test like this has to include a female vocalist, and we pulled out an old classic that went out of production years ago. It's *Ain't No Cure For Love* from Jennifer Warnes' superb album of Leonard Cohen songs, *Famous Blue Raincoat*.

It was close to perfect, with Warnes' expressive voice clear, with subtle inflections and modulations. Was she hardening up when she sang louder? Reine thought she might be, though she wasn't certain. Once again the instruments and her voice didn't run together, and we could hear every syllable with pleasure. The words were especially easy to follow.

The Sedley is, then, a very good phono preamp, but of course it is designed to be more than that. Could the USB connection be used to make superior digital recordings?

To determine the answer, we chose two particularly good LP selections. The first was Eric Bibb's *Good Stuff* from the Opus 3 album of the same title (LP19603). Not only is this a very good recording, but the LP was cut at 45 rpm, and the pressing is nothing less than flawless. The second was also from Opus 3, though one that today exists only as a CD, Thérèse Juel's haunting song *Restgarnskoftan* from her album *Levande*.

We recorded each twice. The first version was done with our Audiomat reference phono stage and our Moon P-8 preamplifier, feeding an Edirol UA-

25 digitizer box. The box was plugged into the USB connector of a MacBook Pro running the open source recording software Audacity (<http://audacity.sourceforge.net>). The recordings were exported as AIFF files, the Macintosh format for uncompressed PCM audio.

For the second recording, we used the Sedley phono stage and ran its USB output directly into the MacBook Pro, using the same software.

Once we had the four files we burned them onto a Maxell CD-R with Toast Titanium 7. To avoid any unlikely glitches, we recorded at 1X, even though our CD burner is capable of 48X recording. We then compared the recordings on our Linn Unidisk 1.1 player through our Alpha system.

Reine and Albert both found the Sedley's version superior. Bibb's voice was clearer, his singing more expressive. The distinctive sounds of the two guitars, one of which is a bottleneck, were well rendered, and they were impossible to confuse. "The image is strange with

the reference," said Reine, "but with the Sedley it's right."

Gerard hesitated. "It's very good," he said, "but they're more alike than I expected them to be. The digitization process hides the differences between the two analog phono stages."

The Sedley also did well with the *Levande* selection. Though Juel seemed closer to us than she had with our reference version, her voice remained warm and attractive. Once again the sound was particularly richly detailed, and we could

SUMMING IT UP...

Brand/model: Sonneteer Sedley USB

Price: C\$1900/US\$1650

Dimensions: 44 x 29 x 6.5 cm

Most liked: Outstanding phono performance, good digital circuitry

Least liked: Add a high level input, and it would only get better

Verdict: For both analog and digital fanatics, a serious choice

follow every note. The plucked bass was solid, rich and rhythmic.

"The highs are still a bit accentuated," said Albert, "not only in her voice, but also in the cymbal." We were, nonetheless, impressed.

The Sonneteer Sedley USB is an excellent phono preamp, and its flexibility will allow it to adapt to any cartridge you own or may buy. Is the price a little higher than you want to pay for a phono preamp? If that's the case, the standard Sedley is nearly \$400 cheaper, and we can expect that its analog performance should be comparable to that of the one reviewed.

If we were you, though, we wouldn't cut corners in this way. The hard barrier between the analog and digital worlds has been porous for a long time, and what's left of it is dissolving entirely. Whatever you may be doing now with your audio gear, you will be doing more in the years ahead. That USB connection is a link to your computer, but it is also a link to the future.



CROSSTALK

Say you're the proverbial person who has everything.

You've upgraded your system more than once — each time wondering how you could *possibly* have been content with what you started with. Your friends, who teased you at first, have now grown silent when they listen to music with you.

But something still nags you about your LPs, though you don't quite know what it is. They used to sound so much better than your CDs, and now they don't even get a chance to be played anymore. Know anyone like that? Is that you? Do I have great news for you!

Go give this phono preamp a try, and you'll find yourself scrambling through your LP collection looking for the finest recordings. Remember that piece, remember that performance you once liked so much? Nobody plays it like that, you used to say, and then you settled for a CD version that was...you know, okay, I guess.

Fire that turntable up, let it play through the Sonneteer, have a seat and enjoy it as you probably never did before.

Is it worth it? Well, if you have every-

thing but you don't have *this*, it is.

—Albert Simon

This listening sessions seemed all too brief. That was because the music was present, and it was some music! All my expectations were fulfilled.

Thanks to the remarkably clean sound and the excellent image, nothing was hidden, not the lyrics, not the inflections, not the modulations, and definitely not the emotion. I was especially struck by the brass, which was downright luminous, by the piano, which sounded as it should right across the spectrum, by percussion that was always effective whether it was powerful or vanishingly soft, by the human voice, which was natural and pleasing, by the bite of the attacks and the quick stops, by a rhythm that was communicative whatever the tempo, and by a very broad dynamic range.

And I haven't even mentioned the free bonus that comes with it.

The Sedley is a magnificent vehicle for musicians and singers. It pleased me immensely, allowing me to put behind me

the petty annoyances of life, in favor of a good feeling.

—Reine Lessard

I wasn't sure what to expect from this upscale phono stage. Previous products from Sonneteer struck me as works in progress, and for the most part they were. This one is fully baked. Not only does it sound outstandingly good, but its configuration is destined to be copied by any competitors who plan to be around for the long haul.

You mustn't think that the USB feature is a gimmick dreamt up to give cachet to a product that sounds so-so. Take away the USB circuit, and what you have is an exceptionally fine phono preamp that is worth every penny of its price. That is of course its main role, and it scores big points.

But the USB output (and *input*, don't forget) is no mere cherry on the sundae. Even die-hard analog fans have cars with CD players, not to mention iPods. The Sedley USB is the valuable link between the analog and digital worlds.

—Gerard Rejskind