Danish dimension

Gamut’s holographic-sounding preamp tops the range without breaking the bank

Gamut has form in this department – its D200 power amp is widely recognised as offering state-of-the-art sound at a realistic price. The D3 does not replace an existing model, but improves upon the continuing C2R preamp. It has a similar mix of balanced and single-ended sockets and chunky, solidly made casework, the laser-cut name in the top plate being particularly nice, if not in a place where most rack users will appreciate it. Gamut has always been keen on balanced connections, because its origins lie in the professional audio world. This approach is favoured by pros for the robust nature of the plugs and sockets themselves and, more importantly still, the ability to cancel noise that might be picked up over long cable runs. Whether balanced interconnects offer a benefit over typical domestic lengths is debatable. There are some who feel that balanced connection via XLR is actually not as good as standard single-ended operation through RCA phono sockets, given the right cable, but the two are very hard to compare properly.

Balanced inputs aside, the D3 has four RCA phono inputs marked MM/MC, tuner, tape and HTH. The latter is a home cinema bypass input, through which the front left/right signal from a multichannel processor may be passed. In theory, this should allow you to integrate stereo and multichannel systems without having to compromise your two-channel sound. The drawback is that when activated, this becomes an unattenuated input that sends a full-level signal out to the power amp. If you accidentally switch this bypass on when there’s a line-level signal coming in, the results can be catastrophic for ears, speakers and quite possibly power...
amps. Gamut has tried to make it difficult to do this accidentally by including a warning light on the front panel, but the less than clear labelling of the bypass switch on the rear means it's not idiot proof. Still, it's a useful function for those who want to combine high-quality stereo plus multichannel/home cinema functions in one system. The MM/MC input is only a line-level input, by the way – you have to buy an optional phono stage to use it with your turntable.

The last input is a balanced XLR socket marked 'CD'. This also offers a bypass function, for players with onboard volume controls. But as Gamut points out, most CD players won't have volume pots of the quality of those here. So, if a fixed output is available, use it. Outputs include two pairs of balanced and one pair of phono sockets, with a tape out also via phono. Gamut points out that each output has its own buffer amplifier, so you can use them in parallel without compromising the common mode rejection ratio (noise cancelling ability) of the balanced output.

This is a remote controllable prepamp, but only optionally – there are two Gamut remotes to choose from, plus the potential to use a Marantz multroom handset. The base Gamut handset is a system-oriented device with only up and down arrows to select between horizontally arrayed inputs on the fascia. It's not hard to get the input you want but harder to read the inscription on the prepamp if you're more than a couple of metres away. Remote level control seems a little crude too, the lightest of touches on the button producing a significant jump in volume, either up or down. This would probably be less of a problem with a low-gain power amp (Gamut power amps can be adjusted in this respect) but is an ergonomic flaw otherwise.

**SOUND QUALITY**

As ever with Gamut products, peccadillos of usage are far outweighed by the sound that emerges, and the D3 maintains that reputation with great finesse. This is a genuinely wide-bandwidth, highly transparent prepamp that responds precisely to the input signal in a clean, smooth fashion. It may initially sound a little warm, but the D3 is actually very low in solid, real and in the room. The snappy brush strokes on the snare, the round resonant 'chunk' of the bass strings and the piano's higher, more eloquent notes were all full of life and vitality thanks to the persuasive shapeliness of the D3's sound. It's well served in terms of dynamics, too – you wouldn't get that sense of life without it. The timing is also entirely natural; you don't notice a particular sense of timing from the product at all, but when a group like EST is in action you appreciate that it is as sensitive to this aspect of the sound as it is elsewhere. This is all-round transparency, not merely detail resolution.

The D3 reveals more variety and depth of tone than you usually hear in vocals. Take Madeleine Peyroux's voice on her Coreless Love album, for example. The D3 managed to retain her tremendous presence and ensured her voice sounded warm and silky, but husky with it. The piano also sounds very real, with a broad timbral range and excellent separation from the band.

This is a very subtle preamplifier. It doesn't shout out 'transparency', which usually means edginess in the long run. Nor does it make you pick out the rhythm specifically, which can suggest an emphasis that's not entirely natural. Instead, it gets on with getting out of the way. You hear more of the music – its charm, its intent and its energy. It works as well with third-party power amplification (ATC was a brand we tried during our test period) as it does with its own brethren (Gamut's D200 MK1 was also used extensively). And it always makes a sound that's both entralling and full width.

Plenty of preamps can produce a fine midrange, but all too many struggle at the frequency extremes. That's not the case here: the D3 shaves the floor where others barely excite it, and reaches highs in a natural yet extended way. In fact, it's hard to say how it might be greatly improved sonically – we've heard more transparent designs, but none close to this price point, which is very competitive for a first class preamp. Such things are rare at any price. 

**VERDICT**

- **SOUND**: 95%
- **FEATURES**: 70%
- **BUILD**: 91%
- **VALUE**: 60%

**Conclusion**

This preamp has a very sophisticated high-end sound, without the five-figure price tag. It is creamy smooth, finely detailed, tonally rich, dynamically strong and three dimensional. If you want the best, don't overlook it just because it's a bargain.
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