

THE GERMAN MAGAZINE FOR HIGH FIDELITY

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Hörerlebnis



Blue Amp: model 42 MK III

BLUE AMP



mc dual mono phono preamplifier

model 42

• 0°

• 845R

• 180°

• 500R

• 100R

┌ • 64dB
70dB

└ • 58dB

• STEREO

• MONO

The Art of Fine Detail

by Marco Kolks

Phono preamp 42 MK III by Blue Amp

This is the everlasting story of a deep love, because sharing my life with an audiophile product for almost 20 years appears to be quite unusual. Our magazine "Hörerlebnis" (Listening Experience) had been taking its first steps and was about to gradually establishing itself within the high-end readership. At that time, I met Rolf Becker, a young, ambitious engineer from southern Germany who was passionate about building phono stages. From this acquaintance emerged the first review of the then top-of-the-range-product Model 42 in issue no. 27. The outstanding sonic performance made the fruitful cooperation culminate in the purchase of this moving-coil preamp. Until then, I hardly knew anything better – and anything more expensive. The acquisition cost of roughly 12,000 deutschmarks triggered intense discussions in my former life partnership, which I can still remember today. Ultimately, my persistence succeeded without continuously infringing the quietude within the family. Oh boy: how flexible can representatives of the female sex in the end be within their world of emotions.

For just over 60 issues, the Model 42 managed to keep its pole position. Then, suddenly the end was near. Rolf Becker had reworked his flagship and called it now MK II. As is often the case in life, the better always is the enemy of good. However, the same happened to occur to the Model 42 MK II and its original version, too. An update was therefore inevitable. Another 20 issues went by, in which this phono amp never was

forced to back down from any other of its kind. And then one day, the telephone rang: "Rolf Becker on the line. There is good news. I have reworked the Model 42 again. The improved MK III is waiting in the wings." Bloomy sonic descriptions followed his opening words, which I, as a longtime owner, was very well able to understand and which aroused my full attention.

If you are a proud owner of the previous MK II model, then you have the possibility to have it upgraded through an authorized retailer for a price starting from 760 euros, though not to full MK III specifications. However, if you are eager to fully enjoy the potential of the new phono amp, then you either have to run discussions within your household community (see introduction), or you are very much used to the world of oil sheik-like incomes, since the new edition accounts for about 14,000 euros.

In previous editions, we already extensively wrote about the enormous efforts that Rolf Becker puts into his creations. Therefore a few key points should be sufficient to be mentioned here: The Model 42 MK III is a fully balanced phono stage, logically comprising both the input and output sections. Thanks to the dual-mono power supply, Rolf Becker achieves an incredibly high channel separation. Four voltage sources guarantee full temperature stability. Each time the relays get switched on, all of them run a complete contact cleaning sequence. This ensures a perfect compliance to the manufacturer's specifications at all times. Such a sophisticated and unique feature, that makes itself noticeable by a repeated clicking after having been switched on, I only know from Blue Amp. In addition, for safety reasons the out-

puts are switched on with a delay. Regarding the components, it's Rolf Becker again, who doesn't leave anything to chance. Only the best on the market, such as resistors from Vishay, is just good enough, and moreover, all components undergo his complementary personal selection before being installed. This takes time, a lot of time, but the designer likes to invest it, as the Model 42 should have the potential to be passed on to the grandchildren some day.

What I still find fascinating is the fact that Rolf Becker bends the connecting wires of the components on a bending gauge himself by hand. In this way the components wouldn't get as mechanically stressed as it would be the case in automated processes, and therefore they increase their durability, so the developer from the German Breisgau region says. Whatever next!... Definitely, all Blue Amp phono amps appear to be devices that are carefully and individually crafted by hand. Yes, a Model 42 happens to be something very special. "Once you have embosomed it, you usually do not want to be deprived of it," Rolf Becker says,

and I can only agree with him on that. And furthermore: "The now available MK III version is based on the development experiences made with an entirely different product. However, they showed to be such a convincing step forward that a MK III version was unavoidable." That's right again.

The front panel reveals all important settings at a glance: As standard input impedances, 100, 500 and 845 ohms are available. In my younger years, the latter was considered as a magical figure. At that time, Audio Saul from Oberhausen had cartridges from Jan Allaerts in their distribution portfolio (today distributed by Isenberg Audio in Hamburg), who happened to be the spiritual father of this set-value. By the way, even nowadays this value enjoys its justification. For adjusting the gain, you can choose between 58, 64 and 70 dB, while switching between stereo and mono as well as selecting the phase mark the other setting options.

The rearside carries the balanced inputs and outputs, but solely for moving-coil cartridges. In

The product:

Phono preamp: Blue Amp Model 42 MK III

Price: approx. 14,000 euros, suits MC cartridges only

Input impedance: 100, 500 or 845 ohms

Input/output: each 1x balanced (XLR)

Gain: 58, 64 or 70 dB

Dimensions (WxHxD): 155x120x320 mm

Weight: hefty 5 kg

The manufacturer:

Blue Amp

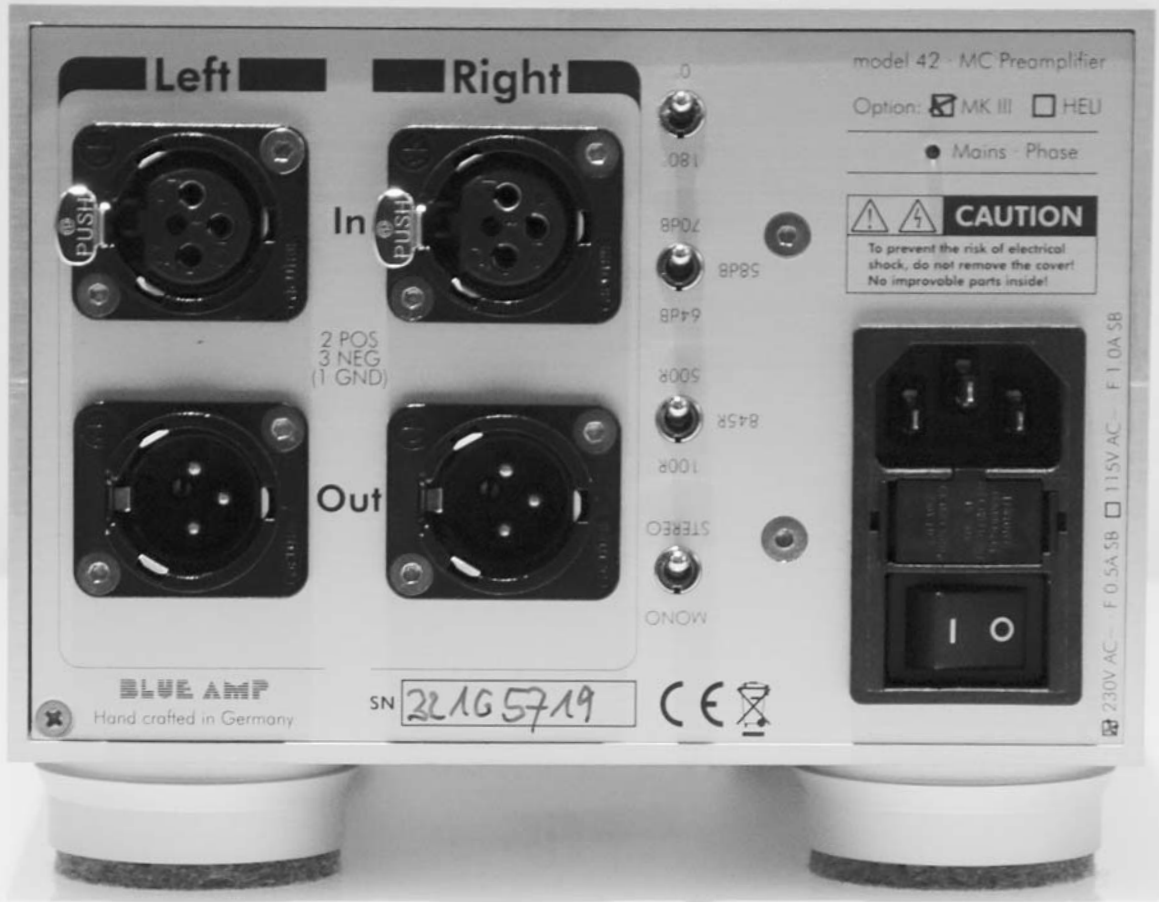
Contact: Rolf Becker

Vogesenstrasse 6, 79276 Reute, Germany

Phone: +49 7641 9543296, Fax: +49 7641 9543297

Email: mail@blueamp.de

Internet: www.blueamp.de



Rolf Becker's opinion, the design of his phono amps makes a shielding of the input cable obsolete, so that their length may even extend up to several meters, thus making a ground socket dispensable. Oh, and yes, the mains phase is also displayed. The change towards a higher quality and therefore much more expensive power cord, the Model 42 MK III acknowledges sonically in a positive way.

Listening experience

The Model 42 MK III reveals things as they are. Listen once, and you know what it's all about. No comparison needed anymore. Resolution, transparency, and detail no longer raise an issue. There's plenty of everything. Subtle, quiet passages on the bass flourish into revelation. Every single note wants to get hummed, even wants to be touched. The vinyl recording sessions, fea-

turing the so-called Bossa Nova, which conquered the mainland United States in the 1960s, very much inspired their creators to roll out the big names. Charly Byrd's guitar-playing (More Brazilian Byrd, Columbia/LP), which is marked by the classical school, ceaselessly interweaves the complex light-footed arrangements when heard through the Model 42. The phono stage performs nonchalantly and with much verve. Deliberate monotony becomes harmonized in "One Note Samba", while the violins in "Weekend In Guaruja" ascend to highest praises. Fluctuating ensemble music and well-dosed brass sets gather together, while slamming drum shots mark the steady rhythm to which Charly Byrd gets his guitar's strings dancing. The intrinsic implicitness that this analogue jewel from Rolf Becker's chamber of treasures discloses in terms of pitch control, is not less than stupendous. And all of this

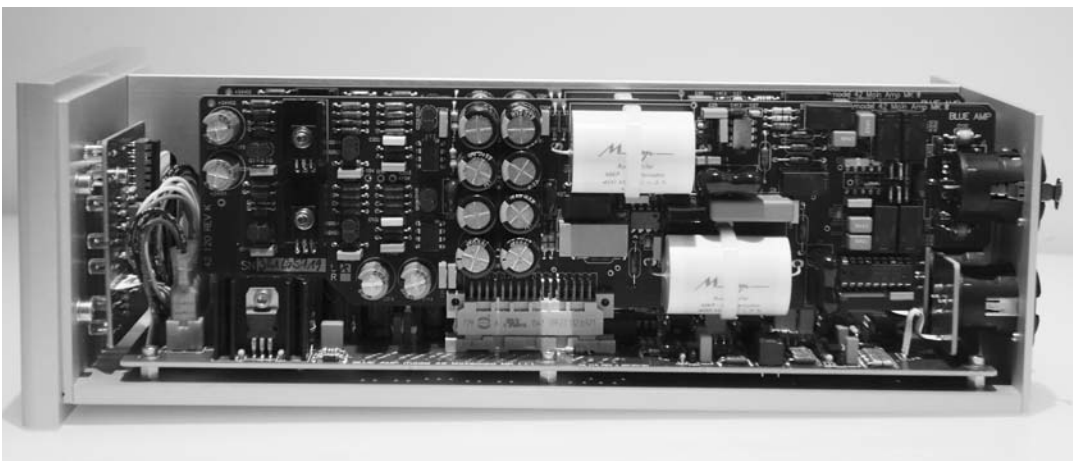
The recording of Tchaikovsky's "1812" (Erich Kunzel, Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra, Telarc/LP) is regarded by many as the reference recording of the Solemn Overture, and at the same time considered as the ultimate touchstone for hi-fi systems. When it comes to testing, the latter statement certainly is more than justified, at least as far as the bass performance of the system is concerned. Even a quick glance at the score is most alarming. For his "1812" overture, Peter Tchaikovsky mobilized just about everything the massive orchestras of the late Romanticism had to offer: strings galore, a vast selection of percussive instruments from timpani to triangles, and the not very contemplative call for "all wind instruments that are in reach." At that time, such a razzmatazz people were accustomed to hear at most from Hector Berlioz. However, with an admittedly hitherto underestimated instrument, Tchai-

kovsky managed to even outshine his usually supersizing contemporary: The cannon, or more precisely, the use of 16 cannon shots at the end of the piece. The Model 42 MK III makes it obvious that this recording nevertheless is musically subtle, the instruments appear clearly coordinated and finely tuned, and the recording shows a better balance and a better spatial imaging. Up to now, only a few components – doubtlessly including this one – have given me the impression of being capable of listening through the surface, and therefore not only approaching a piece of work, but moreover the involved artists. The core message the Model 42 MK III is sending out, is that there is much more than just an aggregation of single tones. That's why I do not hesitate to have it ranking among the rare, really fascinating products in the industry. This is art in the finest detail.

without any effort. Classic tunes like "One Note Samba", "Agua De Beber" or "How Insensitive" float lightly and airily, while the listener is amazed by the contrast between full orchestral sounds

and Charlie Byrd's filigree guitar-playing.

John Barry (Great Movie Sounds, CBS/LP) started his international career as a film composer, and that markedly very British on Her





Majesty's service. And suddenly I faced this: The composer's intention has got almost palpable. The characteristic Bond theme written for "Dr. No" with its mysteriously creaking guitar intro, strikingly pillared by massive brass, thus pervasively echoing in the ears of all those super villains and their evil followers, became both task and obligation for all his successors. The Model 42 MK III impresses with its unbelievable calmness, letting the listener flow through time and space without any limitations. That music never caught me like this before. John Barry lets chords dissonantly arise from a cushion of flutes in an airy and subtle way (Seance On A Wet Afternoon), forms sharp themes from gentle tones (The Ipress File) and programmatically unfurls the soil for the eco-adventure "Born Free" with a warming layer of strings. The impression of immersing into a depth barely experienced before becomes intensified the more I listen. To verify that this performance can actually be allocated to the Model 42 MK III, I let two other cartridges come into play, of which I'm convinced that they are also capable of tracking the grooves in the same first-class manner. And yes, I keep standing firm on the Model 42 MK III.

If you want to experience how fascinating a

live recording can be, go for the album "In Concert" by Freddie Hubbard and Stanley Turrentine (CTI/LP). And what has this record to offer, you might ask? It showcases solid fusion jazz from a time when this new, electronically enriched rocking variant of jazz was actually anything but solid. Freddie Hubbard's trumpet and Stanley Turrentine's saxophone open up a question-and-answer session, while the rhythm section consisting of Herbie Hancock, Ron Carter, Jack DeJohnette and Eric Gale transforms every motif and every groove into a shimmering world between pattern and improvisation. The Model 42 MK III does not disembody this fusion music into a meaningless strumming, but portrays it in an exciting, emotional and energetic manner. Yes, it really can sound this way. The music breathes life and reflects the involvement of the audience. This phono amp gives the concert hall credibility, each and every second. Besides the rustling of some individuals, even the silence of the crowd has been caught. Rolf Becker's top-of-the-range model fascinates with sovereignty. **MK**