



<http://www.6moons.com/audioreviews/jeaudio3/1.html>

Back in the halcyon days of late 2008 and on to early 2009 I took delivery and auditioned the then new VL10 preamplifier from upstart JE Audio. The review's intro described the hardships the industry was suffering back then (and endures still) and how bold it was for a new company to launch into the turbulent waters of high-end audio with ambitious products.

Having said that (then and now), the corporate base is surprisingly resilient. The market manages to support all manner of companies at all levels of product and enterprise. JE Audio, an audio specialist with headquarters in Hong Kong, has managed to maintain its impetus and over the ensuing years since released a number of new products and an update to the VL10 preamplifier as now the VL10.1.

Naught has changed in terms of operability and functional features but JE Audio's John Lam described a number of internal and circuit refinements that he assured me reaped rewards. Much as I thought the VL10 was a solidly engineered and sonically accomplished preamp, I found back then that my reference Supratek Sauvignon possessed still higher levels of instrumental presence and imaging three-dimensionality while being less upfront and more involving.

Since 2009 John Lam has worked on enhancing the VL10's overall sound quality and addressing those issues while improving minor cosmetic details, primarily the design of the top cover's valve access grille "The are a number of changes from VL10 to VL10.1 including the use of a MOSFET current source, a redesign of the DC precision regulated power supply, the use of different types of resistors and pure silver cable within the circuitry. JE Audio is a young company and the VL10 was the our first preamp. Since the VL10 was introduced in 2007 we have had many more new ideas as we gained experience in new circuit designs and different electronic components.

"Technical improvement comes along naturally with the use

of MOSFET current source and a better regulated power supply. But the major aim is to improve the sonic performance of the VL10.1. Cosmetically the changes of the chassis from VL10 to VL10.1 are minor and they include a better open window design on the top plate and a slightly different design on the front panel."

The VL10.1 retains the same fully balanced valve configuration as the VL10 where a team of six 6H30s provide thermionic bliss. The minimalist front panel once again features a central on/off button this time with a nicely countersunk indent plus large rotary knobs on either side; to the left an input control and to the right the volume control. I'm disinclined to regurgitate further on the circuit design other than to mention JE Audio's claim that the Wideband Unity Balanced Amplifier (WUBA) design has been patented and is the point of difference between it and your run-of-the-mill preamplifier. Please check the original review here or JE Audio's website for finer technicalities.

Turning point. The Kramer system has substantially evolved since 2009 and to provide some context (cables aside) I'll briefly outline the changes. The source has remained the same but the preamplifier has had an upgrade from Mr Supratek himself. Like JE Audio's John Lam, Mick Maloney enhanced the circuit to markedly elevated sonic performance. The power amps are the new NuForce Reference 18 monoblocks and Cymer Audio's Southern Star SET monos. The much-loved WATT/Puppy 8 has given way to the revered Wilson Sasha W/P. The system is thus further refined in overall balance, tonal color, texture and finesse over the already outstanding previous iteration. My original point notes were still at hand (I keep a notebook record of all my reviews) and of course I referred back to the fleshed-out 2009 review to compare impressions.

The slightly cold and upfront nature of the original VL10 was going to be my first port of call for evaluating the VL10.1. Well, I'll have to address John Lam directly. Mate, you've nailed that issue. The VL10.1 is a different beast.

Some pretty skilled tuning ears have been at play here. The VL10.1 is a far more natural, musical and emotive preamp than its predecessor. No comparison. Music now flows in a totally involving way where instruments and voices gush forth with presence and a rhythmic fluidity that invokes the real thing. Where before you stood to attention with the music in attack formation until fatigue set in, now the VL10.1 pulls you in with a warm and stimulating but firmly controlling embrace.

Comparisons between VL10.1 and Supratek Sauvignon are appropriate again as pricing is of near parity if you consider Supratek's direct pricing versus JE Audio's dealer network model. Valve to valve, mano a mano comparos are in order. Firstly the VL10.1's bass is tighter and more detailed. On Angus and Julia Stone's "Yellow Brick Road" from the CD Down the Way the VL10.1 sounds just as clearly defined on the close-mic'ed vocals. But then the bass line surfaces and the VL10.1 grabs hold naturally motoring on where the Supratek's added bloom almost overpowers the melody, drawing attention to itself while proudly beating its chest. The VL10.1's bass is unaffected and organic where the Sauvignon is comparatively exaggerated or boisterously magnified.

The same descriptors can be used to illustrate the two units' dynamic contrast abilities. Curandero's Aras is beautifully produced and has unexpected and explosive percussive and acoustic guitar effects. Again the Sauvignon is the more outspoken and extroverted Aussie rascal, a show-off with sometimes startling moments of snap and power. The VL10.1 is the more polite Oriental with the same contrasts being slightly more measured and somewhat genteel. This also carries through to the Sauvignon's more present midrange forward of the speaker plane as opposed to the VL10.1's more recessed midrange presentation. But in no way does that translate to undue politeness in terms of detail. The VL10.1 is as beautifully filigreed as you're likely to hear to savour everything the recording and the system is able to convey.

The soundstage spread is wider and deeper with the Sauvignon. This allows for a more separated spread of images where the VL10.1 packs it a little tighter but not by much though - good job considering the Sauvignon is such a champ at soundstaging. The JE Audio preamp has a much quieter background. The Aussie in fact could be seen—or heard—as downright noisy in comparison. And that statement applies not so much to circuit noise through the fairly efficient Sasha (both preamps are fairly quiet given their valve designs) but to musical information emerging from a moonless black abyss in the case of the VL10.1.

You're hearing music and only music, no hash, no smearing of low-level information. Ergo the astonishing levels of detailing and microdynamics that surface forth. This follows through to outstanding instrumental and musical strand separation and resolution (this latter was in no minor way aided by the extraordinary Siltech 550L speaker cable coming up for review).

At the top extreme the VL10.1 is much more refined, extended and grainless than its predecessor. Play any percussive bells or cymbals and the preamp follows through with delicacy, air, superb harmonic and tonal structure. Those bells and cymbals sure do sound like coruscating metal. And who said the 6H30 valve was brash? This is one sweet preamp, another major-league improved aspect over the VL10. No brightness, spotlighting or high-frequency imbalances here.

'To keep the bastards honest' as the Aussie political saying goes, I hooked up the austere Wyetech Labs Jade at the final stages of the reviewing process. This quite simple design features high-quality components and is built like a brick outhouse. Price-wise it's in the same ballpark as the main narrative's protagonist and its allotted nemesis. The Wyetech has the tightest and most nuanced bass registers while matching the JE Audio's dead-quiet backgrounds and microdynamic expression. The Canadian is as boisterous as the Aussie larrikin in terms of macrodynamic contrast and slightly forward of the speaker plane soundstaging while packing it as tight as the JE Audio but with slightly more precise imaging. When it comes to these three preamplifiers, taste and system balance will determine the ideal match. To say X is better than Y in this case would be almost child-like naïveté.

View from above. As I sit and type this, I realise that subconsciously a day or two prior I had changed my screen's wallpaper image to a glorious high-rise view of the megalopolis that is Hong Kong. Taken as an eagle-eye's view during the nightly Light Show from one of the swankiest restaurants in town—thank you, largest British speaker manufacturer—the skyline stretches impossibly upwards and infinitely outwards as the laser lights scar the night sky with trails of green, white and red.

'Honkers' is one of my favourite cities. On every visit it has imprinted me with indelible memories of its diverse people, cultural richness and urban elegance and vibrancy. In some respects these qualities reflect the core of the VL10.1. JE Audio has wrought richer purer tonal colours and a level of sophistication that mirrors—mid Light Show at its most spectacular—the great city's creative wellspring from which it rose.

|                                | Associated Equipment   |
|--------------------------------|--|
| <b>Source</b>                  | Metronome T-1i CD player with DAISy HE remote  |
| <b>Preamps</b>                 | Supratek Sauvignon with NOS RCA and Bendix tubes; NuForce P9, Wyetech Labs Jade  |
| <b>Amplifiers</b>              | NuForce Reference 18 monoblocks; Cymer Audio Southern Star SE-35 monoblocks; Ancient Audio Single Six monoblocks   |
| <b>Speakers</b>                | Wilson Audio Specialties Sasha W/P   |
| <b>Subwoofers</b>              | Yamaha YST-SW80, Mark & Daniel Maximus-Subwoofer   |
| <b>Cables</b>                  | <b>digital</b> - Cerious Technologies; Harmonic Technology Magic; NuForce digital cables; <b>analog interconnects</b> Bocchino Audio Morning Glory; Cable Research Laboratory (CRL) Gold with Bocchino XLR and RCA; Cerious Technologies; DanA Digital Reference Silver; Eichmann eXpress 6 Series 2; Harmonic Technology Magic and Truthlink Silver; MIT Giant Killer MPC; PSC Audio Monolith AG; PSC Audio Pristine R30 Ribbon; NuForce IC-700 Speaker, Cerious Technologies; MIT Giant Killer GK-1; <b>loudspeaker cables</b> - NuForce SC-700, Siltech Classic Anniversary 550L [in for review]; <b>power</b> - Cerious Technologies AC; Eichmann eXpress AC power cables; Harmonic Technology Fantasy; PSC Gold Power MKII; Shunyata Research |
| <b>Stands</b>                  | Finite Elemente Pagode Signature equipment racks   |
| <b>Acoustic treatment</b>      | Fonic Designer panels and StudioCel bass traps   |
| <b>Sundry accessories</b>      | Burson Audio Buffer, Bright Star Audio IsoRock Reference 3 and BSA IsoNode feet; Bocchino Audio Mecado isolation diodes; Black Diamond Racing cones; Stillpoints ERS paper in strategic positions, Shakti On Lines; Densen CD demagnetizer; Auric Illuminator CD Treatment   |
| <b>Room Size</b>               | 17' w x 35' d x 12' h in short wall setup, opens to adjoining kitchen  |
| <b>Review component retail</b> | USD5000  |