

## Parasound JC 3+ Phono Preamp Déjà-Vu and Then Some

Equipment report

By: [Neil Gader](#) | Aug 11th, 2014



First, hats off to Parasound for not bowing to convention and badging its new, hot-rodded version of the original JC 3 phonestage with the shop-worn cliché “Reference” or “Signature Edition.” And second, and more importantly, if you’re a current owner of the Parasound JC 3 phonestage, don’t panic. It’s still a great phonestage, except now it has company—the JC 3+—priced \$645 above the original’s \$2350.

As readers will recall, the original JC 3 clinched a Golden Ear Award not long after I reviewed it in Issue 215. I stated at the time that this full-chassis, dual-mono design featured “a near obsessive attention to isolation,” to the extent that each channel was housed in its own extruded aluminum enclosure within the chassis, and further isolated from the power supply with 3/8"-thick, low-carbon mild-steel partitions. It remains, in my view one of the most worthy phonestages on the market. But audiophiles are a finicky bunch and the JC 3’s lack of variable loading stuck in the craw of some. Taking notice, Parasound tasked phono wizard John Curl to work his magic once again. Curl’s wand-waving not only resulted in loading adjustments but a chassis full of other improvements as well.

The story goes that during the design phase of the original JC 3, Curl had rejected variable-load adjustment due to the added noise intrinsic in potentiometers. As a result the JC 3 was built with limited, switched-input load-impedance choices. In a short interview accompanying my original JC 3 review Curl’s remarks turned out to be prescient: “Actually I think I underestimated the market. Most phono cartridges don’t require a whole lot of big extremes and I thought on this particular point people wouldn’t be using the most exotic cartridges, so I kept them to a minimum with 100 ohms and 47k for the moving coil and 47k for the moving magnet...We might even consider adding more loading if people complain enough.”



Evidently the market did indeed pipe up. But Curl and circuit-board designer Carl Thompson needed to be convinced they could get the required performance to make the change worth pursuing. They turned to Vishay, a top manufacturer of low-noise parts, which ultimately agreed to develop a potentiometer and manufacture it in small quantities for Parasound. The JC 3+ now features independent, variable-load fine-adjustment capability for moving coils in each channel, ranging from 50–550 ohms using Vishay’s special low-noise dual-gang potentiometers.

As it turned out there are a lot more positives to the JC 3+ than variable loading. Curl and Thompson tweaked the phono-module boards to further optimize every performance parameter. The copper circuit-board traces in the phono modules are now plated with 24-karat-gold at the junction where each part is soldered. Turning to numbers the moving coil signal-to-noise ratio is improved from 75dB to 87dB, A-weighted. Moving-magnet gain has been increased slightly from 47dB to 48dB, but mc gain has actually been reduced from 68dB to 64dB so that very-high-output mc cartridges won’t cause the JC 3+ to overload the inputs of some linestage preamps. The JC 3+ power supply has also been significantly upgraded with 47% larger, low-ESD power-supply filter capacitors for greater current reserves. Finally the new R-core power transformer is 82% larger to provide better bass performance. One ergonomic nitpick: The inputs and pots are deeply inset on the back panel so that only the smallest fingers need apply when trying to reach the spring-loaded release buttons of a typical pair of balanced XLR interconnects.

I had an opportunity to listen to these phonostages side by side, and I’m glad I did. Fortunately the essential character and balance of the standard JC 3 remains intact in the “+” version—the air, the impression of warmth and bloom, the fully realized timbres, and the three-dimensional continuity of the soundscape. Backgrounds are still eerily quiet, instrumental colors ripe, and channel separation exquisite. But then there’s just a little something more. Curl’s application of choice go-fast bits-and-tweaks adds up to speed and resolution improvements of consequence. As I followed the backing accordion during “I’ll Be Seeing You” from Ricki Lee Jones’ *Pop Pop* [ORG], the “+” kicked low-level transparency up a notch with a heightened resolution of dynamic gradients—micro and macro—and cleaner transient behavior.

Critically there’s a subtle reduction of haze and veiling on top, which further sweetened Joni Mitchell’s folksy soprano during “A Case of You” from *Blue* [A&M]. The lack of electronic noise and hash revealed a fuller expression of the inner dynamics of her voice, drawing more attention to the flutter of her vibrato as she sustained the lyric “And still be on my feet.” *Les Brown Goes Direct to Disc* [Century] is a clinic for big band dynamics and a challenge for any phonostage. I’m particularly fond of the tracks “Satin Doll” and “Fly Me To The Moon” with their sparkling and colorful clarinet and trumpet solos. On a macro level there was more jump and pace to the performance through the JC 3+. The trumpet solo was cleaner, alive with snappier transients and clearer decays. More dimensional cues were revealed as well. Especially noteworthy was the piano placement. Where it once resided closer to the right edge of the stage, with the JC 3+ it slipped into a comfortable pocket within the band. This goes along with my general observation that this version’s improved dimensionality is likely due to its higher resolution of micro-dynamic nuances.

Further validation of the JC 3+'s broader dynamic contrasts came during the "Winter" movement of Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons* [Argo]. Overall there was greater resolution of inner detail. The solo violin was sweeter—warmer and simultaneously a little quicker off the mark—and the full weight and micro-dynamic expression of the string section were more keenly expressed. As the melody ascended there was also the slightest reduction of the upper-frequency glare that would sometimes slip into the picture with the JC 3. In addition the "+" reproduced more of the textural gradients of the harpsichord, while also further revealing the ambience encircling the keyboard. The JC 3+ created a soundstage that simply flowed more smoothly from corner to corner.

Original or new and improved? There are no wrong answers. But choosing one or the other comes down to two issues. For those with stable analog rigs who assiduously avoid the cartridge-of-the-week hunt—the obvious choice is to stick to the Parasound original. But then there are those unrepentant analog junkies prone to swapping exotic cartridges, and seeking resolution's final word. For you (and you know who you are) an extra six hundred bucks is a small price to pay to put a little extra "+" into your records.

## SPECS & PRICING

Input impedance: Moving magnet, 47k ohms; moving coil, 47k ohms fixed, 50–550 ohms, variable

Gain: Moving magnet, 48dB; moving coil, 64dB

Dimensions: 17.25" x 4.12" x 13.75"

Weight: 19 lbs.

Price: \$2995

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