

# RCM Sensor Prelude (£1695)

SME's Polish distributor is not only a big vinyl fan but the also the chief architect behind RCM Audio and its remarkably flexible MM/MC phono preamplifier

Review: John Bamford Lab: Paul Miller



While there's little that's grand looking about RCM Audio's Sensor Prelude phono amplifier, despite it costing considerably in excess of a grand, close inspection reveals that it has been purposefully designed.

A substantial brushed alloy fascia disguises what is otherwise a rather utilitarian metal case. But there's little to complain about its construction quality, other than the cheapness of the stuck-on rubber feet. A separate power supply box connects via an umbilical cable of fixed length and locking DIN connector while the cable is generous in length

## ON A WIRE

A cartridge does not have a common ground, rather it has positive and negative signal pins for each channel. There are other phono stages with 'balanced' XLR outputs for marrying to high-end amps with balanced input sockets, but it's rare to find one with balanced inputs.

So where then are the Sensor Prelude's XLR input sockets? Most unusually, the RCA phono inputs can double-up as balanced inputs when the unit is switched. In this instance the outer (ground) connection becomes negative, the signal (inner) connection becomes positive.

to allow remote placement. A phono stage's duty is to amplify minute low-level signals so it's always good practice to keep power lines and supplies at arm's length.

If you're a UK reader you'll be asking, 'Who is RCM Audio?' It's a Polish company with a portfolio of just two products currently in its line up, an integrated valve amplifier and this MM/MC phono stage. Select Audio of Cumbria is importing RCM gear, Select already distributing such prestigious marques as Luxman, Basis, Airtight, and the legendary Swiss-made Benz-Micro cartridge range too.

## ARTISAN EQUALISATION

The Sensor's series of dip switches provides load adjustment to match your chosen MM or MC cartridge, along with seven selectable gain settings from 0.3 to 5mV. Unusually it offers balanced operation too [see box out, left]. While designed around ICs the RIAA equalisation is achieved using 'hand matched' discrete components. In true artisan fashion RCM claims precise matching to ensure that every handmade product leaving its workshops sounds as good as the reference unit in its listening lab.

I don't much like the fact that it has no power on/off switch, not even on the power supply unit. You'll forever have to rummage behind your rack to extract

**ABOVE:** Keeping interference at bay, the Sensor Prelude features an outboard power supply connected via an umbilical cable

its 13A plug from the mains supply each time you know you won't be playing records for a while. Keeping it powered is like leaving several TV sets in standby, and I bet you wouldn't do *that* if going away for the weekend. Well I wouldn't.

## MUSICAL MATTERS

From the outset it was clear that this RCM unit is a highly capable design, preserving the various elements of a piece of music, its melody, harmony, rhythm, together with the timbre of different instruments used to create colour and dynamic counterpoint, delivering what I can only describe as musical splendour.

Using Ortofon's 'Kontrapunkt b' moving coil cartridge in my Townshend Rock Reference with Excalibur arm as a source, the hypnotic, oriental-sounding arrangements on David Torn's *Cloud About Mercury* [ECM 1322] were eagerly examined in analytical fashion. Mark Isham's characteristic trumpet playing rasped when required and yet sounded deliciously sweet when it wasn't.

Tonally the RCM demonstrates a rich, 'earthy' quality which, while flattering of recordings that are lean in the bass, can sometimes spoil the clarity of bass information, for example when trying

## PHONO STAGE

### RCM SENSOR PRELUDE (£1695)



**ABOVE:** RCM offers a choice of seven input sensitivities from 5mV (MM) to 0.3mV (low output MC) plus a choice of six input loads from 47kohm down to 20ohm

to hear variations in textures between Tony Levin's bass 'stick' and the low synthesizer notes on *Cloud About Mercury*. In this respect the RCM proved to be not quite the equal of cost-no-object high-end designs such as Audia's Flight Phono auditioned recently. But as The Sensor Prelude is half the price of the Italian Audia model it's perhaps unfair to make such a comparison.

Demonstrating its ability to create a holographic soundstage, it painted fabulous images of a band performing live with Eric Clapton's 'Double Trouble' from *Just One Night* [RSO RSDX 2]. This classic 1979 recording from Tokyo's Budokan Theatre sounded tremendously 'raw' and resonant, with full-bodied energy and pulsating dynamics that made the musical event wholly engaging. With the lights turned down and the gain turned up, the RCM helped my system depict the cohesive performance of the band in a most explicit fashion.

### THE REAL WORLD

A side-by-side comparison proved in an instant that the Sensor Prelude comfortably outperforms more 'real world' RIAA phono amplifiers such as the Graham Slee Fanfare, a benchmark at its £200-ish price. This RCM is in a class above such budget esoterica, sounding assured and dynamic with an extremely quiet background. Listening to John Martyn's plaintive 'Angeline' [*Piece by Piece*, Island ILPS 9807] soon raised a lump in the throat, Martyn's distinctive vocal sounding as evocative as ever. The arrangement's crafted percussion,

together with extensive electronic processing, was laid gloriously bare. The RCM allows you to hear into recordings in microscopic fashion, to analyse the recording engineers' art. There's no glossing over of studio processing: you'll hear everything, warts 'n' all.

When a turntable, arm and cartridge are harmoniously matched, and an LP's groove is immaculately preserved, there is treasure in the vinyl that can raise the hairs at the back of the neck – from high fidelity recordings, that is. An audiophile-quality phono amplifier is an essential part of the replay chain as well, and RCM Audio's Sensor Prelude is without doubt an audiophile performer.

Certainly it is unlikely to be a weak link in the majority of audiophiles' systems. Given its very low background noise, tonally even sound and very good dynamics, RCM's Sensor Prelude can be filed in the 'luxurious' category for sure. ☺

### HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

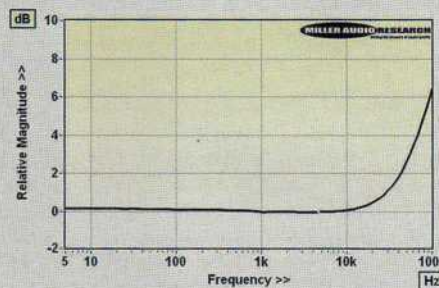
RCM's Sensor Prelude has adequate flexibility to assure a really good match in your system, whatever cartridge you might own today or in the future. While the price is undeniably high, if you're passionate about vinyl and striving for top quality replay this thoughtfully designed phono amplifier can be considered a sensible long term investment. Its refined sound will undoubtedly provide many years of listening pleasure.

Sound Quality: 80%

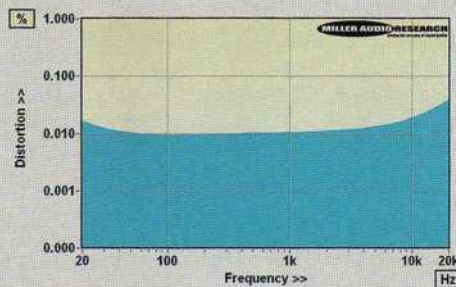


Flexibility is at the heart of the Prelude with not only a choice of seven gain ranges but also both single-ended or balanced inputs and outputs. The exact gain depends on how you 'wire-up' the unit – I used unbalanced RCA inputs and balanced XLR outputs and measured +55.6dB at the notional 5mV sensitivity setting through to +79.9dB at the highest 0.3mV setting. This represents the same range, if not the same values, as the '52-76dB' gain specified in RCM's literature. Either way, it's sufficient to cope with the full gamut of high output MMs to low-ish output MCs despite not having an especially generous 32mV input overload margin (re. 1% THD at 1kHz).

The RIAA corrected response is just within RCM's ±0.3dB specification up to 20kHz but rises thereafter reaching +6.5dB at 100kHz where, of course, there's no useful cartridge output. The Audia Flight [*HFN*, Aug '09] and PS Audio GCPH [*HFN*, May '07] both have far flatter responses and, in the case of the former at least, very low distortion but the 0.01-0.04% recorded for this Prelude over 20Hz-20kHz is perfectly acceptable. In practice, most MCs will be operating at distortion levels 10x higher than this, as our recent reviews have illustrated. The 77dB A-wtd S/N ratio is equally useable and the 58-71dB channel separation (20Hz-20kHz) also comfortably outside the realm of any MM/MC cartridges. Finally, the beefy 10V+ balanced output will drive all likely partnering preamps. Readers are invited to view a QC Suite test report for RCM Audio's Sensor Prelude MM/MC phono amp (including an evaluation of all seven gain settings) by navigating to [www.hifinews.co.uk](http://www.hifinews.co.uk) and clicking on the red 'Download' button. PM



**ABOVE:** RIAA corrected frequency response from 5Hz-100kHz (5mV sensitivity, 47kohm loading)



**ABOVE:** Distortion versus frequency (5mV sensitivity, 47kohm loading), balanced output at 1V

### HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Input loading (MM/MC)	47kohm/150pF / 20-1000ohm
Input sensitivity (re. 0dBV)	1.66mV (5mV input setting)
Input overload	32mV (5mV input setting)
Maximum output (re. 1% THD)	>10V (balanced output)
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 5mV in)	77.3dB
Frequency response (20Hz-20kHz)	+0.14dB to +0.45dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, re. 0dBV)	0.0095-0.039%
Power consumption	4W
Dimensions (WHD)	214x75x214mm