

MUSES 72320 – Electronic Attenuator

Introduction

Everything started about two weeks ago time when I first received a fully tested set of boards with MUSES-chips for balanced use from diyaudio-member spiri.

I was a little curious to try this volume control but not really in any rush. As many people might already know this about me, I am an absolute audio purist; I favor high quality discrete solutions over integrated devices.

Since I have seen this precious little device used on Pass Labs latest statement preamplifier and read several rave reviews about the incredible performance of this preamp, I thought I should give it a serious run.

The test involved the best discrete solutions: DACT stepped volume and Elma attenuator with discrete audio PRP resistors. Only MUSES-section of spiri's board was used, therefore I bypassed the relays part to make things equal.

Test Setup

Test set up was run on a dedicated acoustically treated room, with a separate adjacent room where I allocated Turntable with preamplifiers for minimum vibration interference. Associated gears: VPI Classic 3 with 300RPM motor, ZYX 4D-X, Terminator T3-Pro Carbon Fiber Linear Air Bearing tonearm. Masterpiece as phono-stage and a superb very expensive custom made preamplifier. At the power section there is Pass Labs X250 (soon to be replaced with XA200.5) and for speakers B&W 800Signature. Signal Cables are MIT Oracle V1.2 Pro, MIT Magnum M1 for Phono cable and MIT Magnum M1.3 Bi-wire for speakers. Power Chords are MIT Magnum AC1 and 2. Support for TT is Solid Steel Wall mount shelf and Music Tool Isoshelf for the electronics. Tonearm wiring is Nordost Valhalla and connectors are all high-end Furutech; internal wiring for the electronics is premium custom V-Caps hook up copper uncrystal wire.



DACT vs. ELMA with PRPs:

To not take up too much time on this subject, not too fun but, there will be plenty to read on the next session, I can reveal right away that, with my surprise, the DACT performed slightly better than the discrete version.

Adjusting volume was smoother and more flawless through the DACT though the contacts on the deck make direct contact with the board allowing for a very easy operation.

Sound through DACT was a bit smoother and more refined. I also had the impression that, the dynamic increased a tad and so did the frequency extension.

Overall, it was easier to perceive and retrieve the smaller details and music flowed easier than with the Elma and PRP while sound was overall more transparent.

DACT vs. MUSES:

After having ruled out the first winner, it was time to go to the finals: DACT vs. MUSES!!

I took my soldering gun out and installed the new MUSES on the preamp. Installation was pretty and easy as the documentation provided was fairly clear and helpful.

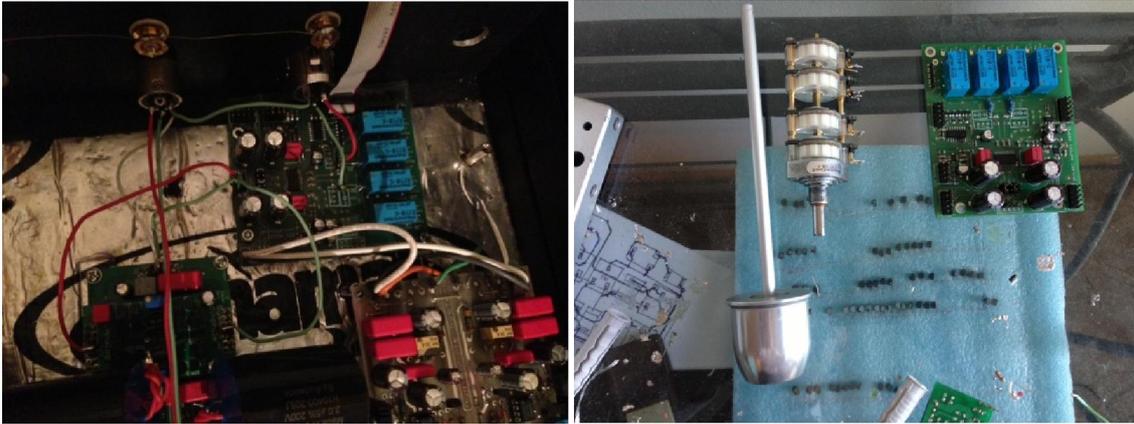
When I put everything together, it was about time to fire everything up. I was pretty skeptic about it, however I tried to keep my mind as open up as possible because my main goal was to provide a fair description of this volume control to all the people who have been following this thread just like I have and I didn't want to rule it out for my application either just because I might have some pre-concepts against this integrated/ modern solution.

First disc I put on was Sara K, a very well known audiophile recording which usually sounds pretty opened and defined if your system chain possesses the right resolution. The MUSES just rendered it pretty flat. Image was a bit blurry and transients seemed to have turned on the speed limit. This performance was confirming my initial skepticism and I was sure at that point, I had it figured out all along. I let a couple of more songs

from that album play and then I decided to change recording and put on a beautiful live performance by Diana Krall Live in Paris 45 RPM and started from the beginning of the vinyl. First track same thing, sound was still a bit lifeless, just not as good as with the DACT.

I decided to hang on it for the evening at least, just because it took me some good effort to replace the DACT and didn't want to reverse it right away.

I was deeply interested in the reading of the new edition of Stereophile, while my ears started detecting a very intelligible sound in the background. Everything was improving by the minute, opening up, producing at that point something very promising and worth some extra listening time. So at that point my plan of replacing the MUSES with the switch had just changed!



Since I never really noticed a huge, huge difference from equipment cold to fully warm prior to this test, this was a little surprising to me. System used to sound pretty good from the beginning, obviously with some improvements with warm up, but nothing drastic.

At that point I decided to leave everything powered up and to come back one hour later to listen to it once everything had fully reached the ideal boiling temperature and see if my suspicions were founded.

With my big surprise sound had immensely changed. It had opened up and was full of details and retrieval information almost unheard of before.

Highs were more extended and at the same time more relaxed. Speakers disappeared due to a wider and more see-through image.

That evening I kept putting different vinyl and had a consistent result across the various genres. Following listening sessions have been all conducted with properly warm up time.

Notes I have developed over the two following intense listening weeks were more than positive.

Voices are more defined with more colors. Sound in general seems to possess one more step of refinement. Cymbals are more realistic and acoustic bass more powerful and articulate. As a matter of fact, I always put the torture disc for bass that I reserved for testing the best gears: Ray Brown Solar Energy. This is such an engaging vinyl to reproduce. The speed of the bass, the minuscule details of the arc of Ray Brown against the lower strings of his double bass, the breathing and grunting in the background made by the musicians. I found everything to be clearer, just as finally clouds have gone, allowing for a perfect vision of all these little, but important, details. The energy on the bass was very remarkable let alone the speed.

What struck me the most was the soundstage proposed, where now delimitation is clearly lined up with the speakers and goes behind my back wall while with DACT it would be a bit flatter and the perspective would be thrown in front of you more than properly placing all the individuals in the back of your room. I can clearly perceive more 3D cues. There is increased sense of space between instruments and an overall good sense of black within the soundstage.

Summing Up:

True!! The MUSES is that much better!! I kept thinking that this makes no sense: an integrated, fairly complicated solution couldn't perform better than the simple and most login high quality attenuator.

I had to think that lots of efforts must have been put in by the designer to create a device that could fulfill the task of volume control as good as possible!

So I found the MUSES to be the most neutral, natural and immediate sounding solution I tried so far. This would also explain why the XP-30 got such a great review. I discovered how important and underestimated on many designs the volume control is. Its impact on the sound was greater than what I would have ever thought.



Last, talking about interface of volume control, it is a pure treat! The large amount of steps makes easy to set the perfect volume. No pops or other noise issue while adjusting the volume, it is just perfect. Board is built with very good quality parts and layout design is extremely organized. This obviously contributes to the final result.

Regulator chosen for the MUSES are very effective and quiet and the nice sense of quietness I detect with this volume compared to the DACT is surely benefited from the excellent choice.

At the end of the day, in my vocabulary sound comes first in front of easy to use. Well then, this MUSES gets both of this two worlds, it gives you maximum flexibility and an amazing sound.

Tonight we elected a winner and for me the MUSES is a 10+!!