

Edge Reference Preamplifier

By Alan Sircom

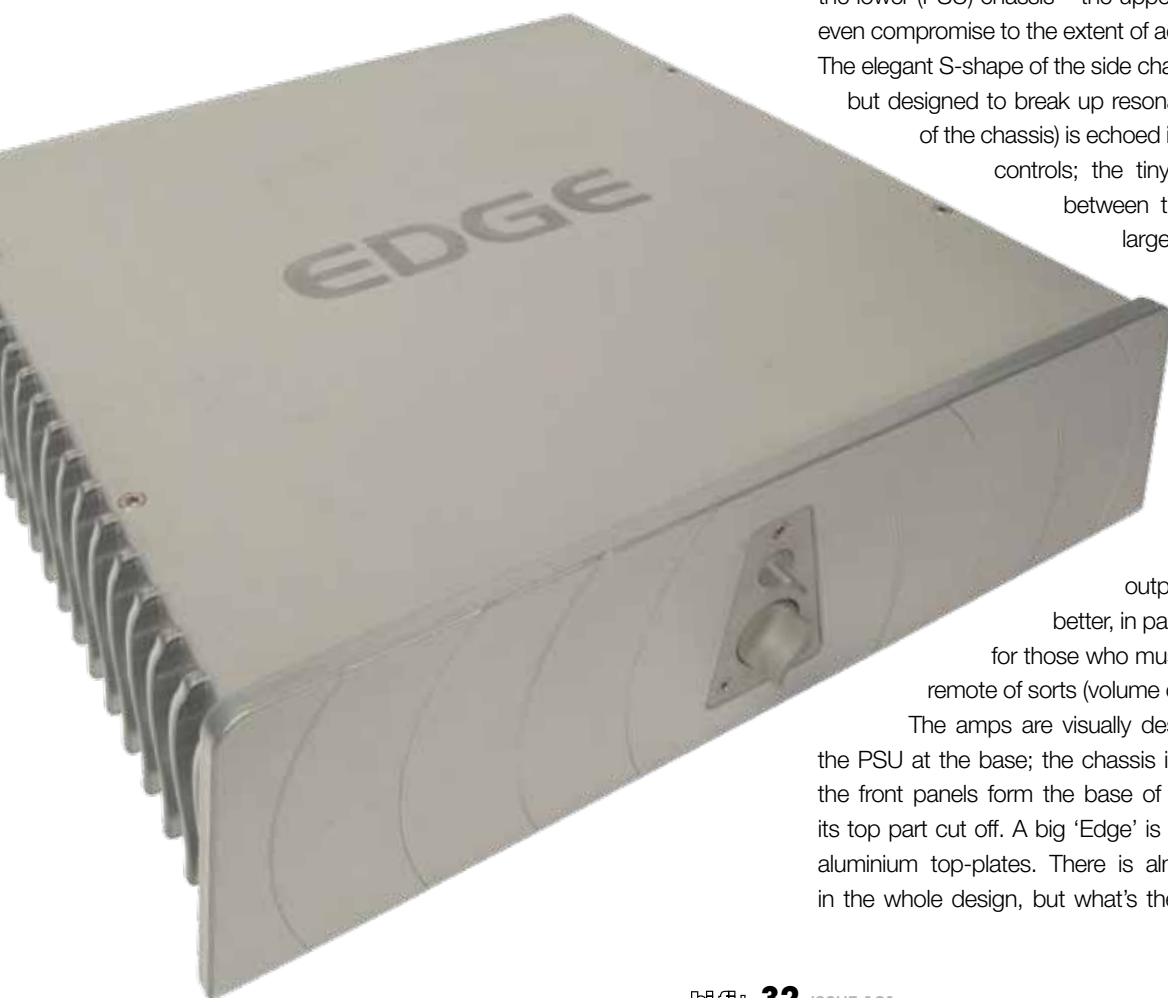
The Edge Reference is a line preamplifier, rarer than hen's teeth that appear on a blue moon to the seventh son of a seventh son (as far as I can tell, there are just four of these things in circulation). It has the kind of control surfaces ergonomists lie awake at night in a flop sweat over. It's a truly dual mono design powered by a separate power supply box that takes the better part of a week to come to life. It needs a 20A mains lead, has just four inputs and if you put even the slightest foot wrong in your system, it will expose the flaw for all to see, and laugh at you for being such a philistine. It takes minimalism to the next level – even balance control is a step too far. And it costs as much as a top-spec Porsche Cayman.

So, why review it? Because it's perhaps the best preamp you'll never hear.

There's not much information on tap, though. An engineer's engineering company, Edge is notorious for having next to no information to hand about its products, and the Reference raises that game to the n^{th} degree. What can be garnered is through visual inspection alone. The power supplies within the lower case each have their own shielded mil-spec toroidal transformer and aside from a shared single board for the PSU, there's no connections between left and right channel until you get to the volume control and source selector. Even the latter control talks back to relays on both channels. The chassis is heavy and well made, and the front panel is heavily lacquered grey aluminium.

The word that appeared most on my notes was 'uncompromising' and it applies to the design as much as anything. The power button is a green-glowing touch switch on the lower (PSU) chassis – the upper audio circuits box doesn't even compromise to the extent of adding a LED in its own right. The elegant S-shape of the side channels (not heatsinks per se, but designed to break up resonance modes along the side of the chassis) is echoed in these two lone front panel controls; the tiny one at the top switches between the four sources, while the larger one controls the motorised volume control, and when handles feels and sounds like you are trying to wade through something squishy. The amp has XLRs for three inputs and single-ended phonos for all four, with one XLR and single-ended output; I felt single-ended was better, in part because XLR is only there for those who must use XLR. Finally, there's a remote of sorts (volume only).

The amps are visually designed to be stacked, with the PSU at the base; the chassis itself is identically sized, but the front panels form the base of an equilateral triangle, with its top part cut off. A big 'Edge' is laser-etched into both thick aluminium top-plates. There is almost no extraneous wiring in the whole design, but what's there is of the highest grade;





the two-inch wires from phono socket to circuit board are all Kimber KCAG, and – although this is never even spoken of in discussions about the Reference – it's that attention to detail on the inside that shines through on the outside.

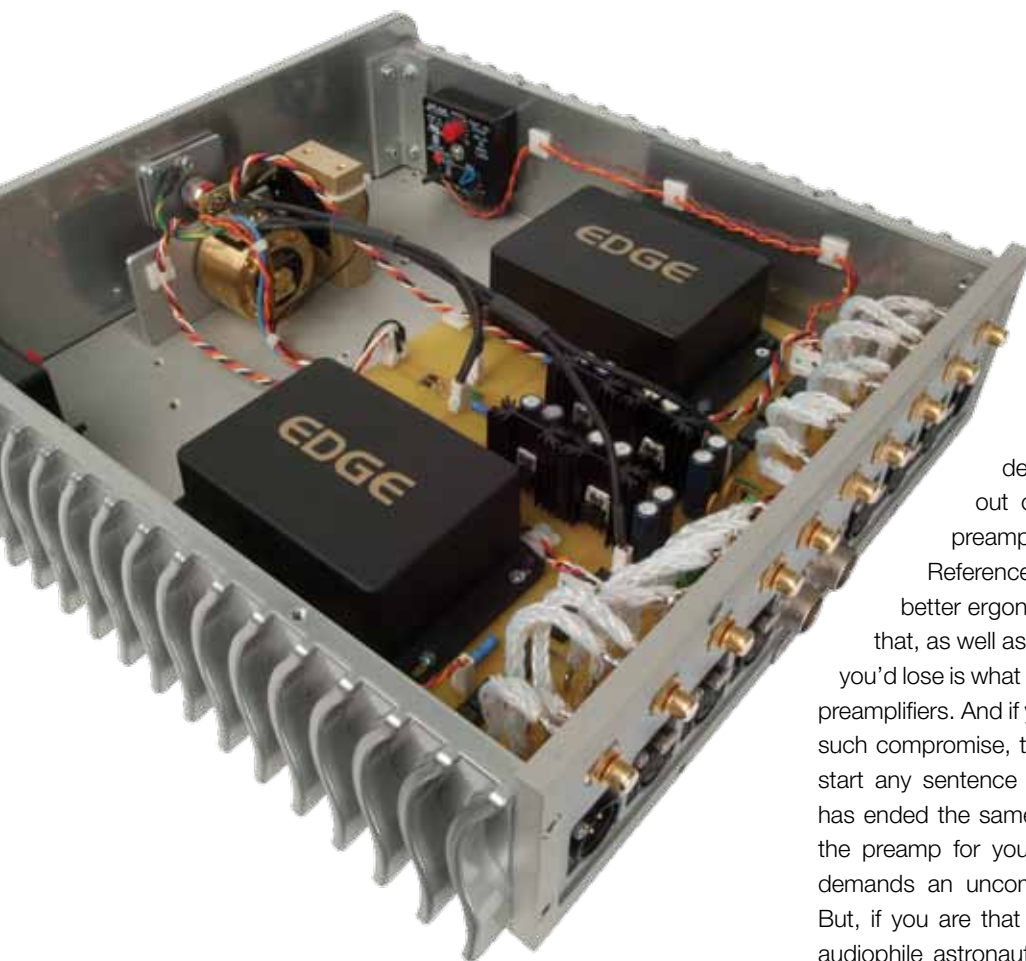
Opening the cases revealed a fine set of large, discrete component circuit boards that were impressively laid out, but if you are looking for a densely-populated, multi-layer platform of advanced preamplifier technology, it isn't here. That will likely dissuade those who buy their preamps based on technological sophistication, or even complexity of circuit, but the good news here is this is the kind of preamp that would never prove hard to service!

When listening to this, the word 'uncompromising' springs up again and again. There's no romance to this sound, but it's not cold; in fact, it asks the big question of whether you need or want romance in an audio presentation. Instead it's just remarkably accurate and honest and shows just how few products really live up to those words in their deepest senses. It's this deviation from the accurate path that leads to editorialising in musical tastes, because when you got all the audio ducks in a row, that just went away. There's a little-deployed school of audio reviewing that suggest the better a product is at identifying the difference between recordings, rather than the individual recording itself. The Edge Reference is one of those rare products that's good at both... and yet doesn't kill off the music in the process. What

it won't do musically is make a silk purse out of a sow's ear, but it will present the recording without holding anything back. That creates the paradox of listening to more hi-fi in a lo-fi recording, but this does work universally.

This makes pulling out musical examples functionally pointless. It will portray them as they are fed to it, with no significant changes to the presentation, the soundstage, the tonality, the timbre or frequency response. If you are up for the challenge of that honesty, the rewards are musically far-reaching, because you'll discover this doesn't force you to cherry-pick your music. That's an occasionally unnerving experience, as you discover what you thought were good reviews have hitherto-unheard weaknesses and flaws, but – unless you have a recording that's almost all overdub – you will find the insight this brings to be more fruitful than hiding it. OK, so not everyone is going to live the 'knowledge is power' lifestyle, and some might prefer not to have those insights into the music and the system laid bare. But, once again... uncompromising. This demands an uncompromising stance from you as listener, and especially you as system builder.

The big mistake in high-end is the 'throw money at it' solution. Spending your way out of a crisis can work, but there are no guarantees, and when faced with something as uncompromising as the Edge Reference, the term 'no guarantees' is a dead-cert disaster waiting to happen. It doesn't need to be expensive, but it definitely needs to be good. It's this ►



more like music and less like recorded music. You take it out – back comes the artificiality. What you heard as sounding rich and warm before now becomes arch and coloured.

The thing with uncompromising designs like this one is the 99% rule flies out of the window. Yes, you could build a preamplifier that gets close to what the Edge Reference can do for a fraction of the price, with better ergonomics and so on. In fact, Edge does just that, as well as many, many rivals. But in so doing, what you'd lose is what separates the Edge Reference from other preamplifiers. And if you are the kind of person who entertains such compromise, the kind of person who's been known to start any sentence about audio with the word "Well..." or has ended the same with "...that'll do", this is probably not the preamp for you. As I said, uncompromising, and that demands an uncompromising approach from the listener. But, if you are that rare type who has The Right Stuff, the audiophile astronaut for whom the word 'uncompromising' translates to 'sufficiently good enough' and are prepared to live your audio life by that epithet, the Edge isn't just a highly recommended component, it's perhaps the only preamp that will meet your requirements. +

► preamp that showed just what the HRT HD digital converter was capable of, it explained why there is some justification for hi-res files after all and it showed just why the Crystal Absolute Dream is more than just bling. It also showed why you'd choose Crystal over Cardas, where the difference isn't as clear cut in other systems; it showed precisely where HRT scores over the Musical Fidelity M1 (I've been using this preamp for some time) and even some more expensive models like the Wadia 121 in some key ways. It even shows perhaps why the '24' part is more important than the '96' or '192' part in a higher resolution recording. It's uncanny, and so is its speed of delivery.

The closest parallel to this is a passive preamplifier. Really good passives tend to solve some of the signal loss, the ability to start and stop properly, and lack of musical 'vibrancy' issues endemic to passive potentiometers, but with even the best of them, there's the gain issue. The Edge brings that naturalness, speed and freedom from any kind of electronic 'hash' you get from passive, but doesn't limit gain or that sense of excitement you get from active stages.

We sometimes call on nuanced superlatives in reviewing; that enormous change that takes weeks to make its presence felt isn't perhaps as enormous as first believed. If it takes so long to become apparent, perhaps it's more subtle than conveyed in print. This is not one of those changes. Put the Reference preamp in the system – you hear the music sound

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Two chassis line preamplifier

Four inputs: One single-ended only, three balanced and single-ended

One balanced and single ended output

Front panel controls – source selection, volume control, power on/off (on PSU)

Available in silver only

Price: £49,000

Manufactured by: Edge Electronics

URL: www.edgeamps.com

Distributed by: Epicurean Audio

URL: www.epicureanaudio.com

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