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Review by Richard Birke

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Model:	SLP 05
Category:	Preamplifier (Tube)
Retail Price:	\$7500.00
Description:	Pure Balanced Preamplifier

REVIEW: CARY SLP 05

Let's start with the punch line: The Cary SLP 05 is the single best equipment purchase I have ever made. It is wonderful sounding, convenient to use, beautiful to look at and built like a tank (two tanks, actually – separate power supply).

Now we can rewind and go through this step by step.

Associated equipment:

- Rowland 201 monoblocs
- Sony 777 modified to Platinum Standard by Modwright
- Linn LP-12 decked out to the max
- Tom Evans Groove phono stage
- Aerial 9 speakers (in gorgeous rosewood, with Aerial stands)
- REL Storm III (rarely used, but nice when needed)
- Shunyata Hydra Power conditioner
- Kubala-Sosna Emotion IC's everywhere & PC's for Pre/Phono/CD digital section
- JPS Power+ PC's for amps and Digital+ for cd power section
- Grand Prix Monaco Modular equipment rack
- Mana stand for the turntable

All this exists in a specially built dedicated room 15x26x7.5 with dedicated hospital grade circuits, etc.

Prior Preamps Recently Owned (*in reverse chronological order*)

- Aesthetix Calypso with NOS Mullard/AmpereX/Telefunken (and other) tubes
- Rogue 99 Magnum
- Melos SHA-Gold
- Sonic Frontiers SFL-1

I love my stereo and I have since I was 13 (32 years ago). I've had many, many pieces of equipment, but in the last few years I have mostly wanted to have a complete, finished stereo system that could handle anything competently.

When I bought my Calypso, I thought I was done. I had gone to the Rowland amps after a long affair with Bryston, and the Rowlands perform at their best when fed by balanced preamps. When my Rowland dealer recommended the Calypso, I took his

advice seriously and later bought one. The Calypso is a great unit, no doubt, but in my opinion, it runs the 12AX-7's a bit too hard, and the result is noise. Yes, the noise goes away when music is on, but it's still there. Musical, well-built, etc.....I tried to love the Calypso, but after more than a year of tube rolling and tube rush, I was tired of trying.

I called Kevin Deal at Upscale as he had supplied me many of the NOS tubes I rolled into the Calypso, and I mentioned to him that I had noticed the SLP 05 in one of his ads. He couldn't say enough about the Cary line, the Cary people, and this preamp in particular. So instead of rolling tubes, I rolled preamps. It was a big financial leap at a time when I thought I was finished making big leaps, but I suppose you should be careful of the questions you ask your hifi dealer. Without being talked into it, I was talked into it.

Wow. No loss of the musicality that I loved about the Aesthetix, but instead of tube rush there was dead silence. Dead. Silence.

But not with the phono stage, right? Jacked up the turntable, and again, dead silence. High volumes, spaces between notes? Dead silent.

Okay...enough with the silence. How did it sound when it wasn't being silent?

Some test recordings and associated ruminations:

Sinead O'Connor – Universal Mother – All Apologies – killer recording with ambience like few other recordings. I thought my listening room had lost its walls. The room went from fifteen feet wide to hundreds of feet wide, from 26 feet deep to cathedral depth.

Thelonious Monk and John Coltrane – eponymous LP – thought I would listen to Well You Needn't to see how the pre did with older piano and sax recordings. Listened to all four sides. Couldn't believe the recording was 40+ years old. Timbres were natural, piano was one continuous instrument (despite 3-way speakers), and the 7-9 players (different bands on different cuts) never sounded congested.

Giant Sand – Cover Story, Stone of Enchantment, All Over the Map – Giant Sand just played here in Portland, and I played a lot of their music on LP and CD before and after the show. They played an excellent show at a superb sounding venue. But my listening room with the Cary is still better. Scratchy hard nasty passages were appropriately abrasive without making my ears bleed and soft solo cynical songs were intimate without disappearing.

Various Operatic Overtures – just went to the Portland Opera to see Macbeth – pretty good show, not the PO's best offering ever, but the soundstage in my room was not much smaller than the soundstage at Keller Auditorium. However, thanks to the Cary, my room was much quieter. And no one was coughing or eating.

Vicente Amigo – various flamenco albums – this guy has won many awards for his flamenco playing, and his albums are closely miked. The Cary allowed me to peek deep into his world with none of the clinical glare that I have experienced with some friends' high priced solid state preamps.

Johnny Cash – mostly American Recordings stuff but some older pieces as well – did I already say “close miked”? These are terrific recordings and Cash leaves a lot of space around his words and carefully chosen picking. This is one of those places where tube rush can be most disconcerting. Not any more!

Janos Starker – Bach Concertos – these even got my wife to admit that the new preamp was worth every penny. Same deal as the Monk – thought we were going to listen to one or two pieces – instead played the whole set of LP’s from start to finish.

Procol Harum – Whiter Shade of Pale – what a great song and what a crappy recording! While the Cary didn’t cover up the recording’s sonic foibles, it didn’t emphasize them either. The song was still more prominent than the gear. I’ve heard this beloved chestnut sound unbearable (like on an all solid state system in my living room) and I’ve heard it sound “tubey” – that is, veiled, thick, fun but dark. These same comments apply to several Doors cd’s and albums.

What else? Well...I used to DJ house music, so I put the system through its paces with electronica (Massive Attack, Leftfield) chillout (St Etienne, Kid Loco, Café del Mar) and more. I play jazz piano and sax and I put the Cary through every Verve and Pablo LP I own (if you can find the Verve Dizzy Gillespie/Stan Getz lp with Siboney on it, buy it!). I love rock (new and old) and classical (but not modern classical) and opera (sucker for Verdi) and world (the whole world, especially remixed, thank you Talvin Singh) and reggae (especially dub and rocksteady) and just about everything else (not much pure Nashville country, but I like blue and newgrass – Allison Krause...), and I’ve been playing about 15 hours per week for the 6 weeks since I got the unit. When the kids are asleep, the volume is moderate (the greatness of a dedicated room – even at midnight I can play) and when I have a day off and they are out, the volume is immoderate. I’ve been ushering friends through, all invited to bring and play their favorite piece. Everything has been wonderful and the consensus is that my rig has never sounded nearly this good. My best listening friend remarked that he hears everything he wants and nothing he doesn’t – i.e., no noise.

The Cary is detailed without being etched. It’s smooth without being pudgy, overly warm or “romantic.”

The volume control is a motorized system – like my Rogue and Melos, but the steps are better on the Cary – I can tune it easily from my chair without over or undershooting.

And it has a KILLER headphone jack – the first truly wonderful one I’ve encountered since the Melos. I have Sennheiser and Grado phones and both worked perfectly. (although I have to confess a slight preference generally for Grado phones, despite the universal hoo-ha over the Sennheisers. Yes the 600’s and the 650’s are nice, but I still like the dynamics of the Grado’s.)

The units are, as I said, built very well, easy to install, and lovely to look at (8 tubes sticking out the top – 2 large meters glowing sweetly blue in the dim of the music room). Autobiasing is a nice plus. I am willing to tweak but I’d rather listen than tinker.

The tubes are eight 6SN7's and something else hidden in the power supply (tube rectified power supply). In this day and age where a Siemens CCA can fetch a price north of \$300, I'm grateful to own a piece of gear with easily supplied tubes. The Chinese stock tubes sound great and I have little inclination to experiment. Why mess around with gear when I'm happy listening to the stereo as is?

I've made many purchases that made me very happy. Pretty much everything I've owned has given me a lot of pleasure. But nothing has done for my system what the SLP 05 has. It's finally made me stop and listen to the music, and that, for me, is what this obsessive hobby is all about.

I can't say enough good things about Cary the company – I had a question about the headphone stage (I had a switch in the wrong setting and the phones were not as dynamic as I'd expected) and they were prompt, polite and very enthusiastic about the preamp. The gentleman with whom I spoke told me that the pre was the best they've ever built and he was clearly and justifiably proud. Once I switched the switch, the phones were superb. But the point here is that the Cary folks were jazzed about the preamp and happy to hear that I was happy.

Thanks to Cary for making this unit.
And thanks to Kevin Deal for bringing it into my world.

Now, back to the music!

Product Weakness: Can't get anything else done -- too busy listening

Product Strengths: Musicality, low noise floor, convenient, great phone jack, easy to find tubes

Associated Equipment for this Review:

Amplifier:	Rowland 201 monos
Preamplifier (or None if Integrated):	none
Sources (CDP/Turntable):	LP12/Modded 777
Speakers:	Aerial 9
Cables/Interconnects:	Kubala Emotion
Music Used (Genre/Selections):	see review
Room Size (LxWxH):	26 x 15 x 7.5
Room Comments/Treatments:	heavily designed
Time Period/Length of Audition:	6 weeks
Other (Power Conditioner etc.):	Hydra
Type of Audition/Review:	Product Owner