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AAVIK R-288

Aavik R-288

DANISH PERFECTION

By Knuth Zensen. Photography: Maximilian Merk



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Fresh ideas from Audio Group Denmark demonstrate that even well-trodden territory such as phono preamplification can still generate innovation. The R-288, the middle model in the new 88 series, performs at such a high level that it's difficult to imagine how it could possibly get better.



– Audio Group Denmark (AGD) is one of the busiest high-end audio companies, particularly regarding materials science and the development of new circuit topologies. The manufacturer pays special attention to resonance characteristics, which is crucial in loudspeaker enclosures. Phono preamps are especially susceptible, because they handle tiny currents and voltages. But function comes after form. Ideally, technology and design conjoin into a coherent whole. Thus, AGD has found the key to its success in the inspired collaboration between Michael Børresen, its technical director, and designer Flemming Erik Rasmussen, founder of Gryphon Audio.

The R-288 comes in a sturdy flight case with a custom-cut foam insert. I was surprised by its substantial weight of 21 kilograms, something expected of an integrated amplifier. The chassis is also generously sized for a phono stage. Michael Børresen explained that everyone involved aspired to give every component in the series the same footprint, just like with their predecessors. Therefore, you can stack them – especially since Aavik devices emit very little heat, while resonance control feet from Ansuz (available as an option for the R-288) make this setup even more compelling.
The chassis' shielding core consists of three-millimeter-thick copper plates, which form the innermost layer of the bottom and top panels. The technical director explained that he avoids placing aluminum close to the electronics because of its paramagnetic properties. Copper, he added, also has more favorable resonance characteristics. The middle layer is a wood laminate, and the outer layer is a matte-silver-coated stainless-steel sheet. All together, they form a constrained-layer construction designed to reduce resonance. Two solid aluminum blocks form the sides of the phono stage. These have a concave profile and are fitted with cooling fins that are intended primarily to keep the look consistent with the other Aavik components. Furthermore,



The large display is easy to read even from a distance. It is also dimmable and can be set to switch off after a selected interval. The touchscreen interface uses only a few controls and is intuitive to operate. The remote makes things even more convenient.

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heat dissipation is secondary in a phono stage. Their stiffness and mass help quiet the chassis. The R-288 rests on four large, black-coated stainless-steel discs, which can be supplemented with Ansuz Darkz equipment feet for further optimization. Michael Børresen pointed out that these can deliver a substantial improvement in performance. Lastly, the front panel is dominated by a touchscreen protected by a sleek bezel. The chassis panels extend around the rear, and so the sandwich construction is clear to see.

Every connection is located on the rear panel: inputs for MC and optical (DS) cartridges, as well as the output, and all fitted with high-quality RCA jacks. The picture is completed by a combined power-switch, fuse, and AC inlet assembly, an RS232 interface, and trigger jacks (cables included).. The optical input carries a warning that it must be used only with optical cartridges: the supply current required by DS systems would not be kind to the hair-thin coil wires in an MC cartridge. Moreover, the generous spacing between the jacks allows even oversized connectors to fit. The longer I spent with the R-288, the more I realized the professionalism behind its design philosophy. Nothing is arbitrary. Design elements that initially appear purely decorative are revealed to reflect the idea that an object's function should be legible in its outward form. The copper strips are a prime example: they color the otherwise simple chassis shape with a distinctive touch – but they are far from a cosmetic gimmick. They reveal the elaborate electronics shielding. The front panel, joined to the main body by cleverly arranged seams, and the carefully considered placement of the chassis fasteners, both bear Flemming Erik Rasmussen's unmistakable signature. The phono stage even passes the final design test – the view from underneath – with flying colors. There are no scattered screw heads, slots, or other blemishes. This should go without saying: but the fit and finish are astonishing even ▸

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under a magnifying glass. This is uncompromising realization of the highest quality. You may wonder why I devote so much attention to "appearances," but in my view, once you reach a certain price level, ticking every box becomes mandatory.

The phono preamp has one MC input and one optoelectronic input. Both can be connected simultaneously. Moving-coil signals are amplified by either 58 or 64 dB. Input impedance can be set in sensible increments from 50 ohms to 10 kilohms. Despite what the RCA inputs might suggest, amplification is fully balanced. Signals from a DS cartridge receive 26 dB of gain. Since these cartridges reproduce frequencies down to nearly zero hertz, a subsonic filter is permanently engaged. Cutoff frequencies of 30 or 50 Hz are available. The high-frequency range can be limited, if needed, using cutoff frequencies of 11, 16, or 35 kHz. All filters are first-order (–6 dB/octave), and RIAA equalization is passive. As with all Aavik components, the R-288 is powered by a switching power supply. Appropriate measures have been taken to address any potential issues associated with these.

Aavik's proprietary passive and active Tesla coils, analog dither circuits, and "Anti-Aerial Resonance Coil" technology – which protects the internal wiring against interference – are present and active in considerable numbers. All these assemblies help shield the cartridges' tiny signals from external disturbances. As the company's white papers put it: "We believe that the lower the internally generated noise of a component and the less external interference it receives, the greater its ability to resolve musical information." This is proven in the R-288's exceptionally quiet operation. The output stage uses carefully selected op-amps.

I searched in vain for an MM input. Michael Børresen explained that, in his view, vinyl listeners shopping at this price and quality level are unlikely to use an MM cartridge very often. He may well be right, although I would have loved to hear what the phono stage could have coaxed from my beloved MI cartridge.

After thoroughly investigating DS cartridges,



The constrained-layer construction and mix of materials are also evident: solid aluminum side panels on the outside, copper plates providing the inner shielding, and a stainless-steel top plate. Joining the perfectly positioned fasteners are stainless-steel bases ready to accept Darkz equipment feet. Thus, components in the X88 series can be stacked with ease.

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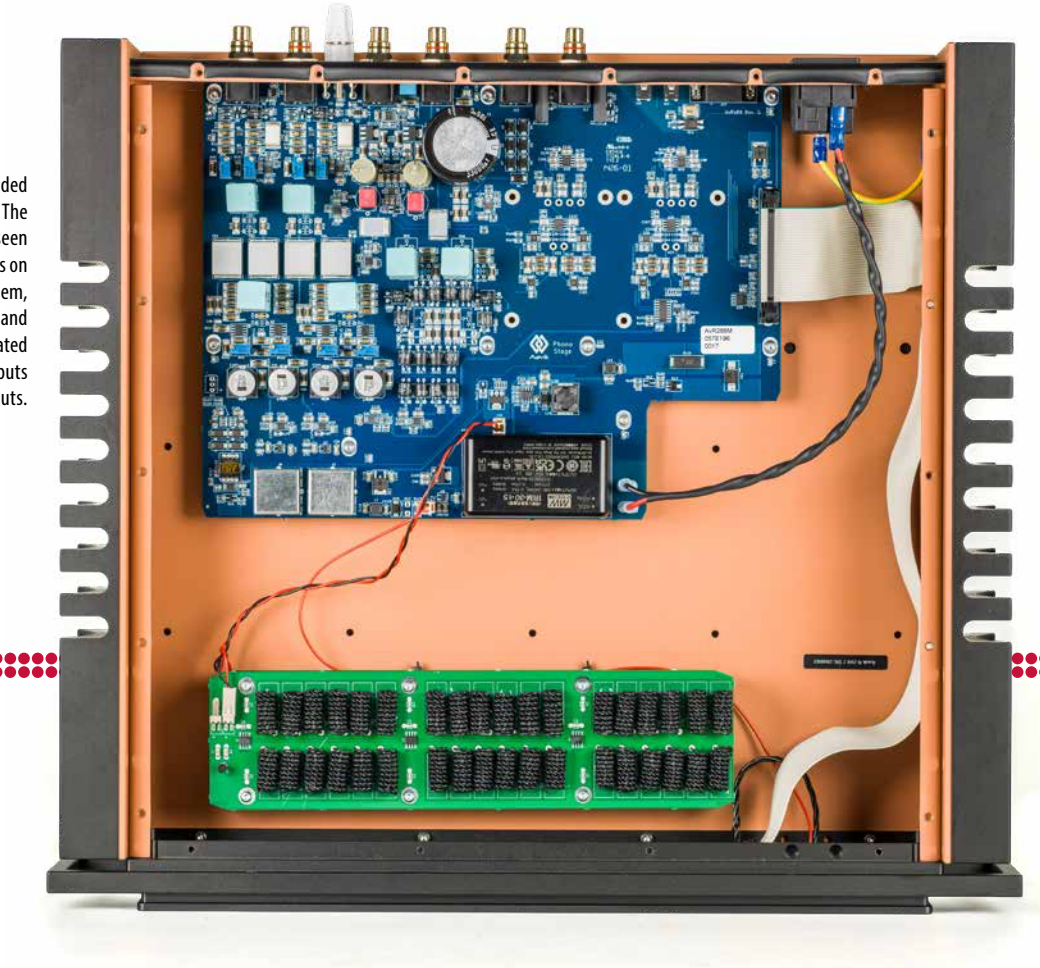
the developers recognized the considerable potential of this technology, resulting in the decision to fit the phono stage with a dedicated gain stage.

Setting up and running the R-288 was remarkably easy. My two Zavfino Goldrush cables connected the 12.9 and 9.5 TW tonearms to the MC and optoelectronic RCA inputs. I connected the ground wires, plugged in the power cord – and that was it. Configuration through the touchscreen – or the very handy remote – was equally clear. The red dot-matrix display is easy to read even from a considerable distance, so all settings can be adjusted from the listening position. The display is dimmable and can be set to switch off after a chosen interval. When I brought the R-288 out of standby, a bar of red LEDs indicated the progress toward operational readiness. This takes approximately 25 seconds. The display identifies the selected input as "Movingcoil" or "DS Optical" and indicates whether the signal is inverted. Michael Børresen explained that, from time to time, a record – or individual tracks on it – is cut with inverted polarity. Inverting the signal in the phono stage can correct the problem. The difference is audible. In the first phase of testing, the signals came from the Skyanalog REF MkII and Ortofon MC X40 MC cartridges (both loaded at 200 ohms, with 58 dB of gain). For the second phase, I mounted the DS-003 optoelectric cartridge – with the 30 Hz and 35 kHz filters selected – on the TW 9.5 tonearm. It features a fine-line diamond on an aluminum cantilever. What I heard – and, crucially, what I didn't hear – was impressive. I have never before hosted a phono stage that operated with so little background noise. Even the lead-in and runout grooves were quieter than usual. I have to say: the phono stage's performance won me over from the first notes. This might sound like a description of almost any outstanding phono preamp: its completely untethered, open, three-dimensional soundstage; the convincing scale of instruments and voices; the naturalness of its tonal colors; and its sensational gradations of dynamics, from ▸



The entire interior is shielded by solid copper plates. The array of Tesla coils can be seen below. The power supply is on the circuit board behind them, while the RIAA equalization and amplification circuitry is located in direct vicinity to the inputs and outputs.

the broadest strokes to the finest nuances. But the difference is that the R-288 renders nearly all of these qualities with more finesse than any phono stage I have tried to date. Differences between the cartridges were clearly delineated. My MC cartridges transcended their usual limitations. I was particularly surprised that even average recordings revealed a level of sound quality I had never heard before. Again and again, I discovered unknown details. One example is my used, slightly warped 1972 original of Santana's Caravanserai. Musically, I consider it one of his finest albums, but sonically it has always struck me as rather average. That is, until the Aavik R-288 entered the picture. The opening track, an introduction, begins with cicadas spread across the stereo panorama, joined by a saxophone slipping into the mix. The sax stands defined and three-dimensional in center stage. Its full-bodied tone is accompanied by subtle key and breath noises. Then, a richly recorded double bass takes over, playing with stoic determination and providing the acoustic foundation for the cautiously entering percussion instruments. Drums and individual guitar chords steadily build the intensity. The precisely organized soundstage and realistic dynamic gradations make it all sound remarkably lifelike. Finally, in classic Santana fashion, the music takes off: those unmistakable guitar riffs, Michael Shrieve's powerful, rhythmically sophisticated drumming, and organ tones that alternately wail and groove. The R-288 untangles every element without sacrificing the drive of the music. I had a thoroughly enjoyable time rediscovering this album after far too long. To find out whether a component can deliver sufficiently well-defined impact in the bass – and to do justice to my dub collection – I like to put on Linton Kwesi Johnson's Bass Culture. "Street 66" made me lean back with a grin after just a few seconds. My Audiophysic Spark speakers had transformed into a sound system with 15-inch woofers and a horn tweeter. I own a half-speed-mastered edition of Ottorino Respighi's tone poem Pines of Rome. The recording by the Minnesota Orchestra under Eiji Ōue, with its massive forces and formidable dynamic range, makes

The sandwich construction of the chassis is visible at the rear. The outer layer is stainless steel, followed by a wood-fiber composite and, on the inside, the copper plate. This assembly forms a constrained-layer structure designed to suppress resonance. The R-288 is supported by large stainless-steel discs that are ready to accommodate the optional Darkz equipment feet. The clearly laid-out connection panel is fitted with top-quality jacks.



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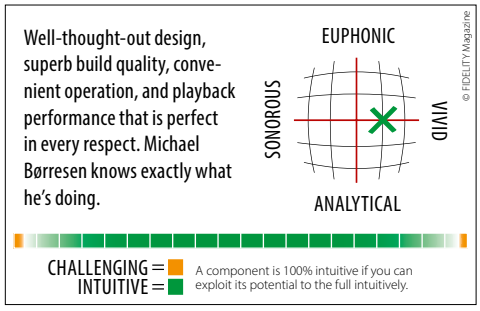
an excellent test record. The first movement, "The Pines of the Villa Borghese," sounds fresh and lively, with a tonal balance tilted toward the upper registers. The R-288 conveys it into the listening room with an appropriate sense of air. Every instrument has its own characteristic tonal color and can be easily located. The scale becomes even more imposing in the second movement, "Pines Near a Catacomb," with its mysterious atmosphere that edges toward menace. The low frequencies surge toward me from the soundstage's depths. Dynamic leaps are reproduced quickly and precisely, accounting for much of the performance's thrilling present sense. What the Aavik R-288 delivers is exactly how I imagine ideal vinyl playback should sound. Its successful synthesis of sound, functionality, and design has won me over completely, and I will be very reluctant to part with this machine. ▪



Phono preamplifier | Aavik R-288 | Concept: Phono stage for MC and optical cartridges **| MC input:** 1 x RCA (max. input: 5 mV) **| Gain (at 1 kHz):** 58 dB or 64 dB **| Input impedance:** 50 Ω to 10 kΩ **| Frequency response (20 Hz to 20 kHz):** at 58 dB +0.1/0.4 dB; at 64 dB +0.1/–1.1 dB **| Optical input:** 1 x RCA (max. input: 500 mV) **| Gain:** 26 dB **| Frequency response (20 Hz to 20 kHz):** +0.1/–0.3 dB **| Output:** 1 x RCA **| Distortion (THD at 1 kHz):** < 0.05% **| Output impedance:** 70 Ω **| Special features:** Aavik noise reduction with 72 wound Tesla coils and 144 additional resonant circuits in the PCB layout; 6 dithering circuits **| Included accessories:** Flight case, remote control (including battery), trigger connection cables, owner's manual, cotton gloves, Aavik logo sticker **| Power consumption (standby/operating):** < 1 W/< 15 W **| Dimensions (W/H/D):** 44/12/43 cm **| Weight:** 21 kg **| Warranty:** 2 years **| Price:** approximately €20,000

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