

THE 2006 BUYER'S GUIDE, PART 2 -THE LATEST IN HOME THEATER

HDTV & HiFi

HOLIDAY GIFT GUIDE

THE
OUTDOOR
CHANNEL

THE HIDDEN
HOME
THEATER

TEST CENTER:
MILLENNIUM
MCINTOSH
SAMSUNG

MCINTOSH C220 ▼



2006
BUYING GUIDE
PART 2
INCLUDES

▼
SPEAKERS
FLOORSTANDS
ON-WALL
IN-WALL

SUBWOOFERS

PROJECTION SCREENS

INTERCONNECTS
VIDEO
AUDIO

◀ SAMSUNG
HL-S5679W



▲ MITSUBISHI HC5000

December/January 2007

\$4.99US \$6.99CAN

01>



www.hdtvetc.com

DVD AND AUDIO REVIEWS: JERRY LEE LEWIS, PIRATES "DEAD MAN'S CHEST," AND MORE!

MCINTOSH'S NEW "ENTRY" LEVEL

McIntosh C220 Vacuum Tube Preamp



For almost 60 years, McIntosh Audio Laboratory has been making high-end audio components. Their first products, vacuum tube amplifiers, were revolutionary designs that helped to solve a variety of the issues inherent to tube-based designs of the day. McIntosh had not only found a way to make tube amplifiers more powerful, but also more reliable. The stage was set, and a brand was born.

Fast-forward to the year 2006, and we find that McIntosh has competently embraced the multichannel formats of today. While High-Definition and Home Theater are the current buzzwords, two-channel listening survives among audiophiles. Many argue that despite all of the advances in multichannel processing, two-channel music systems are still the most satisfying way to bring out the life in your recordings. Indeed, a significant portion of the current McIntosh line consists of two-channel components.

The C220 is the newest entry into McIntosh's stable of two-channel products. At \$3,300, this preamp is the lowest priced offering in the line. Despite this, McIntosh has endowed this product with many of the features offered in their much higher priced preamps. The question is: Has packing all

of this flexibility into a lower priced unit affected the performance?

Unique Features

A quick read of the manual supplied with the C220 reveals that this is not some resurrected tube preamp design of yesteryear, but a product designed with the modern user in mind. The list of features on this two-channel preamp reads like that of a surround processor. These features provide flexibility that allows users to tailor their two-channel systems to their preference.

Starting with the front panel, McIntosh has furnished a complete and easy-to-use interface, all centered on a clear and bright vacuum fluorescent display. Various changes made with the Input, Volume, and Tone Control knobs all clearly show up on this display, allowing even the most technically challenged user to easily operate their system. Below this display is a row of buttons allowing access to output switching, tone bypass, and unit setup. All features are easy to read and operate due to the striking backlit glass front panel—a McIntosh hallmark.

Moving to the back panel, one notices an impressive variety of connectivity. With seven single-ended inputs, two balanced inputs, and even one Phono input (Moving Magnet), this preamp offers more than enough flexibility to

account for all of the sources in a large-scale two-channel system. McIntosh also offers three single-ended outputs (two of which are switched on the front panel), and one balanced output. In addition to all of this, the user is furnished with a variety of triggers and data ports, allowing full automation of an entire stack of connected McIntosh components.

Installation/Setup/Ease of use

I tested the C220 in my two-channel system with a variety of sources, ranging from CD to SACD, and even Phono. I should point out that I elected to allow the unit to run in for 30 hours before I did any critical listening; further, the unit remained powered up for the duration of the review period. Installation was relatively straightforward, with only a few head-scratching moments—easily solved by a quick visit to the owner's manual.

My only real gripe regarding ease of use came in the form of the remote supplied by McIntosh. This remote (clearly designed to provide control over an entire McIntosh system) offers some backlit buttons for source and menu functions, but not for volume. Volume is instead located at the very bottom of the remote, and the small black buttons are almost impossible to find in the dark.

PERFORMING

MCINTOSH C220 VACUUM TUBE PREAMP



Sound

Tube components are often described rather generically as sounding "warm," and in most cases this is true. Tube circuits often introduce a small amount of distortion into the sound accounting for this warmth, which comes at the price of some excess noise. The C220, however, despite its tube circuit, reveals itself with sound that I would describe as big, clean, quiet, and neutral.

At first listen, I was shocked at just how quiet the backgrounds were with this preamp. This quiet allowed for a much greater sense of the space in which the music was recorded. This was especially noticeable when I listened to the Drive By Truckers' CD, *Decoration Day*. This band's raucous brand of southern rock is complemented by their live studio recordings, imparting a "you are there" feeling on a good system. With the C220, I was easily able to catch all of the subtleties of this recording style. I did notice that the bass was not as prominent as with other preamps, but what bass I did hear was clear and accurate. In the end, I attributed this to the C220's neutral character, and with more listening I discovered that increased resolution in the bass region revealed a recording that was not as "fat" in this region as I had previously thought.

I examined female vocals next, listening to Neko Case's latest album *Fox Confessor Brings the Flood*. Neko's voice was centered on a wide and very deep soundstage, where I was also able to clearly pinpoint the location of the instruments. This singer/songwriter's vocal style can be both powerful and remarkably emotive, but some of her more subtle intonations can be very easy to miss unless the quality of your playback equipment is top notch. The

C220's complete lack of noise or harshness left the complexities of her voice revealed to the listener.

I briefly sampled the phono stage on this preamp, wondering if, like many phono inputs on preamps, it was an afterthought. Pleasantly, I was able to listen to this noise- and grain-free phono stage for several hours. Can I say that every last detail and nuance were made clear? No, but I can say that most users will find this to be a highly satisfactory phono stage—a shame considering that many will never use it.

Final Take

Their tube amps are what made McIntosh famous decades ago, and clearly they have stayed true to their roots. The features, flexibility, and sound of the C220 are consistent with the exceptional quality I have come to expect from McIntosh.

Through all of my listening, one thread remained consistent. The neutrality of the C220 allowed me to hear details in the recordings that I never knew existed. Whether it was a sense of space, or an inflection in a vocal, I found that the neutrality of this preamp offered me a window into the recordings that I have rarely had a chance to experience.

There is one caveat: With such a neutral component, one needs to choose their system components (particularly sources) with great care, as the unsuspecting listener may end up learning something they did not want to know about the rest of their components. The honesty of the C220 means that it reveals the intricacies of the best recordings, but also fails to hide the sins of a lesser system.

With the C220, McIntosh comes very close

to the best that high-end two-channel audiophilia has to offer. High praise indeed, especially when you consider that the closest competitors cost several thousand dollars. If a high-resolution two-channel system is in your future, or you plan to upgrade your existing preamp, the C220 is a perfect place to both start and end your journey. ●

—By Laird Ross

Rating
98

C220 Vacuum Tube Preamp
MSRP: \$3,300

- 7 Unbalanced High-Level Inputs
- 2 Balanced (XLR) Inputs & MM Phono
- 3 Pairs Unbalanced Outputs
- 2 Pairs Switched + 1 Pair Fixed Outputs
- 1 Pair Balanced (XLR) Outputs
- 1/8" Front Panel Headphone Jack with Headphone Mode Mute
- Frequency Response: +0, -0.5dB from 20Hz to 20,000Hz
- Signal to Noise Ratio (A-Weighted): High Level, 90dB below rated output. Phono, 80dB below 10mV input.
- Dimensions: 17.5" (W) x 6" (H) x 18" (D)
- Weight: 21.1 lbs. (37.5 lbs. in shipping carton)

McIntosh Audio Laboratory
www.mcintoshlabs.com