



## Review: Gato Audio Pre-1 – A Feast for the Eyes and Ears

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The Danish Gato Audio introduces a new high-end looking preamplifier. It comes with expansion options that allow you to configure either a fully analog preamp or opt for modern digital streaming convenience. The look and feel are truly stunning. But is it all just show, or is there more behind this beautiful façade than meets the eye?

Gato Audio can be considered one of the leading audio brands from Denmark, underlining the country's strong position among Europe's high-end audio nations—despite the Netherlands and the UK having more high-end audio manufacturers per country. Why then is Denmark so often seen as the premium audio country in the world? That's a great question, and I don't have a ready-made answer. Perhaps the biggest difference is the combination of above-average performance and the appealing aesthetics of Danish design. But what exactly is Danish design? If you look at furniture, it's the brilliant simplicity of the designs and the use of honest materials. In tech—and hi-fi specifically—it's a bit different. Here, it's more often about finding the sensitive balance between industrial design, stylish but not over-the-top aesthetics, and a timeless character that wins hearts around the world.

And then there's Gato Audio. The high-end audio manufacturer that takes everything mentioned in the previous paragraph and raises the bar by at least three levels. I've known Gato's design language for many years and can't recall a single time their components left me indifferent. What stunning, organic, almost feminine forms. When I encounter a Gato component, I can't help but gently stroke the top plate with my fingers—and I can't imagine I'm the only one exhibiting such behavior. Such beautiful design, such exquisite material use, and above all, such sublime fit and finish coming out of the factory. Is it love? Is it lust? Like with a first crush, lust takes the lead for me. What a treat. Love might just follow.



## Gato PRE-1 – A Scalable Design

At the start of the year, the distributor and I discussed which model would be ideal for review, and they presented me with two options. Now, Gato gear tends to trigger my desire to own it. Should I go with the beautiful dual-mono, fully balanced PPA-1 phono preamp with built-in headphone amplifier? This one is truly unique and can handle either two turntables or two tonearms, each configurable for a specific cartridge. Or should I choose the all-new PRE-1, which also includes a good RIAA phono stage and is a key new preamp for the Danish brand? The distributor made it easy for me and left both models with me. After a restless night, I decided to give both components a thorough listening test and put my musical emotions into words.

Like the PPA-1, the Gato PRE-1 is fully balanced and built in dual-mono. The frequency response is 7 Hz to 650 kHz at -0.3 dB. It seems no expense has been spared on quality, and, importantly, the amplifier is customizable to your needs. Want anodized aluminum in silver, combined with wood, black, or a bespoke finish in your dream color? All possible. You can also configure the technical setup to your preference. It has two expansion slots: if you only use analog sources like vinyl, you can install the MMC-1 MM/MC phono module, with all parameters adjustable to your cartridge. If you use digital sources, opt for the ESS-1 USB DAC module. Want streaming without buying a separate streamer? Then the NPM-2 module is a great addition—though this, of course, bumps up the price. Since there are only two slots, you can't have both the streamer and the phono stage inside—though the PPA-1 provides an excellent external solution for analog lovers.



## Neat and Organized

The ESS-1 DAC module uses the ES9038PRO chip from ESS. It supports MQA, PCM up to 24-bit/384kHz, and native DSD up to DSD256. The module features a USB-A port, two optical Toslink inputs, and two coaxial S/PDIF inputs—more than enough for today’s streaming sources. The NPM-2 streaming module supports Tidal Connect, Spotify Connect, Qobuz, Deezer, internet radio, and DLNA/UPnP, with MQA and DSD compatibility. It’s also Roon Ready. The unit I received only includes the built-in phono stage, making it 100% analog. On the back panel, there are blanked-off slots for the digital modules, indicating that upgrades can be done later. Without expansion modules, you get three RCA inputs and one RCA output, plus two XLR inputs and one XLR output. My unit also includes two additional RCA inputs and a grounding terminal. The power switch and 6.35 mm headphone jack are centered on the back—keeping the front panel clean. The headphone output has a 2.6-ohm impedance, suitable for headphones between 33 and 600 ohms.



## Features and Controls

The PRE-1’s front panel is a textbook example of Danish perfection: two large knobs and a generous round OLED display dominate. The left knob selects the input, the right controls volume. They’re satisfyingly heavy and reminiscent of robust 60s and 70s vintage gear. Between the knobs are soft-touch buttons for mute and standby on the left, and menu and display lighting on the right. The build quality is sublime—especially the engraved logo in the top plate, crafted with such precision it could be a benchmark for the industry. The round “porthole” in the center reveals the large toroidal transformer, topped with a Gato-lo-goes badge reminiscent of Porsche or modern Peugeot.

Speaking of clever features—the display deserves special mention. As someone with high-octane blood, I’m immediately excited when I press standby. The display resembles a vintage car gauge; the backlit needle

jumps to max and then settles—just like a car’s temp gauge. It shows volume in analog form, with digital readout below and input name above. When I press the menu button, I get a three-line menu. I can re-name inputs, adjust gain, toggle direct mode (which bypasses volume control—handy for surround setups), and tweak phono settings. The volume knob acts as a scroll wheel, menu button confirms, and mute takes you back. A bit unusual, but once you get used to it, it’s quite intuitive. The phono stage is a gem—you can choose MM or MC, adjust capacitance, engage subsonic filter, and fine-tune gain. You can also turn off the large volume display or reset the unit.



## Listening

I tested the Gato PRE-1 with my Canadian Bryston 7B3 monoblocks, using Driade Flow Reference 808 XLR and speaker cables from the Netherlands. The speakers were the Premium 701 Gen2 from Swiss brand Piega. Sources included a Bryston BCD3 CD player and a vintage JDM Denon DP47 turntable with a high-output Denon DL110 MC cartridge. Both sources were connected via RCA, letting me compare the phono stage’s sound with digital precision.

On the intro of Perfect Sense Part I from Roger Waters’ Amused to Death CD, I noticed a wider, more 3D soundstage than I’m used to with this QSound album. The thunder sounded like it came from high behind me, and the piano was lifelike to the right. Even compared to more expensive preamps, the Gato PRE-1 delivered a grander, more open sound. Waters’ vocals were center-stage but respectfully distant, and the backing vocalist stood a few steps behind him to the right. The entire soundstage was precise and coherent. In Too Much Rope, the sleigh ride sound moved fluidly across the room, followed by a Ferrari F40 whooshing past from the opposite direction. Not just width, but the depth of the stage was impressive, with background musical details naturally and effortlessly receding into the soundscape. What God Wants Part III further showcased the rich production—what an incredible album.



## Quality Differences

To stay in the zone, I grabbed a later CD reissue of *The Dark Side of the Moon* and also had an early German vinyl pressing from 1973. This allowed me to compare the built-in phono stage with digital playback. On vinyl, *Speak to Me* instantly brought vivid sound, accurate imaging, wide soundstage, and the authentic timbre of analog instruments. The ticking clocks and fast synths felt lively and immediate. Comparing with the CD, the digital version had more dynamics and midrange detail, but the vinyl sounded more cohesive and fluid—likely also due to the Denon MC cartridge. I found myself preferring the vinyl experience.

How does the MMC-1 phono module compare to the dedicated PPA-1 phono preamp? With the albums I tested, there wasn't a dramatic difference—just a slight increase in dynamics. However, the PPA-1 widened the soundstage and improved instrument separation, microdynamics, and overall immersion. If you're serious about analog, the PPA-1 is a must. But if you want the convenience of an integrated phono stage and have a decent turntable and cartridge, the PRE-1 with MMC-1 will still let you fully enjoy your vinyl collection.



## My Verdict

The Gato PRE-1 is a refined-sounding preamp—anything but sterile, analytical, or flat. Its tonal balance leans toward the warm side of neutral, offering forgiveness even on less-than-perfect recordings. It's approachable, laid-back, yet dynamic. Even digital sources gain analog warmth and a sense of calm. This might come at the cost of some surgical precision...

## Conclusion

Gato has introduced a sublime preamplifier with the PRE-1, which will satisfy even the most critical music lovers. You can customize the musical heart of your hi-fi system exactly to your preferences, and you don't have to compromise on functionality or sound quality compared to separate components. Combine this beautiful preamplifier with two PWR-222 Class AB monoblocks and a CDD-1 AE CD player DAC from the same series, and you will enjoy a visually stunning design every day while continuing to experience the highest possible music enjoyment from your analog and digital music libraries for years to come. Five out of five stars.

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