



Going for the one

Townshend's new stripped-down, low-fat version of its high-end preamplifier is well worth a look, says **Jason Kennedy**

Just over a year ago I got to review two superb preamplifiers at the same time, one was the Mark Levinson No.326S and the other Townshend Audio's Glastonbury Pre. The former is an active, multi-function design while the Glastonbury is a passive autotransformer type that's not so different to the Allegri.

Both are explicitly revealing, but the passive unit had the edge in terms of absolute transparency, the problem is that it costs £8,900 which puts it out of reach for most

of us. It seems that I was not the only person to think this way, another suggested that it would be a great idea if Townshend could make an autotransformer preamp with the same intrinsic technology as the Glastonbury, but without the luxury casework, extra gain switching and remote control for a more approachable price. This idea appealed to Townshend and because that individual plays in the Allegri String Quartet, the new baby preamp didn't have far to look for a name!

The Allegri is a relatively small unit, it's only 127mm wide and 45mm

► DETAILS

PRODUCT: Townshend Audio Allegri
ORIGIN: UK
TYPE: autotransformer preamplifier
WEIGHT: 1.5kg
DIMENSIONS: (WxHxD) 127x45x305mm
FEATURES:

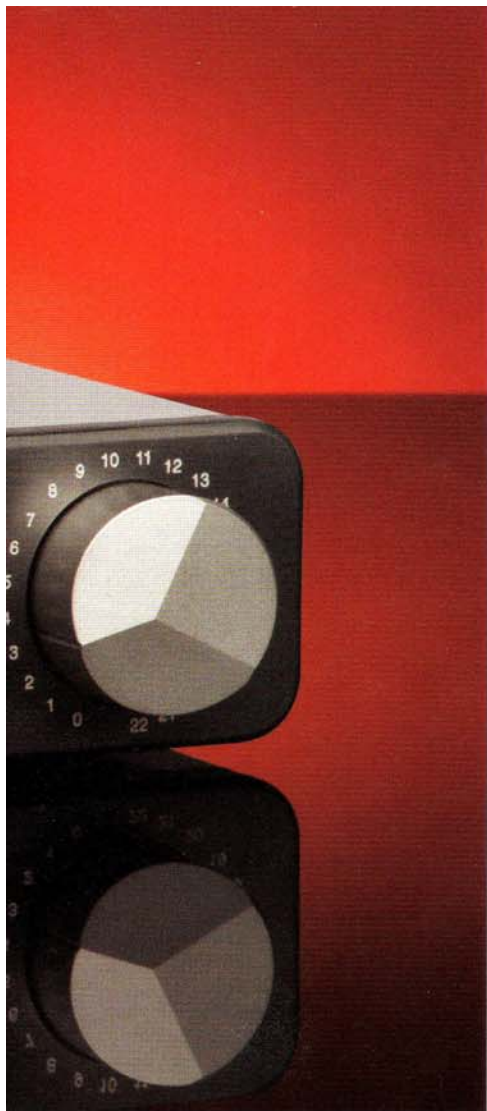
- line inputs: 6x RCA phono
- outputs: 2x RCA phono
- 80% nickel mu-metal autotransformer
- 24-position stepped attenuator

DISTRIBUTOR: Townshend Audio
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high but it's a similar length to a regular full-width component and has six line inputs on its compact back panel alongside two pairs of outputs. It's not the sexiest piece of casework I've seen at the price, but this should mean that you are paying for what's inside, rather than the fancy metalwork which often accounts for a disproportionately high part of the end price in this business.

The heart of the machine is a 24-tap autotransformer that offers -60dB of passive attenuation with +4dB of gain at the top of the range. In practice this means that the majority of the steps on the switched attenuator or volume knob, give a 2dB change in level, but this increases at the bottom of the range. The theory being that you need finer steps at higher levels, which works well so long as you don't partner it with a high-gain power amplifier and high-sensitivity speakers. In that situation you might need to commission a bespoke autotransformer so that there isn't too much gain in the system.

The Glastonbury Pre gets around this by having separate switches for



-10dB at the bottom of the range and an extra 6dB at the top. It also offers 1dB increments across the board, which makes for rather more subtle volume changes. But apart from this the autotransformer in both preamps is very similar, so the Allegri would seem to offer very good value despite its minimal stature and feature count.

As with any transformer the materials used in its construction are critical to

performance, Townshend's autotransformer has 80 per cent nickel mu-metal laminations and some mysterious wire. Rather than regular copper the Allegri uses something called Fractal-Wire for the transformer windings and signal leads within the case.

The company won't divulge precisely what this is because of its experiences of telling the world about the benefits of deep cryogenic treatment (DCT), an idea that spawned a thousand imitators. But I think it is safe to assume that DCT plays a part in the Fractal process. There are also Fractal-Wire interconnects available so that you can use the same conductor all the way from the source to the power amplifier.

Sound quality

My experience with the Glastonbury Pre made me wonder whether the Allegri with its relatively limited attenuation range would suit a variety of amps and speakers; I had trouble getting the level low enough with active ATC speakers at the time, but Townshend's modifications sorted that out.

Initially the Allegri was used in place of the preamp section of a Leema Tucana integrated, as this amp has a direct input that bypasses the volume control. The speakers at the end of the chain were Bowers & Wilkins 802 Diamonds which are above average in sensitivity terms, so I wondered if I would be stuck at the bottom of the Allegri's range where the big attenuation steps are. I needn't have worried, this component combination meant that the stepped attenuator sat around the 10 o'clock position for most of the listening with the quieter recordings requiring a bit more crankage, but not past the midpoint.

The sound is considerably more effortless and relaxed than it is using the onboard volume control of the Tucana, but not in

such a way as to make the music dull and lifeless. Rather the Allegri's remarkable transparency and speed means you can listen at higher levels without discomfort and thus bathe in a powerful, assured sound that is totally grain-free.

I really got into Jaco Pastorius' bass playing on the Joni Mitchell live album *Shadows and Light*. He has never sounded better than with this band and this preamp did nothing to disguise the fact. Quite the opposite, it revealed his sinuous fretless playing and the way it works so well with the rest of the band. The preamp also exposes the natural reverberation of the venue to good effect, which adds to the atmospheric power of the event.

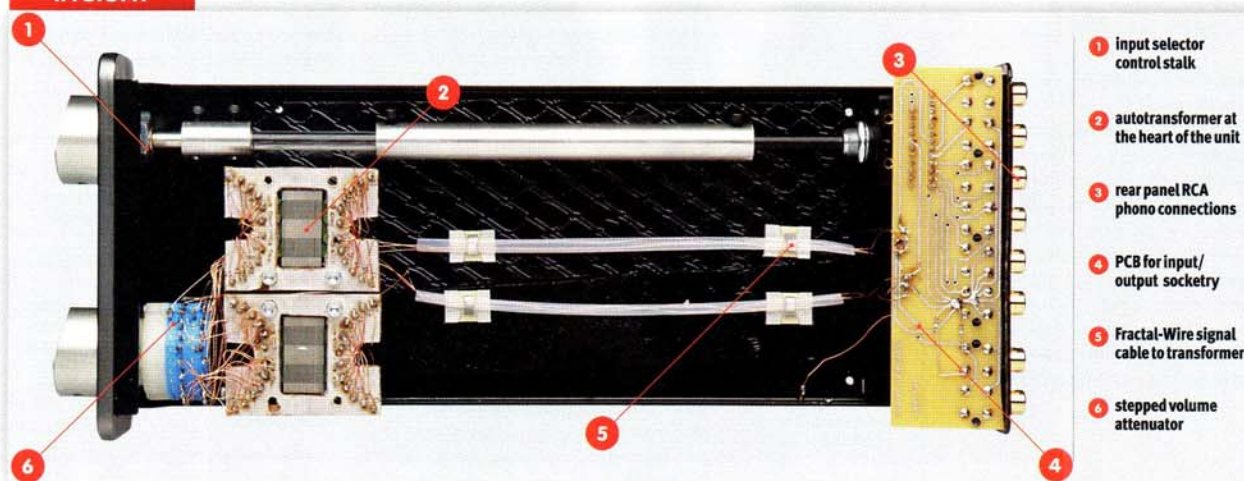
I put the Allegri up against an active preamp in the form of ATC's CA 2, this is a rather more affordable unit with remote control and balanced inputs, but it was interesting to hear whether the passive unit lacked energy by comparison.

If you want to hear more of the nuance in your favourite recordings, then this is a bargain

It proved to be considerably more transparent and better integrated, but didn't have the same degree of power. Active preamps usually have more energy, and whether you put this down to the recording or to the presence of electrical power in the process is possibly a matter of taste. But that energy can mask fine detail and get in the way of timing, which makes the autotransformer's clear approach very appealing.

I have been using a TVC (transformer volume control – see *How It Compares*) from a little known company called AudioZone on and off for some time, and given that it was about the same

IN SIGHT



Q&A

JASON KENNEDY SPEAKS TO
DESIGNER MAX TOWNSHEND



JK: What advantages does an autotransformer have over traditional passive preamps?

MT: It is lossless. A passive pot throws away power, its output gets weaker and weaker as you turn it down, whereas an autotransformer's output gets stronger and stronger as you turn it down. That is, the source impedance reduces as you reduce the level (increase attenuation), so its capacity to drive the load gets better and better. A passive pot is like an automatic car transmission where you've always got your foot on the accelerator and to slow it down you press the brakes harder and harder. You're throwing energy away, whereas with a TVC you gain energy.

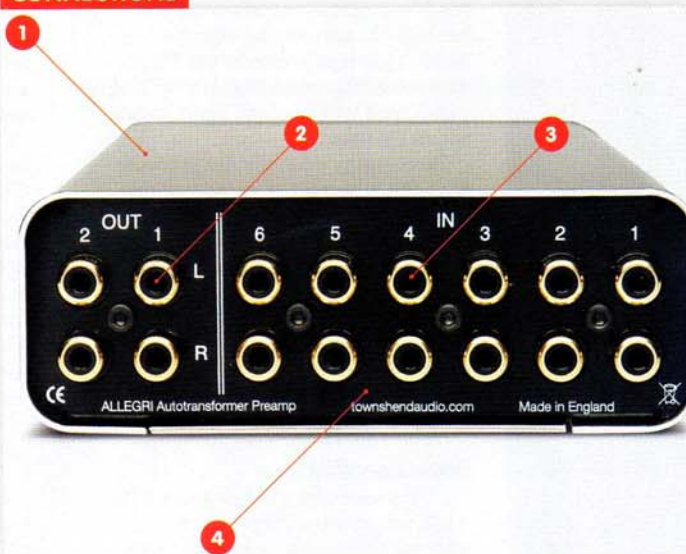
Would it work with high-output impedance sources such as valve CD players?

Yes, it is intrinsically suited to products that have this quality as it actually reduces output impedance as level is reduced. Let's say the source impedance is 100 ohms, when the attenuator is set to 0dB you've got 100 ohms source and 100 ohms output impedance. If you go to half output/volume the input impedance goes up and the output impedance goes down, so you get more drive from the controller. With the top two steps of the control the transformer is stepping up and then the sum works against you, but if you've got a half-decent source and a half-decent amplifier then it doesn't matter.

What other products do you have in the pipeline?

A more comprehensive version of the Allegri with 2dB steps and the 1dB interpolation and the -10dB settings from the Glastonbury, basically offering twice as many steps. It will be in a similar case, but one that can accommodate XLRs, so it will be the same height, but wider and will have the possibility of balanced operation. It will be around three to four grand and include remote volume control.

CONNECTIONS



- 1 decent quality casework confers sense of solidity
- 2 2 pairs of RCA phono outputs useful for bi-amping
- 3 6 pairs of RCA phono line level inputs give source flexibility
- 4 rear panel sports gold plated phono socketry, but no XLR

HOW IT COMPARES

THE ALLEGRI has many similarities to a transformer volume control (TVC), but there is a crucial difference between that and an autotransformer.

A TVC uses a regular transformer which has two coils of wire, a primary and a secondary. These wires are totally separate. There's no direct connection between the primary and the secondary, they're fully galvanically isolated. An autotransformer is just a primary without a secondary, it's a single coil of wire that has taps along its length to give different voltages, but there's no galvanic isolation. So when you're on 0dB the signal goes straight in and comes straight out; at lower levels the output is stepped down.

The advantage of a TVC is that it is a truly balanced volume control, but they are intrinsically more difficult to make and thus more expensive. An autotransformer preamp can be converted to balanced operation with the addition of a 1:1 transformer.

price when you could buy it, I decided to make a comparison with the Allegri.

I was surprised at how much difference there was; the Audio-Zone is nowhere near as relaxed and clean so it doesn't reveal as much detail. What's more it has a surprisingly thick mid/bass when used with the all-exposing ATC SCM150ASL active monitors.

The Allegri is considerably cleaner, tighter and faster and even extends further in the bass. That thickness can give the impression of more bass weight with some amp/speaker combinations (it does with the 802 Diamonds, for instance), but the ATCs reveal it to be an exaggeration of the truth that masks detail for the sake of a heavier sound.

The Allegri, like the Glastonbury Pre, seems to suit the big ATCs down to the ground. They are analytically revealing which can result in a grainy sound with some preamps and sources, but using the Audirvana player on my Mac, through a Resolution Audio Cantata DAC, resulted in an open, detailed and jumping sound with certain tunes.

I got distracted by hip hop for a while and had considerable trouble turning down the Missy Elliott in order to get back to the keyboard. There is something about hearing the extra layers of sounds and effects in a complex mix that makes this component very engaging.

Conclusion

The effortlessly revealing nature of the Allegri is quite understated and may not be to everyone's taste. Some will prefer the extra energy

you get with an active preamp, but if you want to hear more of the nuance and phrasing in your favourite records, whatever format they may be in, then this is something of a bargain.

I was constantly surprised at what it managed to unearth in familiar tracks and once I got the level right, the whole thing gelled with a musicality and realism that is hard to achieve at most prices.

It manages to combine finesse with analysis, yet keeps the musical message at the forefront. What's in the recording is, after all, what you hear more of. This plus the crucial lack of colouration and time-smear means that performances are as riveting as the day they were made.

As with other TVCs, you can't drop the Allegri into any old system and expect instant karma – it's a slow burn that builds up to an inferno as you play more and more music. If your system is revealing this will show you more of the music than anything near the price. Nuff said! ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



VALUE FOR MONEY



BUILD QUALITY



FEATURES



OVERALL



LIKE: Smooth and even, yet with an ultra-high resolution sound

DISLIKE: Alas no balanced operation!

WE SAY: Super revealing, yet understated sounding preamplifier; doesn't look like high end gold, but certainly sounds the part