

**Viola Labs Sonata Preamp**

# A Quiet Masterpiece

By Greg Petan

**M**aking a great preamp is not as easy as it seems. Despite the seemingly modest demands of switching inputs and providing gain, maybe balance control and possibly a polarity switch, attaining a reference level of fidelity from preamps remains elusive. How hard can it be? Plenty. So many preamps that wandered through my sound room over the years either exhibit distinctive distortions, making themselves quickly apparent, or at the least, are accompanied by sonic colorations that are more misdemeanor than crimes; still robbing the recording of its authenticity. The Viola Labs Sonata preamp flies into the world of audio perfection, a club populated by very few and sadly, all seem to come at a very dear price. In this case, \$35,000.





Viola Labs founders have a rich and storied history in high-end audio. Paul Jayson and the late Tom Colangelo began their careers at Mark Levinson Audio Systems in the 1970's. Mark Levinson is widely credited with being one of the founding fathers of modern high-end audio and helped to develop the market for separate components at a time when the US hi-fi business was on the wane and Japanese integrated receiver-style components ruled the roost. In 1984 Mark Levinson left his namesake company to form Cello (The Cello Pallet preamplifier being one of the most sought after classic elements in all of high-end audio). While there, Paul and Tom formed the core of the Cello design team and it was during this period that Paul became Managing Engineer as Tom led Research and Development. Cello came to an untimely end in the late 90's, and by 2000, Viola Labs was formed.

#### The Ins and Outs of things

A 4.3" TFT color touchscreen provides navigation along with a high-quality optical encoder using a magnetic indexing mechanism for volume and balance control. The Sonata can be controlled by using the Viola Remote Apple iOS™ application or RS-232. To its credit, the app is highly intuitive. While I prefer the analog buttons of an old school remote, the Viola app closes the usability gap considerably. A +12V trigger output is offered to remotely control power amplifiers as well. Viola Link bus connectors also provide control of the external Sonata power supply and Viola Concerto power amplifiers. USB master ports are available for firmware updates only. *(continued)*

The Sonata preamplifier uses separate regulated power supplies for the analog circuitry and digital control functions, with the main analog power supplies use a choke input design followed by a dual tracking discrete regulator. Printed circuit board mounted low ESR capacitors handle supply filtering. Inputs include 3 XLR balanced, 3 RCA, 1 RCA and 1XLR balanced variable outputs are available, along with one fixed output for those still craving a tape machine.

Based on the topology of the Crescendo preamplifier, the Sonata uses the OPA-1 discrete low noise, high-speed operational amplifier module. The OPA-1 high current output stage will drive high capacitance cables and power amplifier input stages with ease. The Sonata volume and balance control use discrete high precision resistors. An additional dual tracking regulator is used for local power supply regulation. Aesthetically, the dual, satin finished aluminum chassis configuration, with set back center panels is more Spartan than artisan, so this will appeal or not, though a higher level of visual design and refinement would be welcome at this price.

### Listening impressions

Utilizing the HT pass through of my D'Agostino Master Audio MLife integrated, in this case as a power amplifier, works like a charm. Late in the review cycle, a pair of Pass Labs XA200.8 amplifiers arrived for review, and I can say the Viola/Pass combo is equally impressive. *(continued)*





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REVIEW

Sitting on a weighty 1-1/4" slab of Black Diamond racing carbon fiber, wired with MIT ZII power chords and MIT MA-X SHD balanced interconnects, the Sonata was poised to give its best. Components at this price can often present expectation bias, so letting it warm up for a few hours with Krell's Connect streamer (one of my favorite, best-kept secrets in high-end audio) proves exciting.

Like the Sonus Faber Liliun speaker I recently reviewed, the Sonata's silence is striking; allowing for an extremely low level of noise and distortion. Music played through this preamplifier possesses a subtlety, purity, and transparency I have yet to experience at this level in a stand alone preamp. Transient performance is outstanding, and overall transparency is beyond reproach. The soundstage presented by the Sonata builds layer by layer, coming out of a deep silence as if it were created by a 3D printer; this level of sonic involvement adds interest and spontaneity to any listening session, regardless of program material.

Though the Beatles' *Let It Be*, on vinyl is not an audiophile chestnut, the guitars sparkle and sear with each strum on "While My Guitar Gently Weeps." George Harrison's vocals add a lilting, pleading quality, oozing emotion. Despite the flawed engineering, the musical meaning and a wealth of detail is revealed through the Sonata. The layered imaging and the distinct timbre of Paul McCartney's voice on "Let it Be," is satisfyingly dense, rich, and slightly smooth. Though the recording has its limitations, the sheer amount of detail resolved by the Sonata goes a long way to convince you that you're in the studio with George Martin and company. *(continued)*

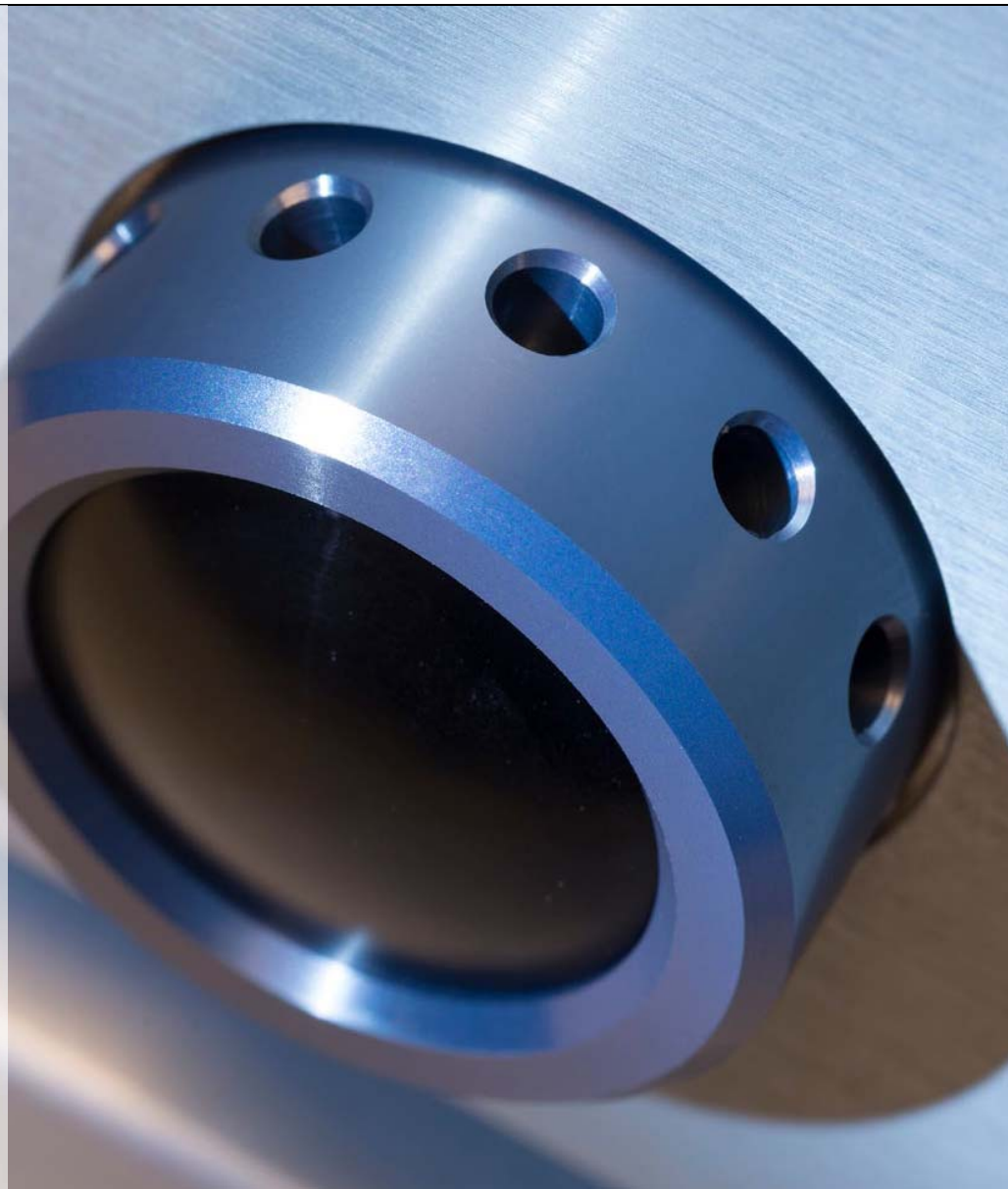
The Sonata reveals the most subtle of nuances related to the performance, without crossing the line of being merely analytical; a tough accomplishment for a solid-state preamplifier. The Sonata gets the big picture right, recreating the thrust of the performance dynamically while capturing an instrument's timbre within a given space. If I had to verbalize a coloration on the Sonata it could be just a tick to the cool side. The Grateful Dead's *Terrapin Station* yanks the sound back to the impression of neutrality or even possessing a touch of warmth, re-igniting the internal battle my brain wages while trying to pin down the character of the Sonata. This one is certainly capable of being a final destination component.

Even tube lovers can swoon over the Sonata; the way it untangles microscopic detail, subtle timbral colors and tonal contrast, is right there with the best bottle equipped preamplifiers. Music played through the Sonata is untethered and free from restriction. In the context of the amplifiers at my disposal and the Sonus faber Lillium speakers offered an audiophile experience that for the first time got me to turn the volume down and enjoy the presentation at more restrained levels.

Bass follows perfectly yet distinctively in suit; while all the time well integrated into the

rest of the frequency spectrum. Following the bass line in any piece is a breeze, with subtlety and slam always on tap. This is holy grail bass performance, folks. The title track from Disturbed's *Asylum* has been getting more than it's fair share of play lately, striking like a menacing visit from down below. The Sonata not only nails the weight but the mid bass punch, keeping me forcibly immersed in the mayhem presented, without the track devolving into noise. In a calmer vein, the more expressive dynamics of Donald Fagan's *Nightfly* floors me with large and small scale expression, and it's always a pleasant journey to revisit a recording you've heard hundreds of times, discovering something new.

Lastly, the Sonata renders the ambiance and space of a recording with perfect integration into the whole of the performance. Performers are immersed within a halo of space that seems to wrap all the way around the image rendered. This creates a level of dimension and depth to the image and stage that is very believable, the last bit of implied reality that eludes lesser preamplifiers. In a large listening room, the title track of Grover Washington Jr.'s *Winelight*, much like *Nightfly*, reveals a sense of space that feels new again.



### Spend em if you've got em

It's not necessary to spend 35K on a preamp to be musically satisfying. However, if you're setting your sights on a no compromise reference system and can incapacitate your accountant long enough, the Viola Sonata Preamplifier brings music to life in a way that few other preamplifiers can. ●

**The Viola Labs  
Sonata Preamplifier**  
MSRP: \$35,000

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**Analog Source**  
Triangle Art Signature/Osiris Arm/  
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Pass Labs XP-25

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