Views: —— 143,713

Audio-Hungary Qualiton APR 204 Preamplifier – Rev My Engine

ON
INPUT
VOL
HEADPHONE
QUALITON
APR204

Qualiton APR 204 is a Preamplifier made by a Hunarian company, the country known as Romania's Best Friend, so I'll be extra cautious to be perfectly neutral and objective towards it. The APR 204 Preamplifier is priced at 2300 EUR, or 2300 USD, and it will get paired with a series of setups, including the **Mytek Brooklyn DAC+** and **Feliks Euforia Amplifier** driving a pair of **HIFIMAN Arya**, **M2Tech Young MK III DAC** and **Audio-GD Master 19**, driving a pair of **HIFIMAN HE6SE**, and ultimately, an **Aune S6PRO DAC**, a **Wells Milo Amplifier**, driving a pair of **Rosson RAD-0 Headphones**. The comparison list will include comparisons with **Audio-GD Master 19**, **Feliks Euforia**, and iFi **iTube2**.

Introduction

Qualiton or Audio-Hungary is a company from Hungary, which actually is built on the older UNIVOX company, which they purchased. That one was an epic company known to have made some of the best PA systems in the entire world, and Audio-Hungary actually changed the profile of UNIVOX from Professional / Public Address to Audiophile / Enthusiast, dedicating themselves to keeping the old pro standards, but improve the sonics enough to be appealing to music lovers. In the process of acquiring the company, they actually acquired the work hand too, so they skipped the first steps most new companies have to go through, like actually finding skilled people capable of producing the final products.

They also have their own new CNC and Metal processing machines, including transformer winding machines. More about this can be seen on Youtube, on their own channel. As per my personal experience, Audio-Hungary is really quick to answer mails, they offer excellent support / warranty, and are one of the most professional companies out there. Once you touch their products, you can feel that they are made to meet up with the standards of both professionals and enthusiasts, using components that are well built, but also sound good. Most enthusiast level companies will sometimes have less focus on how something is made from a technical standpoint, as long as it sounds good, while most professional companies have a minimum bar above which they don't struggle to optimise the last few bits of sonic performance. I believe a mix of both is essential, but I personally use mostly enthusiast and audiophile headphones / DACs / AMPs, but my most used speakers are pro-level studio ones, so a mix of both worlds is ideal.

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It should be noted that I have absolutely no affiliation with Audio-Hungary / Qualiton. I'd like to thank Qualiton for providing the sample for this review. This review reflects my personal experience with the Qualiton APR 204 Preamplifier. Every opinion expressed is mine and I stand by it, the purpose of this review is to help those interested in Qualiton APR 204 find their next music companion.

About me

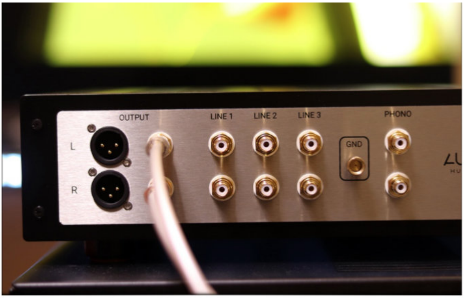
https://www.audiophile-heaven.com/p/about.html

Packaging

First things first, let's get the packaging out of the way:

volume
mute

The package of the APR 204 is one of the best I had the honor to see for the past two years. It is comparable with the package of the **AAdac from Audio Analogue**, which also came with a ton of extras and was packaged really nicely. The same can be said about Audio-Hungary, and they come with an excellent package, including even textile gloves so you don't scratch the preamp while handling it.



APR 204 comes with a beautiful, thick and large remote, which is both heavy and has a leather insertion. It has only three buttons, as you can't select the input digitally. That being said, I do like the remote and do think it is pretty nice.

Technical Specifications

Nominal output level – Line 2 V

Input sensitivity – Line 500 mV, to nominal output level

Input sensitivity – Phono 5 mV, to nominal output level

Number of input ports 3 unbalanced input per channel, 1 MM-level input per channel

Number of output ports 1 balanced/unbalanced line level output per channel, 1 headphone output per channel

Max. input signal – Line 7 V

Max. input signal – Phono 200 mV

Gain – Line +12 dB

Gain – Phono +52 dB, (f = 1 kHz)

Total harmonic distortion – Line < 0.05%, (f = 1 kHz, input level: 500 mV)

Total harmonic distortion – Phono < 0.5%, (f = 1 kHz, input level: 5 mV)

Frequency response – Line 4 Hz – 300 kHz, (-1 dB)

Frequency response – Phono 20 Hz – 20 kHz, (-0.3 dB)

Input impedance – Line 100 kOhm

Input impedance – Phono 47 kOhm

Signal-to-noise ratio – Line > 100 dB

Signal-to-noise ratio – Phono > 70 dB

Tubes required 4 x ECC83/12AX7; 2 x E88CC/6922

Weight 8.4 kg

Dimensions 43 x 10 x 32 cm

Build Quality/Aesthetics/Functionality

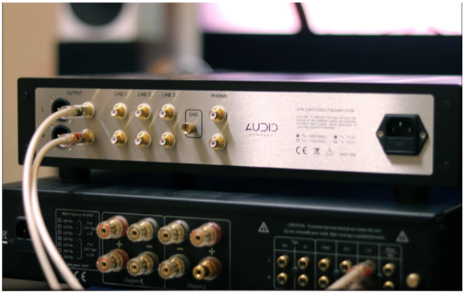
The best part about the APR 204 is that you're always aware of the build quality, and the overall quality of the unit. I never felt like it is a downgrade from something I already have, and even next to the Unico Amplifier I caught in photos, APR 204 felt better in quality most of the time. The little things make the experience, and APR 204 having better quality for the connectors, better machining, better precision where elements match is a real delight. Or at least it tickles my passion and engineer side a lot.

We're looking at a unit that is basically a preamplifier, with phono functions. The front of the unit has most of the indicators, including a status indicator led and an on/off switch. We also have an input selector in the middle, and that allows you to select between three total inputs, and a Phono MM input. There is a headphone output and a volume control potentiometer at the right side of the unit.

ON
INPUT
VOL
QUALITON
APR204
Unico

There is good venting all across the unit, and if you're curious, you can take a peek at the tech inside. It is visible that the company has put in great effort to make the whole unit with the best tech they had available. The input sensitivity is rated at 500mV, but it has a maximum input signal of 7V, which means that you won't get any distortions even from DACs that have a non typical output of more than 2V.

If I didn't tell you about this before, APR 204 is based on tubes, and it is a tube preamp, running a set of 4 X **ECC83** and a set of 2 X **E88CC** tubes. Even without tube rolling, you have access to some of the best tubes you could find by default. You can see that the company has both a professional and an enthusiastic part, because they sport both Single Ended RCA plugs and Balanced XLR jacks. It is interesting that the output has XLR Jacks, while the input is single ended only, both for the Phono and the Line input. At the back, we have a fuse, if you're enthusiastic about experimenting with aftermarket audiophile fuses. Generally, the output is cleaner, more quiet, and has less distortion from the XLR outputs. When investing this much money on a preamplifier, most folks won't even need the single ended RCA outputs, but if you can make a choice, please use the XLR, it is so much better sounding and has better overall control / clarity.



It is really cool to know that regardless whether you believe in burn-in or not, Audio-Hungary will apply 100 hours of burn-in at the factory, to make sure every component is up and running in optimal parameters, and everything is producing the result as intended by the company.

In my subjective opinion, the unit is extremely stable and well made. The headphone output is not its highlight and I would not consider it as a very important aspect of the preamp, and I would use it as a preamp way more. If Audio-Hungary ever decides to make a full working preamp, it should be above the likes of **Wells Milo**, but we will have to wait and see. The current headphone output is more of an optional in case you don't have anything else, but besides **HD650** and a few select headphones, the pairing was not exactly ideal.

As a Preamplifier, I think that the overall build and usage of the APR 204 is perfect. The volume wheel has no channel imbalance, at least as far as practical considerations go (below 9am you're not very likely to be using it). The Phono has a really good performance, the sound is much cleaner and better controlled than I would've thought at first. The line input (I used line inputs the most), are all clean, crisp, and work well. I liked using the Balanced output more, and while you may argue that there is no true balanced stage, because the line in from the DAC is only single ended, I heard a good improvement when using the balanced output (I only have studio balanced cables, nothing fancy).

Video Review

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Audio Hungary Qualition APR204 (APR 204) Prea...
Megnézen...
Megosztás
ON
QUALITON
INPUT
APR204
HEADPHONE
VOL
Qualition APR204
Preamplifier / MM Phono
Review
Megtekinthető itt: YouTube

Sound Quality

I want to make a point out of the fact that I used the APR 204 with multiple systems, including headphone systems, but also highlight the fact that it works best as it is designed as a preamplifier. I would not recommend using it as a headphone amplifier, and I did connect headphone amplifiers to it, including **Audio-GD Master 19**, **Wells Milo**, and **Feliks Euforia**. Pretty much all of those have a pre stage incorporated, so you could argue that I've been adding a bit of extra coloration by using APR 204, but in the end, it improved the sound quite a bit. I also have been using the **AAdac from Audio Analogue**, the **Mytek Brooklyn DAC+**, and **SW1X DAC I Special from SW1X** as DACs to feed it. I have been using the **Adam Audio T7V Speakers**, **Dali Ikko 2 Mk2 Speakers**, as well as **Buchardt S400** for tests.

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QUALITON
APR204

The APR 204 Preamplifier has kept a very coherent signature of its own, and generally changes the sound in the same way. It tends to color the sound a bit, by adding a bit of "tube magic", but opposed to most other tube amplifiers and other preamps, it tends to be quite a bit cleaner and more natural. Most Tube Amplifiers tend to color the sound quite a bit and botch the treble, thicken the midrange and add quite a bit of distortion. There are many outliers and amps that do not follow the trend, though. **Feliks Euforia** and **Feliks Echo** are especially clean and distortion-free, for example. APR 204 follows this tradition and although I can hear some extra warmth with it on certain songs, it is clean, perfectly clear with zero distortions.

The bass and sub-bass of APR 204 are linear for the most part, and there is no particular coloration I could talk about. There is a hint of extra warmth, but it is able to keep with the speed of the DAC, so a slower more natural DAC will sound slower and more natural, while a snappy and really aggressive DAC will be beaty and aggressive.

In the midrange is where most of the magic happens, as it is the case with most tube stuff. The midrange of the APR204 tends to have a signature of its own, which is slightly warmer, more rounded than the original counterpart, with excellent overall detail and spatial reproduction. I really love the tuning, it tends to make everything more vivid and more engaging, while the resolution and detail are never affected by adding APR204. Some less enthusiastic eyes may notice that the THD of the APR204 is not quite as low as that of some solid state preamps, but that does not seem to be an issue, and APR 204 is really potent when it comes to clarity and resolution. In fact, the effect is superb, so much so, that I consider the APR204 to be a necessity for a high-end system where you find the midrange dull. It is guaranteed to add some emotion and emphasize on the organic character of your music. And it also has a much wider soundstage usually, altough I can't explain the phenomenon. This seems to be true regardless of the system it is part of, and it always increases the width, depth and height of the stage, while also increasing the instrument separation.

In fact, even when it comes to the treble, it has a slightly smoother than the original, refined presentation. I did all my tests with equipment that already had a volume variation included, so a pre stage, but for a system that does not have a pre stage at all, you wouldn't be able to do a before and after APR 204. The treble character of the APR 204 is really liquid, velvety, with no aggressive edge, despite the really clean and clear midrange it presents. I liked the really low distortion it has, and for the Tube tech that can't really increase the bass properly, it is excellent to see a honest and deep presentation that adds zero distortions.

Comparisons

I first need to explain what exactly a preamplifier is. A preamp or preamplifier is a device that is meant to preamplify, or tweak the volume of a DAC. It is crucial in systems where neither the DAC nor the power amplifier have a volume wheel or adjustment method. This is because if both the DAC and the AMP have a fixed gain, you will always have them running too loud to be usable. Most of the time, Preamplifiers are built to have much better volume control than all-in-one solutions, and most of the time there is some coloration done to the sound as well.

Because most folks don't want a very complicated system, most of the time the preamplifier function is built within the DAC of a system, and many Headphone Amplifiers or even full sized DACs have a pre function. Basically any DAC that has a variable output has an amplifier built in. There are many amplifiers that have a variable volume, by the means of having a pre stage included, and those too have a pre already. Adding more pre may sound like a poor idea, but most of the time our ear doesn't really price the perfect and most linear, but it prices what sounds most pleasing to it. If distortions were not enjoyable to the human ear, we would only have clean electric guitars, acoustic instruments, and no EDM. But the human ear is a bit tricky, and while some diehard enthusiasts don't like to admit it, the human ear likes certain sounds more, and this is where the tube tech becomes relevant.

OUTPUT
LINE 1
LINE 2
LINE 3
PHONO
GND
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R
AUDIO HUNGARY
APR 204 STEREO PREAMPLIFIER

For most of our history, Solid State or discrete devices have been known to have technical performance vastly superior to tube tech, but we humans just seem to prefer tubes more most of the time. For this reason, many companies dedicated themselves to mastering the art of the tubes, and for this reason we now have excellent tube amps, preamps, and even tube DACs and tube Power Supplies. At the other end of this discussion, there are the ones that are slightly less eager to accept that you are adding more distortion the more components you add in the path of the signal. Adding a preamplifier when it is not needed will indeed raise the THD or total harmonic distortion a bit, but most of the time it is a distortion we enjoy more than the colder, more analytical signal. I've seen folks paying triple for equipment that performed much worse on paper, than what most reference, but as long as those folks were happy, I was happy for them as well. I feel this was needed, because most of the time, I added and compared the APR 204 in systems that already had volume variation, and used it to colour the sound. Especially with the high-end integration of the tube amps the way Audio-Hungary did, APR 204 really shines in many combinations.

All comparisons were done connecting both preamps to a system and double blinded tests were used, assisted by my gf.

Audio-Hungary Qualiton APR 204 vs Audio-GD Master 19 (2300 USD vs 880 USD) – I like comparisons, they are really easy. Using both as preamps for a larger system, like for example for my speaker system, Master 19 is easily brighter, and more solid, more aggressive.

APR204 is far more refined, with better emphasis on musicality, making music more natural. It is tuned for a much more mature and refined presentation, and where I do think that Master 19 is undeniably a better headphone amplifier, APR204 is much more mature and enjoyable in the long run. You can easily hear that Solid Stage vs Tube competition here, with the Tubes in APR204 having a more organic sound, and the full solid state of Master 19 being more clinical by comparison.

Audio-Hungary Qualiton APR 204 vs Feliks Euforia Tube Headphone AMP / PREamp (2300 USD vs 2500 USD) – Using Euforia as a Preamp will rely on the huge tubes at the front, and it will improve pretty much any system that never had any tube influence in it. The thing is, Euforia is tuned really neutral, and has a signature that resembles the typical solid state binding, but with the organic and fluid tube presentation. It is really neutral, and this is different with APR204 that is more colorful, more punchy in the mids, and has a somewhat more warm presentation. Euforia is a bit wider in soundstage, while APR204 seems to have a better separation, with more emphasis on the sub-lows. There's a certain sense of space with APR204, but it sounds more precise, above being wide. Euforia is much better as a headphone amplifier, being able to drive many headphones, APR204's strength being that really natural and organic sound that can flavor a system without hampering its resolution and detail.

Audio-Hungary Qualiton APR 204 vs iFi Audio iTube2 (2300 USD vs 400 USD) – I was quite disappointed in iTube2 when doing this comparison, because I heard that typical "tube" sound, not necessarily in the sense that it was bad, but it added way more distortion than I remembered. iTube2 is a Tube Pre, and it adds a LOT of that Tube magic, having a strong character, can sound like having everything on overdrive, on all settings. APR-204 never gave me this impression, and has always been really natural, having a liquid and effortless presentation, with excellent staging and a bit of extra warmth, but no distortions at all. It can make the midrange more colorful and vivid, but never distorted or overdriven. It just seems to be like iTube2 wants to be a little tube guitar amp more than a stereo amp, where APR204 is undeniably more clean, clear, coherent, having a better stage and instrument separation.

Pairing

The pairings list will include a few complex setups that should highlight exactly how APR204 interacts with multiple systems. I tested it with far more systems, but those are the best to highlight its potential and its value, even though some of them are not quite that pricey. I will focus mostly on the improvements brought upon by the Qualiton, rather than focusing on the whole setup. By the time one uses such a complicated setup, any trace of sanity should have left his body, and one should only do this if he pursues the maximum possible pleasure in audio above everything else, including how practical or unpractical a system can be.

I do this too, all the time, even with my gaming PC. I have my **Gaming PC** right next to my monitor, and it has its place, because I feel happy with the work I did on building it and finding the components / matching them.

M2Tech Young MKIII + Qualiton APR 204 + Audio-GD Master 19 + HIFIMAN He6SE – I noticed a much more natural midrange, and improved overall naturalnes sof the sound. He6SE can be a bit bright, and the entire setup in fact is bright sounding, including the AMP and the DAC, but it is really wide, detailed, and has great control / punch. APR204 is there to add some soul and musicality in the mix, because without it, the sound of the whole combo can be quite analytical and cold. When adding APR204, the sound gets a bit warmer, with a much more dynamic presentation, better overall naturalness, everything is slightly smoother, with more emphasis on the voices and fluidity of each musical note. I did those tests by setting the Young MK III in line mode, so the sound would bypass its built in volume adjustment, and so we could take maximum advantage of the APR204, without hindering its performance.

Mytek Brooklyn DAC+ + Qualiton APR 204 + Feliks Euforia + HIFIMAN Arya – This entire setup is actually pretty balanced as it is, so it is much easier to see APR204's character naked and bare. The sound becomes more dynamic, more punchy, and more fun to listen to when adding the APR204. Euforia already has more than enough driving power for Arya, and the Brooklyn DAC+ has a natural, honest midrange too. APR204 makes the sound more controlled, with better bass extension, more dynamics, and a much more liquid yet refined presentation. It makes the whole presentation flow much better, and helps with the coherency, as well as the overall refinement.

Aune S6 PRO + Qualiton APR 204 + Wells Milo + Rosson RAD-0 – Here I went with one cold, one warm, one neutral, and APR204 to emphasize the effect on an already fairly good system. Overall, RAD-0 is thick and lush, and it doesn't need much help to be enjoyable, while Aune S6 PRO has a bright and somewhat cold presentation. Wells Milo is right in between, being natural, and as I called it, a good cross between tube sound and SS sound. APR 204 gives a much more vivid and colorful presentation to this system, helping a lot with the cold edge that S6 PRO has, all while keeping that huge stage it gives to music. I was surprised many times by this, but APR204 does not butcher the stage into an intimate one, and doesn't really expand too much, being really transparent. The speed is improved a bit, and the bass hits deeper, quicker. I think it reasonably gives more life to RAD-0, setting the treble to shine through with a bit more energy, without making them colder or brighter.

Value and Conclusion

At the end of the day, APR 204 has an excellent value, even though it has a pretty high price. Just opening the unit and taking a look inside, you'll see what I can consider one of the best designed circuits I've seen in a long time. Its quality tries to get dangerously close to the **AAdac from Audio Analogue**, and APR 204 shines as a masterpiece in terms of design and engineering.

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QUALITON
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HEADPHONE

They have a more complete package than what I've seen before even for high-end units, and the best part about the APR 204 has been the build, which is so well made that you'd have a hard time not using the included gloves to not scratch it.

Jokes aside, the power supply is a new thing in this one, and although I generally have an easy time recommending power conditioners like the **Plixir BAC400**, this time around, it won't do quite as much. It is all thanks to the tech inside, and the fact that Qualiton has their own transformer binding machines at the factory, which provides better quality than most entry-level transformers get.

The sound of the APR 204 is clean, crisp and detailed, but manages to catch a glimpse of humanity, some special warmth, characteristic of tubes, but keep the detail and resolution top notch, resembling high-end solid states preamplifiers.

INPUT
QUALITON
APR204

At the end of the day, if you're looking for a high-end tube preamplifier, something to pepper in some spice on your system, or if you don't have any volume variation in the DAC or the AMP, the Qualiton APR 204 is an excellent choice, and should make you happy for years to come!

Purchase Link

You can always grab one of the APR 204 from a local dealer, or on www.amazon.com, once it goes available there:
https://amzn.to/3w002f1

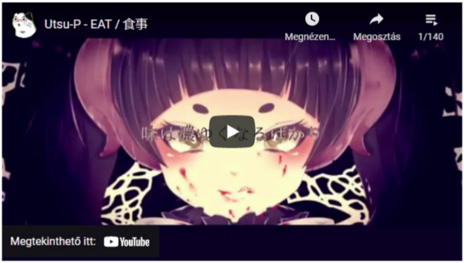
— Please remember to stay safe, and always have fun while listening to music!—

Full Playlist used for this review

We listened to more songs than those named in this playlist, but those are excellent for identifying a sonic signature. PRaT, Texturization, Detail, Resolution, Dynamics, Impact, and overall tonality are all revealed by those songs. We recommend trying most of the songs from this playlist, especially if you're searching for new music!

If you have a dime to spare (**donate**), it would make my day much brighter, as it would help me improve things around the website and increase the frequency of my posts.

Youtube Playlist



Tidal Playlist

https://listen.tidal.com/playlist/64555551-ec3c-4279-ae44-248fdfcf6c4b