

High-performance sound from **Allnic's L6500** linestage



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Allnic L-6500 line preamplifier

Alan Sircom

Allnic Audio is a constant revelation to traditional audiophiles. Many first heard of the South Korean company thanks to its excellent phono stages. Others from its range of fine Zero Loss cables. But the deeper you dig, the more you realise this is an electronics brand with eyes both on the future and the best of the past. The L-6500 line preamp – the brand's entry-level model that replaces the L-1500 – is an example of why Allnic Audio deserves to be taken seriously.

The preamplifier is a paragon of simplicity, with a single gain stage in pure Class A using one 5842 triode valve per channel and both channels fed by a single 7233 voltage regulator triode, held in check by a 5654 detector. This last is a rugged little pentode that was designed by

General Electric in the mid-50s for military applications, so can withstand the high-speed on-again, off-again cycles of a cathode-follower circuit. However, while a cathode-follower is a low-cost, easy-to-design way of keeping output impedance low, Allnic has gone for the more robust approach of transformer coupling.

Iron in the Soul

While a transformer-coupled preamplifier works wonders at keeping output impedance as low as possible consistently across the frequency range, the potential disadvantage such amplifiers have (compared to capacitor-coupled, cathode-follower circuits) is the limits of the frequency response are to some extent dictated by the quality of the transformer itself. This is why some of the cheaper valve amps sound great through small bookshelf loudspeakers >>



EQUIPMENT REVIEW
Allnic L-6500



» and horns but are often found wanting when partnered with more modern wider-range loudspeaker systems. It sounds pretentious, but if an amplifier is the ‘heart’ of a system, then its transformers are its ‘soul’.

Giving my degree in the bleedin’ obvious a workout, care in transformer winding and ‘more iron’ in the transformer core are pivotal in making a good sounding transformer-coupled amplifier. However, a more intelligent approach is often called for. Allnic’s approach is to manufacture its own transformers and to use permalloy (iron and nickel) in the transformer core.

This use of permalloy speaks to Allnic’s ability to look both forwards and back in its development. The material is not new; it was invented in 1914 by Gustav Elmen of Western Electric to compensate for low inductance in transatlantic telegraph wires. Subsequent alloys with even higher magnetic permeability (such as mu-metal and supermalloy) exist, but Allnic – like many discerning audio companies – prefers the sonic characteristics of permalloy.

The amp runs both XLR and RCA inputs and outputs, although it makes no distinctions on the front panel; they are just a line of orangey-yellow LEDs. There are also similar LEDs for power and operation. The L-6500 also has two current meters on the front panel; if the meters are centred, all is good but a swing to the left means a failing gain valve and more spending on social care and a swing to the right usually means lower taxes and either the regulator or monitoring valves are dying.

An operational quirk is that while that volume knob is central and sizeable, the source selector knob is tiny, but at

least it is bi-directional. There is a remote handset, which adds ‘mute’ to the preamp’s functions. You want balance, tape or AV throughput, or tone controls? Don’t be silly... this is a purist preamp for purist people!

Modern meets Classic

That blending of old and new that runs through the technology of the Allnic L-6500 extends to its sound quality too. Although from new, it’s going to take some time to fully get that blend; the review sample already had dozens of hours on the clock but adding more hours made the L-6500 really come into its own. Fortunately, it didn’t take any wrong turns or periods of sonic dreadfulness along the way and the tonal balance remained constant. Effectively, what changes over those first hours is the soundstage fills out and the midrange gets progressively more transparent.

What doesn’t change is the difference between RCA and XLR inputs; RCA remains better throughout. While the playing field is levelled in output (XLR and RCA are of similar performance), I’d still give the nod to RCA. Let’s be honest here; this doesn’t mean ‘XLR sucks’ or ‘never use XLR’; RCA’s degree of ‘better’ is minor at best. But if you can use RCA, do so.

The sound of the L-6500 isn’t the stuff of pithy soundbites, but in broad terms what gets under your skin first and fastest is its beguiling nature. Music ‘unfolds’ when played through the L-6500, almost irrespective of what’s being used up and down stream. This notion of music ‘unfolding’ isn’t part of the usual review vocabulary, but it fits the performance of the L-6500 well; »



Good recordings sound outstanding, but even less than stellar mixes sound free from abrasiveness and aggression.

» the preamplifier digs deep into the layers of music and presents them to the listener. While this reads a lot like it is describing the imaging of the preamplifier (and, in fairness, the L-6500's soundstage is extremely good, with its excellent stage depth being particularly noteworthy), this is something deeper. It's more like getting closer to the intent of the musicians playing. There's an eloquence and expressiveness to the L-6500's sound that is more than just 'feel' or 'articulation' or even 'coherence'. I found myself able to play some of the more 'wig out' recordings of John Coltrane like *Ascension* [Verve] and have that 11-piece band of genius and dissonance seem more understandable.

Nothing seems out of place in the L-6500's performance, both in terms of musical and tonal balance and its spread of sonic benefits. It's detailed and transparent, but not 'to a fault'; the L-6500 lets you deep into the recording, without laying it bare. This might sound pretentious but it's a sound of texture and colour; a rich, harmonically beguiling sound that stays just the right side of 'sumptuous'. I have heard more resolving and more rhythmically direct sounding preamplifiers at this price, but that resolution and that rhythmic strength both come at a cost elsewhere in the performance, and the L-6500 is all about the balance.

Good recordings sound outstanding, but even less than stellar mixes sound free from abrasiveness and aggression. There's not much to be salvaged from the Red Hot Chili Peppers *Californication* album [Warner Bros], but even this casualty of the Loudness Wars of the late 1990s has its moments through the L-6500; the title track has some separation and weight to it, and although it's a record where even the silences are too loud, the L-6500 makes the best of a very bad job. I'm something of a pragmatist when it comes to good audio; if a system is so musically sublime that it means you must curate your music collection carefully, it's doing something wrong. Allnic's L-6500 is on the side of the angels here; maybe it is a fraction soft next to the super-detailed, super-transparent Masters of the Audiophile Universe, but I'd take that trade if it means I can play 'She Does It Right' from Dr Feelgood's *Down By The Jetty* album [United Artists] and enjoy all its raw, proto-punk charm without wincing. Especially as what the L-6500 does with good recordings is so elegant and attractive.

Common characteristics

These characteristics seem common to Allnic's electronics; they were shared by the H-5500 phono stage we tested in Issue 196 and the two make a fine sonic and visual match.

It's a family or house sound. Looking through the Allnic catalogue shows there is a lot more to be had from these two baseline models, with dual mono, direct heated triode and even output transformerless/output capacitorless preamplifiers further up the line. While these remain untested by **hi-fi+**, Allnic is not simply gilding the lily by adding more expensive variations on the same design. It's an impressive array of products.

However, it's also easy for a company to become so focused on the big hitter projects in the line-up that the all-important first rung on the ladder gets overlooked or underdeveloped. That is patently not the case here; Allnic's KS Park puts as much energy in getting products like the L-6500 line preamplifier 'right' as he does with the leaders of the pack. It's hard not to be impressed by the Allnic L-6500; it's well built, sounds great and has an excellent balance of making music sound good no matter the quality of the recording. While the Allnic L-6500 is far too much of a sophisticate to shout for itself, that's something to shout about! +

Technical specifications

Type Class A valve line preamplifier
Inputs 2x RCA, 3x XLR
Outputs 2x RCA, 1x XLR
Tube/Valve Complement 2x 5842, 1x 7233, 1x 5654
Input Impedance 10kΩ (RCA), 20kΩ (XLR)
Frequency Response 20Hz–20kHz (±0dB), 16Hz–75kHz (-3dB)
Voltage Gain +20dB
THD (1kHz, 1V RMS) 0.06% at 0.3V, 0.15% at 1.0V
S/N ratio -90dB (CCIR, 1kHz)
Maximum Output 15V RMS (non clipping)
Output Impedance 150Ω
Power Consumption 30W
Finish Black or silver
Dimensions (WxDxH) 44 × 32 × 18cm
Weight 12kg
Price £6,950

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