

Life-Changer Audio icOn4

THIS SIMPLE PASSIVE AUTOTRANSFORMER LINE CONTROL UNIT MAY NOT QUITE BEST MARTIN COLLOMS' REFERENCE CHOICE – BUT HE HAS TO ADMIT IT GETS VERY CLOSE

MARTIN COLLOMS



Andrew Harrison recently reviewed two passive preamplifier/control units, namely the earlier series Life-Changer Audio *icOn2* earlier this year (Vol 13 No1) and also the Bespoke Audio Company *Pre-amplifier* in (Vol 13 No2). Now a new and even more interesting version of the *icOn* series from that irrepressible designer and manufacturer Pál Nagy. He is full of enthusiasm for his subject and a burst of imagination allied to the versatility of the Arduino micro-computer module he incorporates, has allowed him to take the project further. He is striving for the ultimate performance, inching incrementally towards full transparency with each design iteration.

While there are alternative implementations of this line control genre, for example using double winding transformers, or a resistor ladder, enthusiasts including Pal and myself have homed in on the single winding multi-tapped autotransformer. Here audio signals enter at the high impedance start of the winding and leave at a series of low impedance volume stepped taps, selected by some form of switch. Aside from that single switch contact there is nothing else to interrupt or corrupt fidelity in the signal path.

The *icOn4* has some user selectable, programmed facilities, and some at additional cost, but the key matter is the move to the autotransformer mode, here adopting mu-metal core single winding autotransformers, from US specialist Bruce Slagle, in place of the previous SAC Super Permalloy transformers). As before that convenient and effective Apple remote control handset is used for control of the top model, but also to access and set the several user options.

You also get a two-year warranty, while the service life for the Vishay complementary FET switches used is essentially unlimited.

Those options include an online hardware upgrade possibility, for example, through a Bluetooth app to 40 steps instead of 24, along with automatic input level matching and other facilities such as app control from anywhere in the house, and the inclusion of a high quality optical encoder with variable sensitivity for fine volume control, manually operated. The display is now intrinsically noise free, non-multiplexed, while improved switching timing offers smooth control without audible glitches.

The base price model may readily be reconfigured depending on the price paid, and has 24 steps: -49.5 dB, -45, -40.5, -37.5, -34.5, then 13 very usable 1.5dB steps of 19.5 dB to -15dB and finally five 3 dB steps to 0 dB. When purchased in 40 step mode, all steps are 1.5dB. Surprisingly there is also a useful +, -7.5 dB control of channel balance in 1.5dB steps. '0' on the display denotes full muting.

Sound Quality

I checked that the wall wart power supply had very little effect on the sound of my system and plunged into some heavy listening. The result was so close to my standard set up that I had to exchange the *icOn4* with my reference *Allegrì* + numerous times. I consider that the manually operated *Allegrì* + remains king of the heap but this contender was really tough competition. Without that back to back opportunity I consider it would be quite hard to tell them apart, noting that this test was made in a well-tuned £100,000 system: I have heard less difference between some high quality interconnect cables. The bass was excellent in clarity, attack, extension and tune playing – but was also slightly behind the beat.

Midrange was essentially top class for neutrality and detail, while the deep transparent imaging was really good. At high frequencies, also rated close to excellent, shaded by a hint of grain and blur, this was hard to describe, this more like an interconnect cable difference. I have to rate the *icOn4* as excellent, even if it is a little behind the Townshend *Allegrì* plus. I reckon that in many systems they could not be differentiated.

Conclusion

Now with refined system design, excellent ergonomics and improved sound quality, the remote controlled *icOn4* is a no-brainer for overall value.

Specifications

Number of volume positions	41
Volume step size	1.5dB
Balance control	yes
Remote control for volume, inputs and other functions	yes
Other functions	yes
Display	yes
Built in microprocessor with smart functions	yes
Switching device complementary solid state FET switches by Vishay	
Price plus vat	£1,490 Premium (£1,090 standard)

tvcpreamp.co.uk/icon4

