

Vinius Audio TVC-05 preamplifier

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If there is ever an audiophile medal of honour, owners of passive preamps should be the first recipients. The Vinius Audio TVC-05 is probably one of the most approachable examples of the breed. However, compared to a modern full-function preamplifier, this Polish-built “high-performance magnetic volume control” has rudimentary functionality, making it great!

You have a choice of TVC-05 in a balanced or single-ended version. One has three XLR inputs and one output, the other has RCAs. There’s a motorised magnetic induction-controlled volume control, and the circuit has a transformer, wired to Vinius’ patented design. There are no electronic components in the basic TVC-05 RCA version. The RCA+Remote and the XLR version has a remote volume driven by an Apple handset. This also has the briefest of displays. There’s an even more hair-shirt version of the TVC-05 called the TVC-05 Special Edition. This one even looks at input switching as a form of musical heresy. Just one RCA input, one output and a volume knob. Set against that, the ‘standard’ TVC-05 positively bristles with extra features.

Popularity contest

Passive preamplifiers have been an alternative for the audio hardcore for decades. However, in the early days, they were beset with problems. The biggest of which was high-frequency roll-off. Because there are no gain stages, the connection between a source and an amp can be as simple as a couple of lengths of wire separated by a potentiometer. The moment you construct something like that, you are at the mercy of the length and construction of the wire. Mostly length.

Something too long, or too capacitive, and the high frequencies roll off fast. In the worst cases, “too long” could mean less than a few inches. Combine this with even minor impedance mismatches between the components, making it nightmare fuel. The passive preamp was always at the core of the most immediate, unforced, and effortless-sounding systems, but this meant next to nothing if the system was too undynamic and rolled off in the treble.

Fortunately, the early days of ‘pot in a box’ gave rise to more sophisticated transformer-coupled and passive magnetic preamplifiers. While these still don’t have the gain of an active line stage, they have the transparency of





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» passive designs without the deal-breaking high-frequency roll-off. The TVC-05 continues that trend. However, the absence of gain (and additional features like a balance control or an array of lights) means they still represent a highly specialised choice and have never broken significant ground in places like the US.

Care and feeding

A passive in any guise is still not as easy to put into a system as active components. You still need to be careful in choice of components and cables. It's a popular partner with a tube power amplifier, partly because the input sensitivity and impedance of many all-valve power amp designs are a good match for the output of a passive design. Ground lift is also an important consideration in XLR versions. The TVC-05 has a ground lift switch on the rear panel. Try it... it can make your system even quieter.

I don't know why, but there seems to be a rule amongst passive preamp makers. The better the product, the further it gets from modern aesthetics. In fairness, I like the wooden finish to the front and rear and the big shiny black knobs, but I'm not sure others will find the 1970s retro look as appealing. However, the finish is rich and deep in the flesh and doesn't look quite so mid-century G-Plan.

Given its relative paucity of functions, it's a deceptively heavy and well-made product, and packed like a Russian Matryoshka doll. The TVC-05 is tightly packed in a bag, tightly packed in a box that also houses the Apple remote and the power supply, which is itself packed in a box within a box. All of which means it could survive a few miles in a courier's van unscathed. Impressive... but a flight case would be even better!

That big black central knob has 24 click stops, each with a 2dB step. These steps relate to the EI 105 transformers wound to Vinius own patented design. In fact, if we started listing the components chosen or selected by Vinius because of sonic performance, this review would have to list every part in the TVC-05. It's built with the sort of small-brand artisan obsession that powers much of the audio world. Naturally, it's galvanically isolated too, thanks to the chassis itself. Given hum from ground-loops is a very real concern on any passive preamp or volume control, the more the TVC-05's internal organs are shielded from the outside world, the better. Despite this, I would still hesitate on stacking the Vinius directly on the top plate of your source (or especially the power amplifier).

It's a long story

As described above, the days of very short interconnects to prevent signal loss are gone. I would still avoid using cables more than a metre long, however. This might also explain why passive preamps never 'broke' the US market, as many American audiophiles prefer a system layout that physically sites the sources and preamp along the side wall (near the listening position) and the power amps close to the loudspeakers. As this often requires cables of up to 5m, even an XLR-equipped volume control like the TVC-05 might struggle to keep the treble in place.

Fortunately, that kind of layout isn't so popular elsewhere and people either have the entire system between the loudspeakers or have it away from the loudspeakers and rely on longer lengths of loudspeaker cable. Such systems can highlight what the TVC-05 does so well. And that can be summed up in a single word: clarity.





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» The Vinius TVC-05 is so completely clear and transparent, that – were it not for the volume attenuation – you could be forgiven for thinking you had forgotten to plug it in. To some, it's your source... attenuated. To others, it's your power amplifier... attenuated. Either way, when you hear how much the gain stages of even a good preamp ruin the relationship between source and amplifier, you can't help but be impressed by the TVC-05. That's the big point of the TVC-05; other preamps – even good ones – sound like they are introducing their own characteristics to the overall sound. The TVC-05 never does that. Ever.

I can't overstate that last part. Even by the standards of other passive preamplifiers and transformer-coupled devices, the Vinius TVC-05 introduces so little of its own character as to make it simply the most honest part of your system.

Keep it clear

There's also the clarity the TVC-05 brings to the party! That clarity means the sonic performance of the TVC-05 hangs on that of the devices in front and after it, but its sonic invisibility means that's a good thing.

Pick whatever musical trigger yanks your audiophile chain. It might be detail, soundstaging, vocal clarity and articulation, dynamic range, microdynamics, bass depth and/or resolution, treble detail... you name it, the TVC-05 does it and does it exceptionally well.

I find myself drawn to products that cope well with changes in scale as you move through recordings. A small jazz venue is not the same as La Scala, so why do so many systems try to impose a single sense of scale? As you spend time with the TVC-05, you quickly learn that the main protagonist in the scale-compromising game is the preamp, and when faced with just the best volume control between source and amp, those scaling concerns go away fast.

The best part of the TVC-05 is how it doesn't change the sound one iota as the volume rises or falls. OK, at very low levels, the absence of gain means you are digging deep into the source. Almost inevitably, the non-linearities of a power amplifier input at low levels will begin to emerge. Also, at very low levels, 2dB steps are more noticeable than at

regular listening levels; many gain stages stagger the step sizes to accommodate very low or very high listening levels. However, I'd take the more uniform 2dB steps if it means you get the sheer honesty of the TVC-05. And even here the TVC-05 changes neither tone, scale, nor soundstage.

I am blown away by the absence of performance demonstrated by the Vinius TVC-05. It does precisely what a good preamplifier should do; take the sound of a source and give it the right volume level with nothing getting in the way of that goal. Basically, it's a volume control in a box, and that's so rare. If you see that as 'minimalism done right' instead of a 'hair-shirted gain-remover', the Vinius Audio TVC-05 is not only for you but it might just be the best of the breed. +

Technical specifications

TVC-05 with passive volume adjustment

A balanced or single-ended version with a remote control

Galvanic chassis ground separation

EI 105 transformers coiled following Vinius patent

Directivity-oriented enclosure

Motorized volume switch 24-level volume adjustment (2dB steps)

Input 3× XLR pair (XLR version), 3× RCA pair (RCA version), 1× RCA pair (Special Edition)

Output 1× XLR pair (XLR version), 1× RCA pair (RCA version, Special Edition version)

Maximum input signal 3,5V (XLR), 2,5V (RCA)

Product dimensions width 360mm, depth 400mm, height 125mm

Optimal directivity of the elements designed for minimizing sound quality loss

Weight 15kg

Price £8,500

Manufacturer Vinius Audio

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