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# avm audio

## Evolution PA5.2 Preamplifier

as reviewed by Gary Lea



This will be the first of three reviews that combine to make up a set of AVM Audio product reviews. This is the second such review I have done after having the honor of introducing *PF* readers to AVM Audio components last year.

I have spent the past five months living with three new items from AVM that take the AVM design criteria up the scale a notch or two. This first review will focus on the AVM Evolution PA5.2 Preamplifier. Shortly after, I will follow up with a review of the AVM SA8 Ovation Solid State Stereo Amplifier. The final installment will focus on the AVM Evolution CD5.2 CD Player.

First I think it relative and important to share a couple of pertinent definitions as set forth by Wikipedia.

**Déjà vu**, from [French](#), literally "already seen", is the [phenomenon](#) of having the strong sensation that an event or experience currently being experienced has been

experienced in the past, whether it has actually happened or not. Do something spontaneous to rid yourself of the sensation. Or Deja Vu Showgirls Voted #1 Strip Club in Las Vegas.

**Symbiosis** (from [Ancient Greek](#) "together" and "living") is close and often long-term interaction between two or more different biological [species](#). In 1877, Bennett used the word *symbiosis* (which previously had been used to depict people living together in community) to describe the [mutualistic](#) relationship.

Now why on earth is he opening up a review with definitions of two completely unrelated subjects and one of the definitions having two completely different meanings? Fair enough then:

1. Déjà vu obviously referring to the fact that I did a 3 component review of AVM products when they first entered the US market right here in these pages. The alternative definition is an ode to Las Vegas where I reside. A town in which for many years the CES convention high end stereo exhibits and the Adult Video convention took place in the same building. Hence the fact that Déjà vu is arguably rated the number one strip club in Vegas. For the sake of this article, definition one is the one that matters.

2. Symbiosis is the reference to an interesting interaction between a mix of two or more audio components that are solid-state and tube.

There you have it. This review is both a Déjà vu experience for me, and it is about the symbiosis between a set of solid-state and tube components all living together in relative perfect harmony, (noting that nothing is ever perfect if it is created by man).

The easy thing for me to do is to simply refer you back to my original article on the AVM products in Issue 61 from 2012 and amend it to say, "Yeah, more of that and with less of this and a bit of something to justify the price difference." Of course that would be expedient and easy but it would also do a disservice to this group of products. Because, in a nutshell, if I had the money to replace my long term reference system, this may well be the group of components I would choose to do it with.

Certainly some of this will be repetitive as we are talking about three components from the same company who produced the MA3.2 Mono Blocks, PA3.2 Preamp and the CD3.2 that I wrote about last year. That being said they are very different animals from the same species as it were.

### **The AVM Audio PA5.2 preamplifier**

As I began to write this review I was suddenly reminded of a painting that my beloved Aunt Barbara turned me on to. My aunt is one of those rare geniuses who combines incredible intellect, rapier wit, and unsurpassed passion in one stunning package. Over the years she has become my mentor, personal editor, intellectual guru, and supreme buddy! (And she actually gets my twisted sense of humor!) She had just shared with me a painting by the noted artist Jan Steen. The title of the painting, which was completed in 1665, is *So the Old Sing, So Twitter the Young*. I remember thinking, when I first saw the painting, "What a serendipitous and ultimately ironic title." A full one third of a century ago, prior to this moment in time, he chose to paint about the contrast in generations and their use of time. Who would have thought 348 years hence that essentially nothing has changed. Today's older generation would rather speak to each other face to face, to share in song and fellowship rather than Tweet, Facebook, text, and IM each other. We would rather sing! As it pertains to audio the same general philosophy applies. I would rather indulge in a less expedient, perhaps more extravagant method for enjoying my music than my granddaughter Olivia, who is more than satisfied with an iPod. The AVM gear in my possession is the type of gear that draws me into the music and envelopes the listener in the experience, as opposed to simply texting you the abbreviated music summation.



The first item to enter my system was the AVM PA5.2 preamp. This is a very cleanly designed unit, as are all the AVM products. The unadorned panel with its blue-lit display is easy on the eyes, and gives you all the info you might need sans stock prices and the current rate for precious metals and petroleum in real time. There may well be an option for that info. The display is also dimmable which can be very nice feature if you are in a dark room looking straight at the unit. Although blue light is my preferred, I have seen some blue LEDs that will damn near blind you. The HD light on my Cary unit can cause retinal damage if you look directly at it. Think Laser and not LED.

The PS5.2 preamp has a number of available options, making it supremely flexible and easy to tailor for anyone's needs. My unit was plain vanilla and only included the remote. Other options available are Tuner, Digital input, and phono stage. Even the basic unit is very flexible and easy to use.

#### GARY LEA'S SYSTEM

##### LOUDSPEAKERS

Von Schweikert VR4 MKIII, Odeon Elektra Horns, Compact WZSE Collector's Edition, Usher 6311 and AAD Silver Reference 1.

##### ELECTRONICS

Tube: Jolida Music Envoy 211 tube monoblock amps and preamp (main reference).  
Solid-State: ShengYa PSM-600 monoblock solid-state amps and matching CS6 tubed preamp.

##### SOURCES

Digital Front End: Grant Fidelity Reference Tube 1000 CD player (main reference), Cary Audio DVD 6 used as a CD, Wadia i170 iPod Deck and 160Gig iPod.  
Analogue Front End: Consonance Droplet 5.2 MKII with ST600tonearm (main reference) Nottingham Analogue Hyper Space and Arm with Wave

Inserting the PA5.2 into the system brought about an epiphany of sorts. While the previous components sounded good in my system with the Jolida preamp, good enough in fact that I was quite content to live with the level of performance it provided indefinitely, things really came alive and jumped a few notches when this last piece was put into place. Everything became totally seamless. This is where the idea of symbiosis came into the picture. While the PA5.2 is by no means a living, biologic, organic being, any more than the other components, there was something that just clicked when it was added to the rest of the system. It's like siblings, or couples, who have been together for years, or are just connected on that ethereal level. My wife and I often say the exact same thing at the exact same time. So much so it no longer startles us but just makes us give each other that acknowledging look. It is that feeling of always being connected and on the same page, soul to soul, so to speak. In a single solitary moment when the stylus hit the first grooves of Stephan Grappelli's "Just One of Those Things" from *Ji Grande Del Jazz*, Stephan Grappelli (GDJ47) I knew I had hit some level of that elusive audio nirvana.

Suddenly the separation and isolation of performers was as if I had stepped on the stage and placed them where they were. I got the sense of placement, relationship to each other, and almost could tell the relative height of each performer in my room. It was almost other-worldly and scary at the same time. It is important to note that no alcohol was used prior to, or during this part of my time with the AVM gear. I never do so during the critical part of my listening sessions. Other listening sessions, absolutely, but never during critical note-taking, so I cannot attribute the sensation to anything other than the gear and its ability to deliver the goods as well as I have ever heard it done in my room. Any time a reviewer starts to spout off about things like this it is purely subjective and my interpretation of what my ears hear and my other sense feel.

Listening to Joe Satriani's, "Flying in a Blue Dream" from the album of the same name,

Mechanic. **Montegiro Lusso with DaVinci Noble and SME 5009 tonearms.**

Cartridges - Koetsu Azule Platinum (main reference), Koetsu Urushi Vermillion, Goldnote Baldinotti, Dynavector 17D3 cartridges. Phone Stages: Goldnote Pamphili (main reference), Blue Circle Fon Lo Thingee, Musical Fidelity V3, and Koetsu Step up transformer.

#### CABLES

XLO Signature 3 interconnects speaker cables and power cords (main reference cables currently). Furutech DIY interconnects. Kimber Kable Monocle XL speaker cables and Select Interconnects. And a bunch of cables I am too lazy to list.

#### ACCESSORIES

Grant Fidelity RPF-120 MKII Reference Power Conditioner. Misc doodads and tweaks and loose parts like all audiophiles.

(Relativity Records), I was really able to feel the drive behind the music. This is a song with a lot of minute detail that is always taking place under the intensely woven lead guitar work of Satch. If a system is unable to break down each individual part of the music and present it accurately and at the right level, a bit of it gets lost. Such was not the case with Satch. (Yes I intended that to sound just like it does. Catchy, no?) Every detail from the opening background conversation, the obvious tone of a young female child, and the haunting acoustic intro were all handled with appropriate delicacy in the face of the mounting stampede of bass and drums that suddenly overtakes the soft intro. Those few seconds, for me at least, define the experience of the song. The PA5.2 just did a beautiful job integrating the whole track without missing a single iota of the detail and emotion!

When I played Dire Straits "Private Investigation", from the album *Love Over Gold* (Warner Brothers Records 2372811), supposedly a QUIEX II limited edition recording (whatever the hell that is), I was really drawn in more than usual. The beauty of this particular track is that it is almost as if Mark Knopfler is telling an intimate story in a private eye's office, and the music is simply a background to the story. It's hard for me not to get caught up in the nuances of guitar work in any song, let alone when you have a guitarist who is as sublime as Mark Knopfler. This song is especially captivating in the guitar work, but when played through the PA5.2 there was a sense of intimacy in the vocals that made me pay particularly close attention, as if he were having a conversation with me alone. I do not pretend to know what others find compelling in the music they listen to, or in the gear they choose for it, but I can say for me, music is deeply, and I do mean deeply, emotional, intimate, and personal. This is why I don't listen to much when others are around. I do not like the interruptions and distractions. I expect my gear, no I DEMAND that my gear, draw me in, get me involved, and leave me emotionally drained at the end of a session. During my time, with rare exception, that is exactly what the system fronted with the PA5.2 did. I am not sure I could ask for one tiny bit more from it.

That being said, it was that chillingly intimate. You can spend more than the \$5k plus that it takes to own the PA5.2. I can think of another preamp that I had in my room not too long ago that cost considerably more, but it was not five times better. \$5450 is certainly not chump change, at least not around my house. That being said, it is certainly not out of line for what the AVM PA5.2 offers, and in today's high end audiophile market that is something of a bargain. To match the performance you would likely have to spend at least twice that much, if not a considerable amount more. And to get any noticeable improvement you would need to spend three times as much at the minimum, based on my experience! Can't say that it is bargain-basement pricing, but I can state categorically that it is value pricing at its best. My advice? Check it out before someone figures out that this gear may well be a bit under priced! **Gary Lea**

#### Audio Evolution PA5.2 Tube Preamp

Retail: \$5450

#### AVM Audio USA

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F110-194  
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1-888-593-8488  
[www.avm-audio.com](http://www.avm-audio.com)  
[sales@avmaudiousa.com](mailto:sales@avmaudiousa.com)

#### Specifications:

- Tube output stages equipped with ECC83 (12 ax7a), balanced mode
- Regulated high voltage generator independent from AC mains for supply of the tubes
- 5 line inputs (one XLR), 1 processor in/out, 2 Pre Amp outputs (cinch and XLR)

- [Headphone output](#), switchable as front-in
- 3 slots for: Phono module (MM and MC), tuner module, USB DAC module with 192 kHz/24 bit up sampling (USB, SPDIF opt. and [coaxial](#))
- Input specific tone control and parametric loudness with bypass-function
- Blue graphic display, dimmable
- RC3 included
- Menu functions (i.e. adjustable input sensitivity, individual input naming, display settings and many more)
- Available finishes: aluminum silver or black, Chrome front optional
- Input sensitivity (output signal 1 V) 20 mV–350 mV (adjustable)
- Input impedance line cinch 6,8 k $\Omega$
- SNR line, MM, MC (Phono optional) 103 dB(A), 85 dB(A), 75 dB(A)
- Frequency range line/Phono (Option) <5 Hz – >80 kHz, 30 Hz – >20 kHz
- TIM 0,01 % (generally K3)
- Tuner (option)
- Frequency range 87,5 MHz–108,0 MHz
- Step 50 kHz
- Antenna impedance 50  $\Omega$
- Sensitivity mono/stereo 1,5  $\mu$ V/50  $\mu$ V
- S/N mono/stereo 76 dB(A)/70 dB(A)
- THD mono/stereo 0,1 %/0,3 %
- Digital input (option)
- Sampling frequency up-sampling to 192 kHz/24 bits
- Frequency response <5 Hz – >50 kHz (depends on input sampling rate)
- De-emphasis yes, auto
- Input data rate optical/coax SPDIF, 33 kHz–96 kHz/192 kHz/16–24 bits
- USB input 24/192 Asynchronous, no special drivers required
- S/N ratio 20 dB(A)
- Phono Module (option)
- Input sensitivity 50  $\mu$ V–10 mV (adjustable)
- Input impedance MM 47 k $\Omega$ /100–450 pF (adjustable)
- Input impedance MC 75  $\Omega$ –1 k $\Omega$  (adjustable)
- SNR MM (5 mV/1 kHz) 83 dB(A)

- SNR MC (0,5 mV/1 kHz) 79 dB(A)
- Frequency range <5 Hz – >50 kHz
- Phono de-emphasis RIAA  $\pm$  0,3 dB
- Power supply AC 230V/50–60 Hz/25 VA (stand by <1 VA)
- Dimensions (W x H x D) 430 x 130 x 370 mm
- Weight approx. 9 kg (depending on version)



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