

# DENAFRIPS ATHENA

*A real joy from a high-end Aficionado*

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As a long-time audiophile and as a high end aficionado, I think I know how to distinguish good electronic devices and appreciate them at their true value. I am not a reviewer or a high-end critic, but an informed consumer with the sole intention of passionately transmitting my musical experience. Nevertheless, I will remain modest in my observations because my musical perception is based only on personal experience. I do not expect to be a "guru" or a "know-it-all".

I've long understood that audio electronics must be well associated, and then evaluated according to the other electronic elements of a Hifi system. It is therefore obvious that the characteristics of the associated equipment must be similar or very close in order to ensure a perfect combination of sound reproduction. The bottleneck is located at the weakest electronic element, thus limiting all other elements of a system. However, for some

associations there are cases where the exception does not make the rule. Indeed, you will find the equipment associated with the Athena below. The aficionados will understand.

The Athena is remarkably well made, and the thick aluminum case allows the electronics to reveal themselves at their best. Aesthetically one can say that the design is rather inspired by Nordic trends and the aesthetic success is materialized by its sobriety. We are not here with a product that is complex to use. The implementation is efficient thanks to its simplicity.



The Athena offers 1 RCA input and 3 other XLR with 2 XLR outputs and 1 RCA.

The remote control is machined from a single block of aluminum, anodized in black. It controls preamp volume, source selection and display dimming.

On the front panel the display is large enough, and you can easily see the selected input and the selected sound level.

The preamp features an advanced CPLD discrete relay microprocessor with 60 level volume control, coupled with a Darlington current-controlled array of Darlington matrices and metal film resistors to military specifications, it has achieved perfect channel balance, ultra-low THD+N distortion at 0.000120%. (Denafrips source)

The output stage is Class A and the encapsulated power supply unit is located underneath the main control panel - with a double layer of shielded MU sheets in between. This effectively suppresses harmful electromagnetic interference (EMI/EMF) from the power supply unit. (Denafrips source)

A special attention on the power supply is observable by a double power supply allowing a clean energy and which is the basis for a good sound quality. Multi-stage, low-drop voltage regulators and a large capacitor bank supply clean energy effortlessly to class A circuits. (Denafrips source)

Good preamplifiers are becoming scarce today, regardless of the prices, which in my opinion are often exaggerated. The preamplifier acts as the first amplification stage located closest to the signal source. According to Friis' theorem, it is the preamplifier that guarantees a good signal to noise ratio at the output of the system since it must succeed in extracting a very weak electrical signal and here the Athena plays its role to the full.

Adept of the integration of various equipment and not mono-brand, the preamplifier power amplifier couple must be excessively well chosen and at the risk of repeating myself a particular attention will have to be made in the choice of the amplifier that is to say the perfect adaptation of the characteristics of the Athena and the amplifier. This is not easy to find if you are a perfectionist.

In spite of this difficulty encountered with the Athena on the choice of amplification, the Athena preamplifier with such a price level was a real surprise for me. A high-flying listening experiences! What happiness! For a better understanding, we will briefly approach the sound aesthetics.

The Athena expresses itself perfectly on the Spanish harlem Rebecca Pidgeon disc and it is important to underline that these qualities are undeniable and when this preamplifier is associated with the Terminator or other quality DACs, it is an uncommon introduction to high resolution.

The music expresses itself and is articulated on the depth of the soundtrack. A feeling of fullness, especially on classical music, which is challenging. The ultra-transparent Athena preamplifier allows the Terminator and Lite 7 from Lampizator to express themselves with ease, with the advantage of an exceptional sound image due to the DAC "tubed" with EML 45 Mesh. When you give a tube meshed anodes (Mesh), something magical happens in the sound. In many cases, a more transparent sound scene appears, which means a more realistic stereo reproduction of the original sound recording.

In return, the resolution of the Terminator compensates for the muffled sound of the Lite 7 (Lampizator), but with a precise sound image and good resolution. The sound stage is wide and the instruments clearly identifiable. The audiophile sound of MDG classical reference CDs confirms this:

- Francis Poulenc Norddeutscher Figuralchor Jörg Strauber as well as on JS Bach performed by Harriof Schlichtig, viola, Yumi sekika, piano.
- Josha bell Bernstein west side Story Sony classical.

How to do better and how to express the musical atmosphere from these electronics? The CD of Hans Theessink & Terry Evans visions Blue Groove makes us dream and the whole Mississippi shines at each note, the vibratos of the path of each artist are perfectly reproduced. Just listen to Mother Earth - got to keep Moving - At dark end of the street etc. Two ways two guitars is all the talent of the artists who express themselves. The Athena is capable of faithfully recreating the atmosphere, the context and the small noises associated with the sound recording.

On the CDs following Sarah k stars Stockfish records and Bach cello suites Queyras by Harmonia Mundi as well as with the interpretation of Yo-Yo MA Solo Sony classical Bright Sheng Seven Tunes in China (track 9) allow us to appreciate the purity of the medium it is fast and detailed, it was slightly upfront in its presentation, yet very adept at rendering timbres naturally. In essence, it was very balanced, presented superb imaging and was very true to life. On the CD Correnteza by Ana Caram the natural background of a tropical nature blends perfectly and offers a natural reproduction on my Avalon Indra. The transparency of the Athena is exceptional and as I already said above this kind of preamplifier is rare because it does not intervene and disappears when listening and lets the associated equipment express itself. As much as the Dac Terminator is the perfect chord for this preamplifier as much as the Dac Lite 7 from Lampizator coupled with the Athena is exceptional all the variations, the nuances and I am talking here about the nuances which indicate the relative intensity of a note, a phrase, or even an entire passage of a musical work, these nuances allow the musician to restore the dynamics of the work during its interpretation and they are reproduced here with finesse and softness thanks to the EML 45 Mesh tubes.

For example, the dynamics are thus brilliantly reproduced. The pianissimo at the beginning of the 2nd movement Romance Larghetto of the Chopin Concerto performed by Martha Argerich & Claudio Abbado with the London Symphonies Orchestra of Deutsche Grammophon is a marvel.

In order to check and having a weakness for Chopin I tested the same concerto n°1 romance larghetto but here interpreted by Daniil Trifonov "Chopin Evocation" by Deutsche Grammophon and then in comparison with Lang Lang Chopin 2nd movement on the CD The piano concertos Wiener Philharmoniker and with Zubin metha as conductor by Deutsche Grammophon.

These three interpretations of Deutsche Grammophon's Chopin by different performers respect the differences in interpretation, without embellishment, without any specific sound identities, an absolute neutrality

Concerning the presence and focus of the instruments, the Athena Terminator tuning is not lacking and on the CD Music of post -Byzantine high society- I hoped and still hope Various Hilaris one finds this impression of definition and the left-right balances are respected and the sound image extended. This is the great quality of the Athena.

The image is holographic, three-dimensional without ever having an oversized image and not, for example, of the double bass which is outside the listening room but in the garden! The Lampizator Athena couple is simply magical in terms of three-dimensional image. The Terminator, on the other hand, offers a shallower but extremely pleasant sound stage. On the Diapason test CD, the piece Saint James Infirmary (traditional) with Maxim Saury (clarinet); Michel Crichton (piano stanway D) is the perfect illustration of this image and the feeling of focus of the instruments.

Conclusions.

What to say about Denafrips electronics: exceptional! Surely. To criticize for the sake of criticizing would be too easy and above all dishonest. The Athena is a preamplifier that promises, and I don't doubt for a moment that a plus version will eventually be proposed. I am very astonished that institutional critics have not yet shown up on this preamplifier.

The Athena must be combined with high end amps and I can guarantee that the musical experience will be there.

I would like to take this opportunity to say how happy I am to have the DAC Terminator, and I have nothing to teach you because these DACs are indeed among the best DACs on the market. If the Terminator is so subtle with a zest of its tube, I can't wait to listen to hear its big brother the Terminator +...

My only regret is not having been able to use my vinyl records and the opportunity to use I2s connectivity. In the first case my phono preamplifier was not adapted in terms of gain to the preamplifier and my system does not have an I2s link.

For the test I have used no up sampling and all the test with 16 bits or 24 bits 44.1 or 48khz

There will be other occasions to completely review the Terminator + as after this musical experience my curiosity for the DAC is growing.

What else can I say? It's remarkably well made in China, high class at a moderate price. It's accessible to every audiophile, no snobbery. That's what hifi should be: accessible and not just for the happy few.

I takes my Hat off and I say: Bravo Denafrips!

Musical greetings to all the aficionados and above all a big thank you to Kamen from Denafrips Europe who is doing the best to promote the brand.

Associated audio Equipment:

Drive: Mark Levinson 31 cable AES EBU NBS reference - Recloaker Mutec MC3 USB & cable: AES EBU Siltech signature / on DAC - Power cord Energia Alef

Mack book pro - software: Audirivana - cable USB Transparent

DAC Denafrips Terminator - DAC Lampizator Lite 7 & Tubes EML 45 Mesch - power cord NBS reference - Interconnect: Music Link Reference balanced from Transparent

Preamp Athena from Denafrips Interconnect RCA Kubala Sosna Revelation MIT MA Oracle Balanced - Power cord NBS Ref

Power Amplifier: Spectral 360 mon block - Power cord speakers cable MIT MA oracle to Speakers - Power cord Oyade Tunami GPX - power cleaner: Delta Sigma

Speakers : Avalon Indra - Avalon Eidolon Diamond