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**WHAT HI-FI?**  
★★★★★

# Chord

## Ultima Pre 3/Ultima 6

Pre/power amplifier

★★★★★

### Chord's starter full-size pre/power sets high standards for the price

**T**he **Ultima Pre 3/Ultima 6** is Chord's starter full-size stereo pre/power pairing. The Pre 3 is a pure line-level device with five standard inputs, two of which are balanced XLRs, plus a 3A / 5 Volt USB type A power output on the back panel that can be used to feed external products such as Chord's Hugo 2 or Qutest DACs. The Ultima 6 power amplifier is even simpler, with just balanced and single-ended inputs and a chunky set of speaker outputs. It's a powerful unit though, and outputs a claimed 180 watts per channel.

One of the cornerstones of Chord's electronic designs has always been the use of ultra-high-frequency power supplies, rather than the usual big transformer/large smoothing capacitor configuration used by most rivals. Not only does the efficiency of such a power supply allow Chord to make more compact and physically lighter products, but the company also claims sonic advantages in terms of distortion, responsiveness and stability. Both the Pre 3 and Ultima 6 use these kinds of power supplies, tailored for their specific requirements. The preamp's circuitry isn't just a tweaked carry-over from the previous generation of Chord products, but rather takes a fresh look at the task; and it approaches it with all the technical advancements and experience gained over three decades-worth of manufacturing.

The Ultima 6 uses a clever dual feed-forward amplifier topology, with sophisticated drive circuitry feeding 32 proprietary MOSFET power devices to deliver that healthy output figure. Chord claims the electronic design gives benefits across the board from very low distortion figures to wide ranging dynamics.

Build quality is excellent. Both units feel immensely well made with thick aluminium panels and a high standard of

Chord's pre/power combo is nicely made and exudes an aura of luxury

**WHAT HI-FI?**

#### SOUND

★★★★★

#### BUILD

★★★★★

#### FEATURES

★★★★★

#### FOR

- Impressive detail resolution
- Sonic precision
- Outstanding clarity and insight
- Astonishing speed

#### AGAINST

- Preamplifier's controls could work more slickly
- Cheap-feeling remote

#### VERDICT

Chord's Ultima Pre 3/Ultima 6 pre/power combination leads the class when it comes to clarity and insight

"Old favourites come through with verve, and at high levels manage to pin us back in our seat with the energy"



There's a fine sense of scale here too, thanks to an expansive, open and beautifully stable soundstage and the ability to deliver huge dynamic swings when the music demands. Old favourites such as the *Gladiator* OST come through with verve, and at high levels manage to pin us back

in our seat with the energy on show. These are expensive items and they certainly exude a luxury aura.

#### DYNAMIC FINESSE

While Chord's amplifiers have invariably been detail retrievers of a high order, they haven't always been as successful when it comes to musical engagement. The company's latest designs, however, have kept all the clarity, precision and speed of previous generations but now combine that with a more natural sounding fluidity and dynamic finesse. There's a greater sense of tonal richness. The Ultima Pre 3/Ultima 6 combination is still a highly analytical beast, though. It allows the listener to dissect a recording if they desire and dig deeply into its production. When we listen to Arvo Pärt's *Tabula Rasa* we are acutely aware of the recording venue's acoustics and the way the musicians fit into that space. We hear low level reverb sounds that we haven't really noticed before, and marvel at the way this Chord combination uncovers so much information, so effortlessly.

There is class-leading composure and little sign of strain even when we push very hard. Even dynamic contrasts are maintained long after most alternatives begin to sound compressed.

We also like the way this combo renders bass. Lows are punchy, powerful and immensely taut. It can track rapid changes with ease and reveals plenty of textural detail where it exists. Our time with the Chord pairing is something of a blur as we go through a wide range of recordings, both old and new. Each time we play a different artist we find ourselves admiring the Chord's transparency in showing up the differences in recording techniques over the years, from the bare-boned stereo of early Beatles to the sophistication of Quincy Jones's *Back On The Block*.

This Pre 3/Ultima 6 pairing is closer than most to being an 'all things to all people' amplification solution. Take care to partner with suitably talented and sympathetic partnering equipment and it will sing.

