

Four Phono Stages

ALVIN GOLD ASSESSES FOUR PHONO STAGES WITH SERIOUS PERFORMANCE POTENTIAL, WITH ASSISTANCE FROM MARTIN COLLOMS AND CHRIS BRYANT

INTRODUCTION

There is something at once exciting but also terrifying about audiophile attitudes to vinyl replay. By now vinyl should be footnote in history, but someone didn't read the plot, and instead it could even be that CD will have been consigned to the graveyard before vinyl takes its last gasp. The terrifying aspect of course is the quasi-religious zeal of many vinyl adherents, which simply knows no bounds, and which it is hard to avoid concluding is only loosely related to any rational assessment of the merit of the format. You have probably heard that vinyl is incomparably better than CD. It isn't of course, even if it once was back in the early days of digital audio.

What really sets vinyl apart is obvious enough when you think about it, and can be summed up in three words: catalogue, catalogue and catalogue. The reality is that no one will ever again record Wagner's Ring again for the very first time, and very probably no one will ever conjure up a worthy successor for the Beatles, Rolling Stones or Bob Dylan. Some of course will point to the sound quality issue as the clincher in vinyl's favour, but I don't buy this for a second. If it really was all about sound, we'd be braying for DVD-Audio or SACD, which have been all but written out of the history books. Or even Elcaset, which long ago suffered that ignominious fate. No, the reason why vinyl has the status that it does is because its heyday coincided with a brief moment in history which saw a confluence of cultural influences, musical ideas and technological possibilities that no later or earlier age has been able to anticipate - or replicate.

Notwithstanding all this, vinyl replay can be remarkably good. With sufficient care and attention, sound quality from records may indeed be in the same ballpark as CD. Sometimes worse, but equally sometimes better. Not better if you're easily put off by the merest whiff of vinyl roar, or impulsive surface noise of course. You need to cultivate a certain forbearance for endemic analogue shortcomings that is simply not otherwise necessary in a digital age. We'll return to this later.