

Disparate Phono Stages

CHRIS BRYANT SCRUTINISES FIVE PHONO PRE-AMPLIFIERS, EACH VERY DIFFERENT FROM THE OTHERS

CHRIS BRYANT

For good or ill, digitally recorded music now seems to be becoming more of a computer product than an audio one, and in the short term anyway, I believe that this can only be a negative move. While poorly encoded music such as MP3 files take over the mass market, vinyl and CD may be left as the only generally available resource of recorded music that can be called high fidelity. It might be argued that this is good for the enthusiast, because plenty of good recorded material comes onto the secondhand market, as computer archives replace traditional methods of music storage.

Vinyl is still available, and I have recently found 30, 40 and even 50 year old secondhand LPs, that look as though they've never been played. Those readers that do not have a record deck will still find it worth keeping in touch with what's happening in the analogue field. Unless there is a useful change in the direction of digital audio [*perhaps via the downloading of higher resolution FLAC files? – Ed*] I can only see an uncertain future for it. There is talk of Blue Ray high definition audio, but results currently seem unfocused at best. I also wonder if there is enough real interest from the general public to make this format happen. So is the future of digital audio a mediocre 'it will do' mass market affair? I hope not but fear it might be.

This disparate group of phono stages covers a wide price spectrum. The Musical Fidelity *V-LPS* is available for less than £100, yet the Sutherland *2020* costs £2000. Four of the units are solid state designs; the fifth uses valves. Comparative references used in these tests include an Audio Research *Reference Phono 2*, a Creek *OBH15*, a Naim *Superline* with *Supercap* power supply, and a Raysonic *SP88* integrated amplifier (which includes a very good phono stage). Cartridges used included Koetsu *Urushi Vermilion*, Audio Note UK *IQ3*, Rega *Exact*, and Audio Technica *OC9/III*.

My recent experience, including some time spent with the exceptionally costly Audio Note *M9* (reviewed in *HIFICRITIC Vol4 No3*), has shown surprising improvements at the top end of the market. The art of reproducing great sound from vinyl records is at a level that seemed impossible only a year or two ago. I now wonder just how far it can go, where this may ultimately lead, and am continually amazed at how good LP replay can be. So, while progress is made at high end prices, all designers have an obligation to create more affordable components able to approach or exceed the current standards set by these costly phono stages.

The technologies employed to create such fine products does not seem to follow any particular path. Every designer has different ideas on how to apply the available solutions and move the state of the art forward, but it's always interesting to try and spot similarities in the products that sound particularly good. Unfortunately, the references mentioned above indicate that there's no specific path to follow: each model somehow manages to extract more by further developing the technology the company habitually uses. I therefore conclude there's good reason to believe that the current pinnacle of performance can be exceeded through further development, and/or made available at more affordable prices. We can only look forward to this happening.

Now that I've given good reasons to be interested in such an ancient technology, I can get on with the reviewing. Although some of the devices assessed here are only a small fraction of the price of the reference models, I tried all of them in the highest quality system available, but also used more modest arrangements that provided a closer price match to some of the units on test. It was interesting to find that the review samples maintained the same ranking positions irrespective of the total system price, and attracted similar sound quality comments. Such consistency in preferences is very encouraging.

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