

Audio Research PH5 phono pre-amplifier



ARC is replacing both PH3 and PH3SE phono stages with a superior model costing less. And it even comes with a remote!

Audio Research PH5

PRICE £1799

Continuing to revert exclusively to vinyl usage for my 'pleasure', as opposed to 'reviewing' listening, I'm ecstatic about the flood of killer phono stages available today. My absolute references, but beyond my means, are the Manley Steelhead and the Audio Research Reference Phono, while I adore the EAR 324 for its unbelievable flexibility and quietness – a masterpiece. EAR's 834P remains my sub-£500 all-tube reference, while I can't recommend too highly either the Pro-Ject Tube or the NAD PP2 for sheer value for money.

But it's time to get selfish. I try to treat myself to a piece of hi-fi each year, having bought London and Koetsu cartridges, the Denon DVD-2900 universal player and other bits and pieces since the change of millennia. Now I'm after a phono stage with three specific requirements, beyond sublime sound. They are, in ascending order of importance, 1) a price I can manage, 2) valves inside and 3) ultimate suitability for the two cartridges I love best: the aforementioned Koetsu and London. Which makes it so tough, because one's a moving-coil and the other's a high-output freak of science.

Enter a new phono stage from Audio Research Corporation, with trickle-down technology from the REF. ARC explained the arrival of the PH5: 'The PH3 series had been in our line some nine years and needed replacing. Discussions with our retailers and importers indicated that a well-performing product around US \$2000 was what they and their customers were looking for. So, our task was to give them a phono stage that was a clear sonic advancement upon the previous products, with enhanced features, a little more gain (+3 dB), at a lower price (some \$600 lower than the previous SE). Thus the PH5.' Not an easy task, as the PH3 and PH3 Special Edition

side and four soft-touch buttons on the right. The buttons control Power, Mute, Mono and Loading for 47k, 1000, 500, 200 or 100 ohms through press-press scrolling. Here's the irresistible kicker for analogue addicts: the PH5 comes with a remote control for all functions, so you can listen to the adjustments from your hot seat. [But see the sidebar, 'To Load Or Not To Load'.]

PH3/PH3SE owners will recognise the layout of the rear panel, with one pair each of phono-socket inputs and outputs, an earthing post and an IEC three-pin mains socket. Alas, due to cost, balanced output is not available, but ARC will consider it for a dearer variant if there's enough

“ And the vocals! Natural, with sibilance that sounded real. I implore you: audition this with some Peggy Lee! ”

have been major successes and remained unchanged, for nine and six years, respectively.

Its response? The new PH5, replacing both the PH3 and PH3SE, with a retail price of £1799. Its 48cm front panel layout matches the SP16 and CD3 Mk II, with green LED indicators on the left

demand. Like the PH3, the PH5 is a hybrid, using a high-gain, 5-JFET per channel, non-inverting input stage with constant-current stabilisation and no overall feedback. A direct link to the flagship REF is new RIAA circuitry, patterned after the Reference Phono's RIAA stage, with



To load or not to load

There's nothing as rewarding as learning something new, and the PH5 completely altered my understanding of moving-coil cartridge loading.

Like most audiophiles who lived through the Great Moving Coil Renaissance of the 1970s, I thought of loading to be as important as driving sober, safe sex and paying VAT. Boy, was I wrong. What happened was this: After carefully installing the PH5, with the Koetsu Urushi in place, I was not merely surprised but distressed to hear absolutely no level changes whatsoever when scrolling through the impedance settings on the PH5.

I freaked – was it a dud? So I found myself entering a phone-and-e-mail exchange with Terry Dorn of Audio Research. He told me, 'Ken, don't worry, so did I. Our techs explained that with low-impedance cartridges, the actual impedance differences between 100 and 47k ohms work out mathematically to be almost negligible. However, with a cartridge having an internal impedance of, say, 500 ohms, the



difference becomes much more audible. "On a higher output cartridge," one of our technicians explained, "the different loading options will act like a very subtle tone control, mainly affecting the high frequencies and reducing overall volume slightly as you load the cartridge down."

'At most we're looking at subtle differences, not radical ones, and it is possible that, depending how the record was recorded and cut, one setting may be preferred on one record and on another record another loading option might be

preferred. We have also found that some cartridge manufacturer's loading recommendations do not accurately reflect the actual internal impedance of the cartridge. But, again, they may feel that most users will find their recommended loading the best-sounding option for most systems and most recordings.

'So, as it is with so many things in this industry, cartridge loading is a combination of measurement, subjective preference and system synergy. Perhaps not a "black art", but as much art as science.'

passive high frequency and active low frequency equalisation. ARC believes that this results in an improved margin of stability under the most demanding conditions.

Four 6922 twin triodes make up the non-inverting gain and output stages, with high-stability power supplies and four separate regulators for all valve heaters, plate supply and microprocessor logic. Bandwidth is 0.7Hz–400kHz (–3dB), while gain has been increased to 57.5dB – I had to trim the phono stage output down to match the line sources. The PH5 pumps out plenty of signal, resulting in a lowered noise floor for most installations. And it was consistent with the McIntosh C2200/MC2102 and Musical Fidelity kW combinations, and the PrimaLuna Prologue One, Audio Analogue Maestro and Audion Lo Sfizio integrateds.

Regardless of how hard I made the system work – Apogee Scintilla, Wilson WATT Puppy 7, LS3/5A, Sonus Faber Guarneri – and irrespective of my hunger for level, the PH5 never failed to deliver sufficient oomph. Main listening involved four wildly differing designs fitted to the SME V/SME 30/2 front end: the London SuperGold and Grado Prestige MM/MI/MF cartridges, and Koetsu and Transfiguration MCs. No question: the PH5 met all three of my criteria, caressing the Koetsu

and preserving its warmth and sheen, while opening the window for the peerless frequency extremes of the London, especially the snappy bass. Treble? Crystal clear and – above all, when you're dealing with Londons – scarily fast, the transients snapping without smearing, without hindrance. With so much gain, background noise was never an issue. With so much transparency, everything else profited.

It was a litany of superlatives: massive soundstage, wide and deep to the point where there was no doubt of the presence of specific sounds beyond the outer edges of the speakers. Front-to-back depth turned into an added benefit especially for mono listening – all those wonderful Capitols and RCA and Columbias I've been enjoying. And the vocals! Natural, detailed, with sibilance that sounded real rather than spitty. I implore you: audition this with some Peggy Lee!

But there is one area where the PH5 nears the REF Phono and the Steelhead at three or four times the price: retrieval of low-level detail. I simply heard 'stuff' I hadn't before, including the very artefacts that make a listening experience more real: Keely Smith's breathing while Louis Prima was mugging about, greater separation of voices among the Hi-Los and the Crew Cuts, more subtlety in harmonic overtones on acoustic guitar,

dazzling tastes of mallet and drumstick and pedal in well-recorded percussion tracks. Microphone fetishists will want to dig out test discs that tell whether they used Neumanns or AKGs.

Simply the most 'real-sounding' phono stage I've experienced below £2000, the PH5 is a natural upgrade from the delightful EAR 834P. Had I more patience, I might have waited before buying, for there are two phono stages due soon that should also tempt me: EAR's valve version of the 324, and the all-valve Quad phono stage to match the QC24, which I've used in 'beta test' form – a stunner at under £1500, believe me. But I've always had a soft spot for Audio Research. And now I actually own a piece. ■

Ken Kessler

Supplier

Absolute Sounds
020 8971 3909
www.absolutesounds.com

Hi-FiNews verdict

A highly flexible and superb-sounding product that is sure to whet the appetites of vinyl lovers who've long hankered after a piece of the Audio Research legend. Strong on vocals and low-level detail retrieval.