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REFERENCE PHONO 2

This amazing phono stage delivers CD a damning blow

PRICE £11,495 **CONTACT** Absolute Sounds ■ 020 8971 3909 ■ www.audioresearch.com

This device kills CDs. While in our company, the Reference Phono 2 phono stage totally suppressed any desire to set CDs spinning – it makes vinyl sound that good. There was wailing and gnashing of teeth when this not insubstantial slab of kit had to return to its Audio Research home, we can tell you.

So, if size matters, the Phono 2 is undoubtedly the business. For a phono stage it's enormous – we've seen smaller 500-watt power amps. Admittedly, the box could be made slightly less high, but only if the tall 6550C tube was put on its side.

There are inputs for two turntables with switchable hi/lo gain, variable cartridge-loading impedance and selectable equalisation. It offers balanced inputs and balanced/unbalanced outputs plus full remote control.

This phono stage is compatible with most fixed and moving coil pickups. It's possible to select cartridge loading impedances between 50ohms and 47kohms and there are two sensitivity settings – high giving a 23dB increase in gain. Six tubes are employed – four 6H30 dual triodes for signal processing, plus one 6H30 and one 6550C in the power supply. The unit weighs around 12.3kg (27lbs), and comes in a 19-inch rack-type mounting with grab handles. Being tube, it gets fairly warm during use – not excessively, but certainly warm enough not to allow you to leave LP sleeves on the top of the unit while in use.

It's a fairly simple and straightforward item to install. For a typical moving coil cartridge, you'd set the gain to high, and the load impedance to the value suggested by the cartridge maker – though the 'correct' setting is largely down to personal taste.

The 47kohm setting is for fixed-coil pickups. With moving coil pickups, any impedance can be used. 50ohms gives maximum damping, but may lead to a sound that's a bit dull and lacking in sparkle. Unusually, you're offered a choice of equalisation curves – either the standard RIAA curve, or one for Decca or Columbia. Subjectively, the Decca and Columbia settings reduce the extreme treble compared to RIAA EQ – presumably to counteract the tonal brightness of early Decca and Columbia LP pressings.

SOUND QUALITY

Sonically, the Phono 2 delivers a crisp presentation – clear, smooth, and effortlessly detailed. Presentation is focused and articulate – very open-sounding and highly-revealing, yet simultaneously refined, clean, and exceptionally good at highlighting fine detail.

It's also capable of surprising you. Depending on the LP, the sound can display unexpected shifts of tonal balance and dynamics – smooth and refined one moment, then suddenly brilliant and immediate the next. A backing voice, for example, may suddenly project in a manner that catches you completely off-guard – something that rarely happens with CD, which tends to have a sameness about it compared with good vinyl. The phono stage reveals the kind of subtle tonal colours and holographic soundstaging that CD only hints at. At the same time, the presentation has impressive scale and dimensionality – it's big and solid, despite having plenty of finesse.

One disc that unexpectedly demonstrates the device's vinyl capabilities is Joni Mitchell's 1979 LP *Mingus*. We've always felt that the sound of the early British pressing has always seemed a bit contrived and flat, lacking in dynamics and bass/treble extremes. But, now we have to eat our words. Here, *Mingus* sounds amazing – the layering of vocals and instruments impresses, with a huge range of colours and contrasts previously unexperienced.

We sampled a bit of Joni's earlier album *Court and Spark* and once again were very taken with how crisp and detailed the sound was. The Phono 2 really plays to the strengths of old recordings – in other words, it reveals lots of subtle detail without pulling the recording apart. At the same time, it remains a very revealing component. Be warned: it will show weaknesses in your front-end, if there are any.

On LPs that sounds a bit bright, it's possible to dial-in the Columbia or Decca equalisation curves. This takes some of the sting out of the extreme top-end – the Columbia setting being the stronger of the two.

For best results, use via its balanced outputs. These produce a slightly louder/bigger sound than the unbalanced option, giving the music greater space and definition and a broader more

holographic soundstage.

Residual hiss and hum are very low with this preamp and should not be an issue with any but the lowest-output MC cartridges: the high-gain input stage employs special low-noise FETs. However, the gain difference between high and low is a bit wide: it

would have been nice to have had an extra in-between setting.

Overall, the Phono 2 is an amazing piece of kit – one that makes LPs sound incredible. We didn't want to listen to CD after it went back: there seemed to be something lacking. ■

Jimmy Hughes

“The Reference Phono 2 really plays to the strengths of old vinyl recordings”

