

HIFICRITIC



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THE REGENERATION GAME

Will hi-fi ever win back today's music listeners? Andrew Everard reckons that 'loud' is more important than hi-res 'quality'.

PHONO STAGES

Harry Harrison checks out six phono stages, including models from iFi, Timestep, Graham Slee, Rothwell, Naim Audio and Audio Research

ACTIVE SPEAKERS

Martin Colloms assesses a couple of affordable active stand-mounts: the PreSonus Eris5 and the Yamaha MusicCast NX-N500

BOWERS & WILKINS 707 S2

Bowers & Wilkins' new 700-series has inherited technology from its flagship 800-series. Chris Frankland tries out the entry-level 707 S2 stand-mount

HIFICRITIC ANNUAL AWARDS 2017

Our retrospective awards come in three forms: Audio Excellence, Recommended and Best Buys. In this piece we summarise the review findings from 11 years and 48 issues of the magazine

MUSIC & MORE

REVIEWED THIS ISSUE

AKG N90Q
Russell K RED 150
Silver Solids
Inakustik LS-4994
iFi Audio micro iPhono2
Brainwavz Delta
Timestep T-01MC
Graham Slee Accession MC
Rothwell Signature One
Naim Audio SuperLine
Audio Research PH9
AqVox CAT 2109
PreSonus Eris5
Yamaha MusicCast NX-N500
Bowers & Wilkins 707 S2
Pioneer N-70AE
AqVox Switch 8 SE
LessLoss 5x Firewall Module
Inakustik NF-2404

Audio Research PH9

**HIFICRITIC
RECOMMENDED**

Manufacturer's Specification

Gain	55dB
Input impedance	various
Output impedance	200ohms
Distortion	<0.015% (3V, 1kHz)
Size (WxDxH)	48x34.8x13.7cms
Weight:	7kg
Price	£7,498

HARRY FINDS THIS COSTLY VALVE-BASED PHONO STAGE HAS LOADS OF MUSICAL DETAIL

The Audio Research Corporation (ARC) was one of the first companies to develop serious outboard phono amplifiers in the early 1980s. This £7,498 *PH9* is the eighth of a Foundation line that began in 1992. The 'house style' of a large box and lab handles makes the products instantly identifiable.

Since the original solid-state *PH1*, the internals have been tweaked over successive generations, including the first move to a hybrid valve topology for the *PH3*, while keeping a solid-state power supply. The *PH9* uses three Sovtek *6N30P* double triodes for signal amplification; the regulated supply has a large *6550WE* tetrode and another *6N30P*.

The total weight is a surprisingly light 7kg, thanks to a lightweight perforated aluminium chassis. Assisted by a solid-state front end plus remote control, basic input impedance can be relay-switched from across the room. Mono mode may also be selected, and one can cycle through the remaining microcontroller-aided features, such as a valve-life counter, and an auto-shutdown timer adjustment. However, since this is an entry-level product, there's no remote switching of input capacitance, equalisation or gain, all of which are available on the top *Reference Phono 3* model.

Gain is fixed at 55dB, which lies somewhat uncomfortably between the typical outputs of MM and MC types. Input impedance can be set at 100, 200, 500, 1kohm and 47kohm. Build quality is instrument-class, and with by far the highest component count of all units in this group. The front panel packs an Atmel 8-bit RISC microcontroller and a large fluorescent display, with all audio circuitry arranged across a huge PCB that stretches side to side. The power supply is based on an R-core transformer, a hefty bank of electrolytics, and several solid-state regulators in addition to the valve heater-voltage regulation. Audiophile passive components include REL-CAP, Nichicon and ARC-branded capacitors.

Sound Quality

The *PH9* delivers a very wide bandwidth and majors on midband detail and treble revelation. The review sample looked new, and initially there was a decidedly solid-state electronic quality that 200 hours later had settled into a merely bright and hyper-detailed effect, and in a purer valve-like way.

Setup proved tricky as the available gain was not optimum for the average output (500µV) moving-coil

cartridge used throughout testing. One can turn up the pre-amplifier volume, but such higher volume positions highlighted HF hiss as well as a trace of mains hum. An external 1:5 step-up transformer (+14 dB, for an overall gain of 69 dB) addressed the issue.

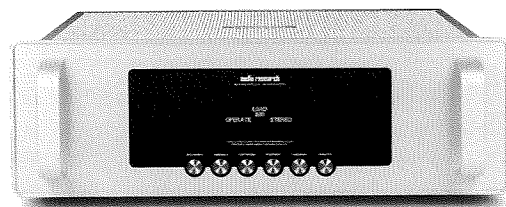
With energetic electronica music, the *PH9* repaid with a dazzling performance: Leftfield's *Leftism* album rarely sounded so muscular through its earth-shaking bass layers, and was cavernous in stereo depth and height. That extra illumination also worked well on acoustic jazz, giving the delicious bell-like chime to Christian Garros' kit on various Jacques Loussier Trio recordings. Paradoxically, the apparent spotlight on the treble did not put worn and scratchier LPs off limits. Surface noise was audible of course, but not exaggerated.

Pace was rarely found wanting. This Audio Research unit has a fleet and incisive bass despite its thunderous impact on the right recordings, and while I wouldn't fault its overall timing, I did find the musical flow came second to the amazing exposition of detail on offer. Perhaps this is a phono stage that's more for the head than the heart, the ARC's forensic extraction of instrumental and ambient nuances meant attention could be diverted from the music as a whole, either in favour of the production or perhaps diluting the timbral riches.

A final salute must go to that midband, which allowed the human voice in particular to step out of the mix. Like other good phono amps, this was not promotion in level or image position, the soundstage remaining suitably ordered and far back. The *PH9* could demonstrate where a singer had opted to overdub a familiar recording, and see exactly which member was contributing harmonies in pop and rock songs with multiple vocalists. Over several months, the *PH9*'s extraordinary powers of analysis brought me huge enjoyment, though it may not be for everyone.

Conclusions

The Audio Research *PH9* is a valve phono stage with a high-definition sound that delivers exceptional clarity through the treble in particular. This is sufficient for Recommendation, but note that its gain is too low for best results with most moving-coil cartridges, so it might well benefit from an additional step-up transformer.



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