

Pure & Simple



There's nothing like a purpose-designed valve phono stage, says Noel Keywood...

This phono stage was stolen from our office with indecent haste. I made off into the night with it, padding through Maida Vale's quiet side streets with a certain amount of determination, because I know what I like and I guessed that I would like the P10. It had to be spirited away before anyone else realised what lay inside the anonymous cardboard box and committed the heinous felony of spiriting it away before me. [Such behaviour with tasty tube products is depressingly familiar to we who work with Noel... Ed.]

I can't claim to be in any great need of a phono stage as they are not exactly uncommon at present, outnumbered only by Polish plumbers from my perspective. But a good one is a delight if you spin LPs (Polish plumbers are no use at this), giving an expansive and alluring sound that eludes conventional phono stages, by which I mean solid-state of course. So I was keen to get the P10 home and into my system, where an SME312 arm, Goldring 1042 and Ortofon 2M Black cartridges awaited.

My interest and confidence in this slightly anonymous looking

design came from the fact that it is from the man who brought us the broadly admired Audio Innovations P2 phono stage - Guy Sergeant. The P10 is a lot simpler than the P2 and better still, I'm sure you'll agree, commensurately less expensive. Way back in our February 1996 edition the impressive P2 cost £749 for the basic Moving Magnet cartridge version; the P10 reviewed here, MM version, is priced at a bargain £399.95.

Nowadays, that's not a whole lot of cash for a good phono stage, especially with valves instead of silicon chips inside. So what we are looking at here, potentially, is a high-end design at a low end price, for valve phono stages commonly start at £1,000 and go upward...

The original P2 was a sizeable

unanimously felt our own World Audio Design (now World Design) valve amplifiers sounded best with valve power supplies, but such supplies are bulky and expensive. For this reason the P10 uses a compact solid-state power supply, but that is only to be expected at the price and - designed properly - it should hamper performance little. This simplification allows the P10 to be lightweight and reasonably compact too, the case measuring 330mm deep and 220mm wide.

One of the delights of valves is that at heart they can sit within fairly simple circuits - and this is the best way to use them I feel, as it minimises component colouration. Not for me complex solid-state bias, switching and display circuitry, an approach that, from Aesthetix for example, results

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beast with a mesh cover to release the heat produced by a valve stabilised power supply. This is the classy way of doing it; we

in an onboard computer in a phono stage - a bizarre fusion of ideas and technologies if ever there was one. Simplicity well handled brings

only benefit with valves and the P10 exploits this fact well, physically and audibly. You get no baffling options, like those adorning the £550 Audiolab 8000PPA I reviewed last month. The rear panel carries a pair of solid gold plated phono input sockets alongside similar output sockets. It also carries an earth lift switch to break hum loops (this does not affect mains safety earthing) and an IEC mains input. The front panel carries a rotary on/off switch that, when on, lights a small blue LED.

The case is sturdy, constructed from thick gauge folded steel. Inside, an aluminium tray carries two valves, 6992 and 12AX7 double triodes. With the P10 you simply connect up inputs and outputs and switch on - that's it!

What are the drawbacks to this simplicity? Almost none. On offer is an absolutely standard x100 gain, something of a benchmark value for Moving Magnet cartridges. It's sufficient to provide a match to most amplifiers, but volume will have to be turned up after playing CD. Input impedance is a standard 47k Ohms of course.

I had the P10 connected up and switched on within minutes of arriving home. It runs silently, having a d.c. heater supply to eliminate hum. Whilst valves are slightly noisier than transistors on paper, they are not in practice because MM cartridges generate more noise than both, being the dominant noise source (this is not the case with moving coils).

SOUND QUALITY

Hustled into use shortly after the Quad and Audiolab units I reviewed last month, with just the briefest spell in between with my resident Eastern Electric MiniMax, I was able to get a handle on the P10's sound quickly - and my haste in lifting it from the office was justified. I could tell from listening alone that the P10 is super accurate tonally; in other words it is accurately equalised. Every LP was played with perfect equanimity, the P10 favouring neither the bright, like Cat Steven's 'Teaser and the Firecat', nor the dull, like Creedence Clearwater Revival's 'Suzie Q' (45rpm recut).

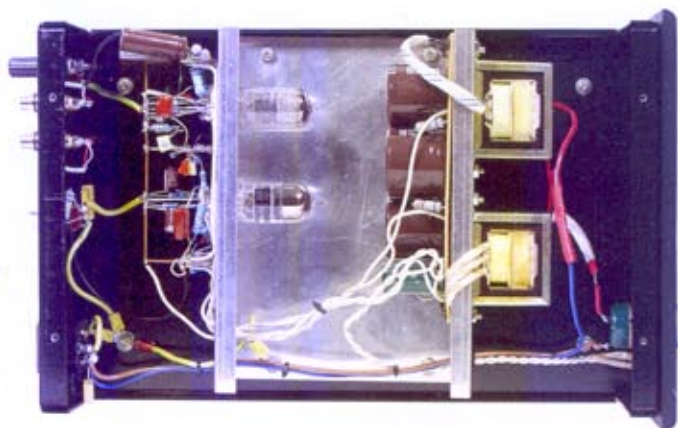
Spinning 'Tuesday's Dead' from 'Teaser and the Firecat' outlined the P10's basic properties clearly enough: hand drums sounded firm and taut, nicely supporting the speedy pace of the percussion work on this track. The timbral properties of the drums, the slap of hand against skin and the resonance of their bodies, uncoloured by the mechanical patina and compression of dynamics that

plagues solid-state, was delightful. This stage's almost stark clarity struck me, not as sterility but an absence of vagueness or hash. It's what you get when using high quality components, but few of them - a distinct benefit of simple, valve based hi-fi. Strummed guitar was vibrant, and again fast-paced. The melodic bass line sounded strong yet wonderfully controlled. Images had firm structure, not soft outline, nor was there any hint of the slightly syrupy presentation that valves can give. Quite the opposite: the P10 offers the apparent tidiness that solid-state seemingly achieves, but without its colouration, shaky outline and dynamic restraint.

It airbrushes nothing, nor does it hint at what may be: the laconic start of 'Willie and the Poorboys' was simply yet solidly portrayed, building steadily into a rock solid rendition underpinned by firm bass line, impactful drums, rim shots being hit forcefully hard-right and Fogerty's gritty vocals firmly anchored at centre. There was no equivocation here; I loved the stark, clean but forceful delivery. The engaging nature of this atmospheric early Creedence Clearwater Revival recording was beautifully revealed. What lay within the LP's grooves - in this case a recent 45rpm re-cut on 200gm vinyl - had an unusual solidity that had me hooked. I fancy the P10 painted a larger and more expansive picture than I am used to, individual musicians being better described, all within the venue's surrounding acoustic. This imparted a sense of a believable reality from these relatively unprocessed nineteen sixties studio recordings.

CONCLUSION

The Pure Sound was more cohesive than the Eastern Electric MiniMax I normally use, and I felt it was faster paced also. It knitted musicians and instruments into a wonderfully cohesive whole, perhaps the biggest contrast betwixt it and the MiniMax. That still leaves the MiniMax with its lovely tonality and MC input of course,



an option not yet ready with the P10, but for anyone not interested in running a moving coil cartridge, this preamp is the best choice I have yet to hear. In conjunction with an Ortofon 2M Black it had me reaching for LP after LP in night long sessions. It's a product that is very right, one that draws you into the music. It easily outguns all competition and is, for moving magnet cartridges, a no-brainer in my view. Not only do you get one of the best MM phono stages around, it comes at what is a nonsensically low price for a top end product. Get one - but watch out that someone doesn't commit a heinous felony upon you by carrying it away into the night...



VERDICT

Powerful, transparent sound makes this an exceptional phonostage.

PURE SOUND P10 £399.95

Pure Sound

+44 (0)1822 612449

www.puresound.info

FOR

- superb fidelity
- taut bass
- ease of use

AGAINST

- MM only
- appearance

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

This valve phono stage offers x100 gain for moving magnet cartridges, which is about the minimum required for satisfactory matching to most amplifiers. Volume will have to be turned right up on amplifiers of 400mV or so sensitivity, all the same. Maximum acceptable input measured a high 150mV and was in fact set by output non-linearity, 1% distortion at 15V out in this case. The P10 actually swung 70V out under test and was good for more, but I feared for the test equipment.

Frequency response was flat down to 200Hz, with a gentle slope down below this frequency, as our analysis shows. The lower limit was 30Hz (-1dB) and output was -3dB down at warp frequencies (5Hz) so there is some slight reduction in warp signals, but audible bass will be little affected. By best modern standards the P10 is very accurately equalised.

Input noise was not as low as is possible from solid-state stages, but at 0.47uV it was still below the Johnson

noise from cartridges. Hiss will not be audible, except possibly with very low output MM cartridges, which are rare. Distortion was low at 0.06% and purely innocuous second harmonic in nature.

The P10 turns in an impeccable measured performance. It will sound clean and accurate. NK

Frequency response (-1dB)	30Hz-43kHz
Separation	71dB
Noise (e.i.n., A wtd.)	0.47uV
Distortion (10mV in, 1kHz)	0.06%
Gain	x100
Overload	150mV in/15V out

FREQUENCY RESPONSE

