

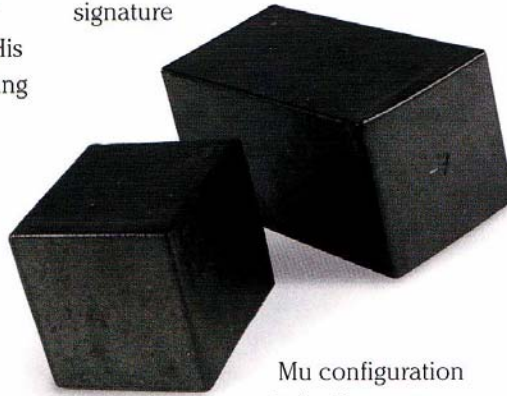
Mass Appeal...

Phono-stage solutions between £1000 and £2500

by Roy Gregory

The assembled cast represents the solid middle ground of phono replay – in all its guises. Perhaps we should start where moving-coil replay started, with the transformer equipped and appropriately retro styled Quad 24P (£999), a Tim DeParavicini design. His track record with transformer coupling low-output cartridges dates back to the early '80's and The Head, and is combined here in a single chassis with a tube based RIAA and gain stage built around a quartet of 6111 sub-miniature twin-triodes. Of course, with transformers at the input gain isn't an issue and the 24P offers either MM or MC input, each with three input sensitivities selected via a rear mounted rotary control. The 24P will thus accommodate cartridge outputs between 1.3 and 5.2 and 0.13 and 0.52mV, a formidable range. The MM input loads the cartridge at 47k, while the MC transformers offer a 10 Ohm load. More unusual though, is the provision of a pair of optional variable outputs, controlled by the large rotary knob on the front panel, allowing dedicated analogue users to dispense with a line-stage altogether. The 24P was auditioned in both modes. Be warned that appearances can be deceptive and that the sleek exterior is not constructed to the same standard as Quad units of yore, the sleeve being quite a struggle to remove. That aside construction appears excellent and operation was faultless throughout the review period.

Staying with valves, the Modwright SWP 9.0SE (£2695) eschews transformers in favour of a pure tube circuit based around two each of 5687s, 6N1Ps and 6C45s, arranged in the company's signature



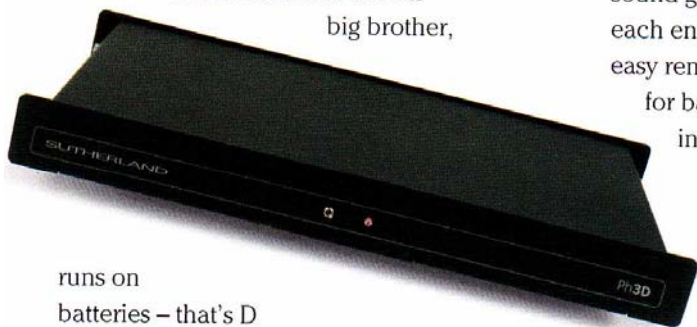
Mu configuration gain/buffer stage.

A substantial, choke regulated and 5AR4 valve rectified power supply is augmented by FET regulation of the B+ supplies. The enormous toroidal mains transformer wouldn't disgrace a decent power amp. The SWP shares its large case with the SWL line-stage, but the circuitry more than justifies its dimensions. An internally bulkhead divides the audio and power supply segments, the nicely laid out and heavily populated circuit board filling the interior. Four front panel switches reminiscent of early ARC units control power, mute, mono and switch between MM and MC sensitivity, the latter delivering 66dB of gain. Rear panel dip switches allow the user to select 50, 100, 500, 1000, 47k Ohm or an individually selected load. However, two oddities stand out; the earth post is inconveniently located by the output sockets, which is far from

ideal, while with no other controls on the front panel, those undeniably attractive but slender switches are horribly vulnerable. Clearly a little care in handling and installation will be required. The significant material content and solid build quality go a long way to justifying the price-tag, the most expensive in the test, reflecting the inherent difficulty of achieving decent performance with MC cartridges from an all-tube circuit, something the Modwright achieves at what can only be considered an extremely reasonable price. As well as the silver fascia shown in the photographs, there's also a bright blue option for those of a more demonstrative bent.

At the opposite extreme, in terms of size and complexity at least, 47 Labs' diminutive 4718 phono-stage (\$925) employs monolithic i/cs built into a small but incredibly solid block to provide gain, with a separate power supply that's equally solid and only a little larger. The tiny chassis means that the socketry and earth post are inconveniently close together, making hook-up a fiddle, especially with WBT NextGen plugs (I wouldn't fancy trying it with 47's vestigial cable connections). There are no adjustments of any type, although you can choose between the 75dB gain A model reviewed here or the 90dB of gain delivered by the B version. Being a voltage source device (rather like the Dynavectors) loading is 0 Ohms. This device is as minimal as it gets – and I'm not just referring to the size!

► Acoustech's PH3D (\$1000 plus shipping, duty and 17.5% VAT) is a simplified and significantly cheaper evolution of the PH3 so enthusiastically reviewed by JMH in Issue XX. Once again this is the work of renowned solid-state designer Ron Sutherland and in common with its big brother,



runs on batteries – that's D cells, and not rechargables! Despite the "simplified" tag the PH3D still offers internal jumpers that permit users to select between five different gain levels (between 40 and 60dB) and 100, 200, 1k, 10k and 47k Ohm loads. Controls are limited to a front-panel on/off switch and an LED which doubles as a power and battery life indicator (simply replace them when it no longer lights). Talking of batteries, you'll be needing 16 of the large D cells. These cost me around £20 – taking advantage of a 3 for 2 offer at boots – and should

The Review System

The phono-stages were auditioned in a system consisting of Connoisseur 4-2L SE and ARC LS26 line-stages, feeding a Hovland RADIA amplifier and Nola Pegasus speakers, cabled with Nordost Valhalla cables. Source was the VPI TNT6 with the latest suspension upgrades, a JMW 12.5 tonearm with interchangeable arm-wands carrying Lyra Titan-i, Clearaudio Concerto and vdH Condor cartridges. I used Nordost Tyre and Discovery arm cables. The system was supported on finite element Pagode Master Reference and Stillpoints racks, while Stillpoints Component Stands, cones and Symposium RollerBlock Jrs were tried under each unit.

The phono-stages were well warmed-up and left powered throughout the review period. Once optimized each unit was listened to both individually and in a comparative context with its peers and the TEAD Groove Plus benchmark.

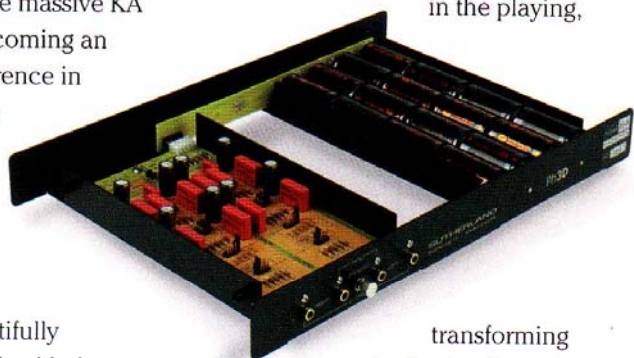
last for 1200 hours or a year, whichever ever elapses first. I haven't tried alternative battery types, but previous experience with Final Labs equipment suggest that the more basic the better, at least as far as sound goes. Thumb screws at each end of the chassis allow easy removal of the top-plate for battery replacement or internal adjustments.

The Karan Acoustics KA Phono2 (£2300) comes from one of the high-end's unsung heroes, but one whose reputation is rising rapidly. The massive KA M1200s are fast becoming an indispensable reference in the Gregory system while AS was bowled over by the astonishingly affordable KA S180 power amp that shares its beautifully machined casework with the Phono2, and these slim-line units will soon be joined by a matching line-stage. Lift the lid and you realise that the quality is more than skin deep. The fully differential circuit is ultra wide bandwidth and beautifully executed in discrete components. Banks of internal dip switches allow user selection of gain (50 to 70dB), loading (100, 1k, 47k Ohms or a user selected value) and input capacitance (in 100pF steps). There's a single pair of high-quality input sockets and a choice of single-ended or balanced outputs. Despite being at the top end of the group in price terms, it's hard not to be impressed by casework and construction that matches the standards found on Karan's

£24K mono-bloks. As we'll see, the Phono2 has more than just its looks in common with the flagship products.

The Listening

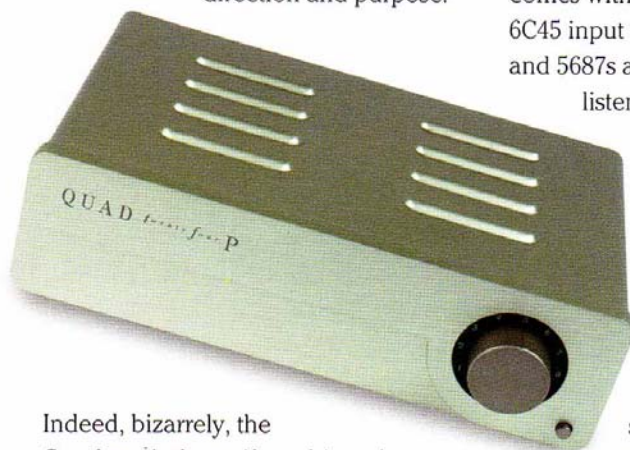
Quad's 24P presents a big, bold and powerful performance, redolent with drive and energy. Indeed, it has so much gain and is so quiet in operation that it's easy to overdrive the line-stage (or power amp) – which is a big mistake. Do so and the sound takes on a mechanical, relentless quality, losing subtlety and texture. But run the sensitivity switch at the correct level (Medium for the Titan and vdH, Low for the Clearaudio) and the sound gains significant flow and expression in the playing,



transforming the Starker Bach Cello Suites just as completely as the delicate simplicity of Neil Young's Silver and Gold. Further experimentation also revealed a marked preference for the Clearaudio over the otherwise superior Lyra and vdH cartridges, which has to be reflection on the German design's preference for the low impedance input provided by the Quad's transformers, a fixed parameter in this instance.

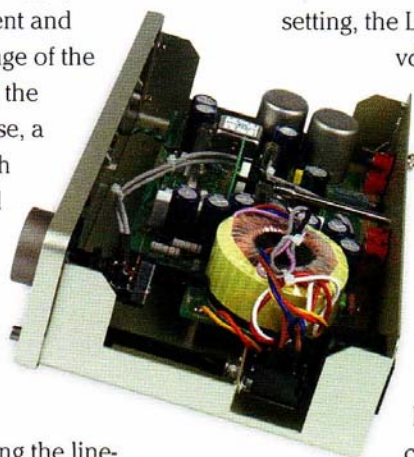
At its best the 24P delivers an energetic sound full of life and presence. The challenge lies in channeling that energy into a coherent musical strand, maximizing its direction and flow, integrating the solid low-frequencies. It's a balancing act involving choice of settings, system matching and selection of cartridge (all concerns which should inform a record replay system anyway). ►

► Get it wrong by using too much gain, the wrong cartridge or opening the window too wide (either at the input or the output) and the power and energy on tap becomes an uncontrolled and clumsy embarrassment. Get it right and you are rewarded with real musical direction and purpose.



Indeed, bizarrely, the Quad reminds me if anything of the drive and intent that comes from a good Naim set-up. Never the most transparent, delicate or subtle, it never fails to impress with its sheer solidity and presence; the rich body and woody vibrance of Starker's Cello is a case in point. Auditioning is essential as the 24P is unusually system dependent. If things start to fall apart try dialing back the demands. In this case the Quad worked more happily with the relaxed refinement and smooth dynamic range of the LS26 than it did with the Connoisseur. Likewise, a brief experiment with the Classe integrated amp was also notably successful.

Running the 24P direct into the power amp was less beneficial than hoped. Removing the line-stage from the equation also removed significant control, separation and musical insight. The result might at first seem more coherent but that's because it's also more muddled. Unless your line-stage is of very dubious quality I'd be surprised if this offers any real



benefit – other than the opportunity to put that huge rotary control on the front-panel – which probably justifies its inclusion on styling grounds alone.

Modwright's SWP 9.0SE risks spoiling the ship for a hapeth of tar; fortunately it's an easy fix. The unit comes with damping cans for the 6C45 input tubes, while the 6N1Ps and 5687s are left naked. Initial listening, whilst promising showed an unexpectedly bland tonal palette that robbed the music of life and presence. Installing EAT tube dampers on the undamped valves wrought a significant improvement and frankly, should be considered an essential upgrade.

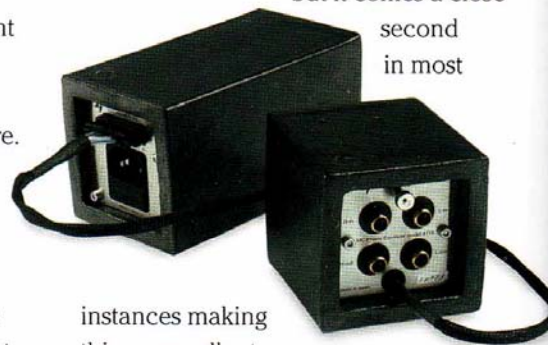
Unfortunately I had insufficient of the EAT dampers to use them on the 6C45s too, but I suspect there's another improvement to be had here. Needless to say, all listening was conducted with dampers in situ.

One other aspect of set-up proved critical; cartridge loading. The SWP seemed more critical than any of the other stages in this respect, the Clearaudio demanding the 50 Ohm setting, the Lyra 200 Ohms and the vdH 1k. Once optimized

the music gained significant coherence and momentum, overcoming a slightly stilted quality if this parameter was neglected. With a commendably quiet output, users need have no fears about curtailing gain.

Sonically the Modwright treads a near perfect middle path between the vivid presence and body of the Quad and the expansive stage and pleasing perspective of the Karan Phono2. In many respects this is a textbook valve stage, offering

the colours and energy, spacious dimensionality and life that we've come to expect whilst the excellent noise performance and good transparency and resolution belie the technology's familiar Achilles' heel. The combination of impressive body and presence together with good musical flow makes for an involving performance, and one that is essentially well balanced. This evenhandedness allows the various contributions within music equal status, never for instance favouring the vocal over its accompanying arrangement, a solo instrument over the rhythm section underpinning it. The Modwright may lack the delicacy of the PH3D and absolute stability and transparency of the Karan, the sheer impact of the Quad or the overall coherence of the 47 Labs, but it comes a close



second in most instances making this an excellent all-rounder with an uncanny grasp of a note's leading edge and as a result its purpose and direction. You might start by noticing what it doesn't do but it's surprising how quickly you forget aspects of performance in favour of the performance. Swapping back to other stages immediately highlights their strengths – and equally as clearly, their weaknesses: there's a lot to be said for balance. This is a musically satisfying and versatile stage, which with its loading options and mute switch should satisfy all but the most demanding vinylphile. And those who want more are going to have to pay handsomely for it.

Intriguingly, those for whom the SWP 9.0 fits the bill might well be able to pay less. As impressive as the standalone unit is, the phono-stage ►

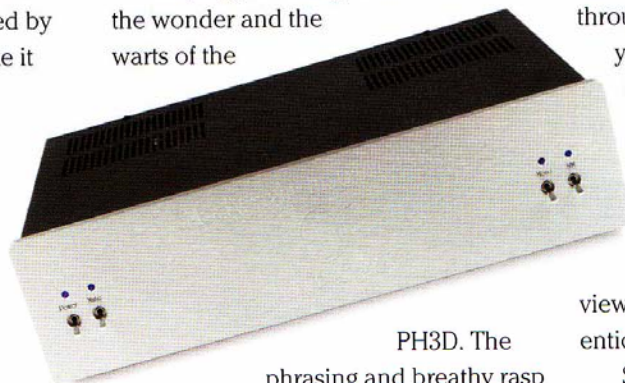
► is also available built into the company's SWL 9.0 line-stage – at the bargain price of £3195. I don't believe you get the same impressive power supply (there's a more expensive, external supply option) and only time will tell whether the combined arrangement can match the performance of the separates, but given the quality and high-value represented by the line-stage alone, this looks like it could be an absolute bargain.

Acoustech's PH3D has a simplicity and cleanliness that matches the elegance of its design. But once again, extracting its considerable best is something of a balancing act. On the plus side are a midrange purity and delicacy that are astonishingly seductive. On the downside are the limited gain and musical authority on offer. Any cartridge that puts out much less than 0.4mV is going to be marginal on noise grounds, while the need to add grip and control invites you to load the pick-up down, further limiting the available output. But don't be downhearted; it's well worth persevering.

With an easy, expressive, almost languid grasp of musical flow and line the PH3D has sinuous grace to burn. Always a stage that will seduce rather than command, its control at frequency extremes needs all the help it can get from choice of cartridge and input loading – indignities its musical coherence can easily accommodate. Listen to Starker and you'll hear a slightly more distant, inclusive presentation, a greater sense of acoustic, while the sound majors on the maestro's grasp of line and his awesome technique rather than the sheer energy of his instrument. The structure and phrasing of the Bach suites is laid effortlessly bare, their technical demands and beautiful compositional symmetry equally apparent. This sense of relaxed, unhurried ease allows music to develop in its own time and with its

own pace. Combined with the textural and temporal insights the Acoustech makes vocals come alive. Great singers capture the listener, be it Neil Young, Lou Reed or Ella, their subtle vocal inflexions and mastery of phrasing and placement making their voices captivatingly expressive.

Playing jazz brings home both the wonder and the warts of the



PH3D. The phrasing and breathy rasp

of horns is breathtakingly real, while the bass line, whilst it never plods or drags, has no real bottoms to the notes, no real edges. It's not a destructive flaw, but a visiting bass player found it frustrating. It's a quality, along with the slightly cozy warmth that comes from the less than stratospheric top-end extension that you'll need to weigh against the beguiling appeal and musically addictive ease of the mid-band. For fans of vocal and acoustic recordings this could be a no-brainer. Those who simply have to have scale, authority and bandwidth, preferably allied to positively frightening presence and dynamic impact, will probably look elsewhere. With the PH3D you can sense the spit hitting the microphone, but you don't feel it on your face. If that comes as a relief then this could well be your phono-stage of choice.

The 47 Labs phono-stage is definitely the curate's egg of this particular group. With no adjustments, no tweaks and precious little physical bulk to show for your money it

challenges you directly; forget the fiddling and simply listen. And listen you will. From the very first note there's a compelling beauty, directness and immediacy to sound from the 47. So much so that you'll find yourself asking, "Why bother with anything else?" Listening to the glorious freedom of Starker's cello, its sure-footed progress through the most convoluted phrases, you wonder where else you can find such unimpeded, unencumbered naturalness in the music that flows from a system? The old adage of vocalists singing to you could have been made for the 47, the colours are natural, the general view and scale of the picture utterly enticing.

So where's the problem? In many respects this phono-stage reminds me of a really good 300B single-ended amp. It has all the qualities that people seek in such a device: tonal warmth and beauty, a directness of musical communication flowing from its inherent simplicity, an inviting balance that draws you into the listening experience.

But it also has the failings. The 47 Labs excels with simple acoustic recordings: sonatas, girl and a guitar, four-piece pop and rock are all handled simply brilliantly. But the emphasis is on the simple. Larger scale works and denser musical arrangements underline the limitations of this device at frequency extremes, its lack of dynamic authority and the absence of a real acoustic space around performers. Really big orchestral pieces become congested, denied separation within both the soundfield and the composition, lacking drama and dynamic contrast as a result. The Milstein Dvorak Violin Concerto is a case in point. The perspective has plenty of width ►



▶ but little real height and precious little depth, the soloist collapsed into and swamped by the orchestra, the incredibly bold orchestral tuttis robbed of their substance, complexity and the emphatic quality they demand if the music is to make sense.

Rather like the original Quad ELS 57 the 47 Labs phono-stage delivers a select few musical attributes with such blinding brilliance and fidelity that for those who value them there's nothing else that will do. For others with broader based musical demands, it could prove a frustrating experience. Or to put it another way, the 47 Labs has editorial tendencies; if they coincide with your own perspective then, rather like a daily newspaper, you'll find it a reassuringly comfortable fit. As to the title at the head of the page, on that I'll not be drawn...

Which brings us finally (and by design) to the Karan Acoustics Phono2, not because it offers the "best" sound – a meaningless concept as should be clear by now – but because of the nature of the sound it delivers. Both in appearance and sonic character the Phono2 is the unit that most embodies what has become recognized (at least in America, and to a lesser extent by aficionados of American products) as "high-end" sound. Its wide bandwidth design is reflected in the expansive scale and incredible stability of its soundstage and associated acoustic. Nor is that stability disturbed by the most dramatic dynamic demands. Ironically, just as the Milstein Dvorak reveals the 47 Labs' shortcomings so it allows the Karan to bask in its strengths. Interestingly, this isn't a ghostly quiet phono-stage like so many of its peers, but nor is it one that holds the music with such an iron grip that it crushes the life and flow out of the performance. Indeed, its dynamic hold is deft enough not just to hold Milstein's instrument separate but to preserve the finesse and brilliance of his technique.

On smaller scale material like the Bach *Suites* it leans slightly towards the academic rather than exaggerating the player's flair, but this is in keeping with the inclusive nature of the more distant perspective and palpable acoustic. The structure of the piece is laid bare, the pacing and placement of the notes impeccable. Indeed, this is rather more Starker than the Modwright's Piatigorsky (or the 47's Du Pre).



The precision and control in his technique is simply awesome. Yet, at the same time the sheer dancability of Neil Young's *Silver And Gold*, the infectious energy and humour of 'Good To See You' remains undiminished. Indeed, in some respects the most remarkable feature of the Phono2 is the uncanny way in which it echoes the staging, stability, transparency and absolute dynamic integrity of the massive KA M1200 mono-bloks, with their unique combination of control and musical freedom.

Downside (such as it is) lies with the unit's self-effacing honesty and essential neutrality. There is no padding or rounding of awkward edges to make poor recordings more acceptable or to banish surface noise. If you want flavour then there's a veritable Baskin Robbins of alternatives out there, with a few reviewed here. But if it's honesty that you require, along with the ability to grow into or answer the demands of a full-range, high-end system, then the Karan's sonic qualities and balanced output option demand serious consideration.

Conclusions

This trawl through the bottom tier of top-end phono-stages has been an enjoyable and entertaining trip. It once again confirms just how critical this most prosaic of boxes can be in terms of overall system performance, whilst at the same time underlining the dangers of drinking by the label. Don't assume that a given technology will deliver predictable results. Once again we

discover that there is no silver bullet – just a range of options one of which will best meet the demands of your cartridge, system and personal listening

bias. The vital importance of auditioning a unit in the context in which it will be used, of matching it to the cartridge in question and optimizing its adjustable parameters cannot be underestimated. We started by observing the fragile nature of the phono signal; any one of these units can wreak havoc on it if improperly applied. ▶+

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