

hi-finews GROUP TEST

Balanced connections, digital screens and seemingly endless cartridge matching options: the modern phono amp has a lot to offer. But which of our six will be the pick of the bunch?

PHONO STAGES £250-£1500

TESTED THIS MONTH

CLEARAUDIO NANO PHONO	£255
LEHMANN BLACK CUBE STATEMENT	£350
MUSICAL FIDELITY M1 VINL	£700
PRIMARE R32	£850
ASTIN TREW AT8000	£880
CREEK WYNDSOR	£1500



Cutting-edge gear, cherry-picked by the *Hi-Fi News* editor



The pinnacle of sound quality within its peer group



Great sound, great value and a cut above its rivals

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Having to spend extra for a separate phono stage because your amp didn't come with one as standard used to be considered a means of overcoming a frustrating oversight. These days however, many audiophiles accept that to get the best out of your pick-up the use of a carefully chosen separate phono stage is *de rigueur*. And one with a variety of gain and load settings is essential future-proofing for anyone who is partial to a bit of cartridge-swapping when the mood dictates.

THE CONTENDERS

Thankfully, as the entry level Clearaudio in this month's group test demonstrates, you can have a well built model that will cater for both moving-magnet and moving-coil types (and with a choice of loading options for the latter) for comparatively little outlay.

All models under scrutiny in this test offer dual mono circuits, and Lehmann's Black Cube Statement, with its pro-audio credentials, represents the next rung on the ladder. It's also the cheapest model on test to feature part passive

equalisation (considered by many to be superior to all-active designs).

Both the Astin Trew and Musical Fidelity models offer balanced outputs, which will be welcomed by those with pre/integrated amps with corresponding inputs. The MF clearly majors on the user experience, with a digital interface that sets new standards at this price point for how a phono stage can be operated. Housed in a chassis that dwarfs the competition, the Swedish Primare represents the big bruiser of the group, with a meaty PSU, part passive EQ and shielded circuits. Finally the Creek combines all of this functionality and more. With a separate DC PSU, three stages of RIAA equalisation and a user interface that can be programmed to match the settings for any given cartridge, this is a phono stage for the digital age.

SYSTEM AND MUSIC

To get the full measure of each unit on test, a selection of MM and MC cartridges at varying prices was made: these were Nagaoka's MP-100 high-output MM; a Benz Micro ACE SH high output MC; and

Roksan's lower output Shiraz MC. We used a Roksan Xerxes 20*plus* deck with Tabriz Z1 tonearm [*HFN* Dec '11]. Amplification came via a Musical Fidelity M6PRE and M6PRX pre/power combination driving Dali floorstanders. Van Damme cables were used throughout and I took advantage of the preamp's balanced inputs by using balanced cables between preamp and phono stage for the models that could take them.

Review albums included Neil Young's *Harvest* [REP 54 005], chosen for its contrasting hard and soft rock tracks, and Antony And The Johnsons' *I Am A Bird Now* [Rough Trade RTRADLP233] – with particular attention paid to 'Spiralling' for its atmospheric vocals and piano, combined with strong bass.

I also used a Decca pressing of Charles Dutoit conducting the Montréal SO in Respighi's grandiose *Roman Festivals* [SDDL 7591] which revealed how each phono amp coped with a large and complex soundstage. (Note: SQ ratings reflect the price bracket of each product.)

REVIEWS BY ANDREW SIMPSON
LAB TESTS BY PAUL MILLER

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OUTSTANDING
PRODUCT

Primare R32 (£850)

Uncomplicated Scandinavian design' is how Primare defines its ethos and a quick glance at the R32's front panel tells you that this phono stage is truly living Primare's 'brand values'. Since it measures 430x95x380mm (whd) and weighs a substantial 8.5kg, you could be forgiven for thinking you've been sold a power amp in the wrong box. Of course much of this weight can be attributed to the R32's case, with its 8mm-thick front plate and solid feet.

According to Primare this large chassis makes it easier to keep sensitive signal circuits away from the PSU in a bid to reduce noise. Also justifying the R32's weight is its R-core type transformer with separate windings for each channel. There are no capacitors in the signal path and a shield-plate inside the unit further isolates the signal circuits from the PSU.

For MC cartridges, the R32 offers seven load resistance settings between 10ohm-47kohm, with gain set at 62dB. For MM types, gain is factory set at 41.4dB [see Lab Report] and there's also a 5dB boost setting which is accessed from inside the casework. (Although given that the rest of the settings are on the back panel, and removing the top panel means undoing ten screws, this seems a bit of a design flaw. Why couldn't this setting be accessed via jumpers on the underside or the back panel?)

SPACE TO BREATHE

Beginning with *Harvest*, I was immediately pulled into the album by the soundstage's depth which



ABOVE: Thick full width front panel with cut-out logo displaying on/off looks classy. Chunky feet add to solid feel

the R32 lays out in front of you. Each instrument had plenty of space to breathe and none fought to dominate a song. Young's slide guitar was full of detail and I noticed its fading reverb far more through the Primare than the other phono amps, which gave it a natural edge.

The R32 has a mellow, unfazed personality which marries rhythm and emotion with a balanced sound that is easy to live with. 'Spiralling' flowed forth at an unforced pace, allowing the song the space to grow, and while the piano sounded laid-back it gelled with the bass guitar in a way that none of the other phono stages had been able to capture.

The higher horns within the Respighi piece were deeper in the mix, and while the R32 might have lacked the last word in power compared to the MF, for example, it had just the right amount of attack to keep me engaged. Indeed, it was this inherently 'natural' and well-ordered perspective that won the day for the R32. Finally, more than with any other phono stage, the Primare's sound continued to improve with each cartridge upgrade. The R32 just gets better!

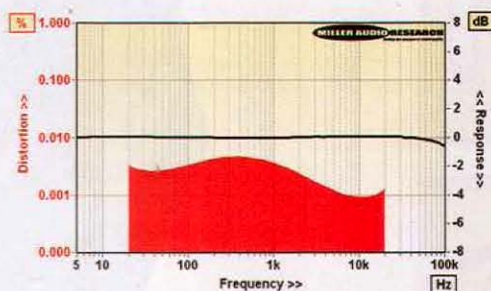
Sound Quality: 86%



HI-FI NEWS LAB REPORT

As befits this black slab, Primare's R32 is a rock-solid performer. Gain is bang-on specification at +41.4dB (MM) and +62dB (MC) but unlike some other stages with this 'industry standard' gain, the R32 offers greater headroom: +26.1dB (101mV) for MM and +25.4dB (9.3mV) for MC. The A-wtd S/N ratio is impressive too, amounting to 87.2dB re. 5mV and 67.6dB re. 500µV (or 91.9dB/71.6dB re. 0dBV) ensuring the R32 is very quiet, especially with MM pick-ups.

Full output is a preamp-busting 11.5V from a low ~90ohm source impedance which, unusually, drops lower still from 66ohm at 100Hz to 0.5ohm at 20Hz. Coupled with the R32's exceptionally flat and extended response [see Graph, below] that's a mere -0.3dB down at 2Hz, this almost guarantees a subjectively strong bass. However, this lack of subsonic filtering also warns against arm/cartridge combos with little damping at resonance, especially when coupled with reflex-loaded loudspeakers. Harmonic coloration is not an issue though, with THD uniformly below 0.004% at all frequencies. PM



ABOVE: RIAA-corrected response (black) with low bass filter (dashed) plus distortion versus frequency (red, 20Hz-20kHz)

Input loading (MM/MC)	10ohm-47kohm
Input sensitivity (MM/MC re. 0dBV)	8.55mV / 0.77mV
Input overload (MM/MC)	101mV / 9.3mV
Maximum output (re. 1% THD)	11.5V
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 5mV/500µV in)	87.2dB / 67.6dB
Frequency response (20Hz-20kHz)	+0.05dB to -0.00dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, re. 0dBV)	0.0010-0.0044%
Power consumption	6W
Dimensions (WHD)	430x95x380mm



ABOVE: No XLR outputs, although the Teflon-insulated RCA sockets are top quality. Loading is selected via two rotary dials, denoting dual mono internals

GROUP TEST VERDICT

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Beginning with the Astin Trew, it's difficult to avoid the conclusion that, while showing promise, the AT8000 needs further polish in its basic design to deliver consistent results. 'Nano' by name but not in nature, the Clearaudio packs a big sound for such a small unit. What's more, you can add the optional (£15) headphone socket and thereby have it double up as an amp for your vinyl. In the sonic stakes however, the Nano's relatively unsophisticated sound is bettered by the Lehmann, which is in another league despite only costing £95 more.

RUNNING ADJUSTMENTS

From the tweaker's perspective, the Musical Fidelity VINL has a lot to offer. Being able to try various settings 'on the fly', *ie*, while an LP is playing, means that your ears can quickly decide what works best for you, regardless of what the cartridge's manual says. And with its screen and push-buttons, the MF (like the Creek) makes the user experience with some of the other models feel so 'last century'. Soundwise the MF is a big, bold performer. But despite delivering music on a grand scale, I thought it failed to bring it all together into a cohesive whole (especially when compared with the Primare, at only few pounds extra).

Don't be fooled by the Lehmann's modest price tag and perhaps mundane aesthetics, as these clearly belie its audio capabilities.

ABOVE RIGHT:
Creek Wyndsor –
supreme flexibility

RIGHT: Primare's
'effortlessly
involving' R32 is a
bargain at
under £1000

Sonically, the Statement is a serious performer with an accurate and mature sound: a hard act to beat for the money. And on these grounds it deserves recommendation. It also has the added bonus of a custom impedance loading setting for those who are wedded to this model and want the ultimate in cartridge tailoring. Where it's left a tad wanting is in rendering scale and weight – but only in comparison to models well beyond its £350 price bracket.

THE TOP TWO

That Creek offers something laden with complex features which are accessed through such an easy-to-use interface, it deserves a 'hats off!'. It took me all of two minutes to programme in gain and load selections for three cartridges, and selecting between them was as simple as choosing a track on an iPod. And being able to store settings for up to 99 cartridges is just showing off! Thankfully, its features are matched by its sound. In terms of accuracy, the

Wyndsor is similar to the Lehmann, however what the Creek also adds are subtle levels of finesse which make you want to dive into your vinyl collection to savour detail you've perhaps previously been missing.

With the Primare, £850 buys you a lot of phono stage. Okay its features are quite straightforward but its tank-like build and classy looks impress. 'Effortlessly involving' are the two words I'd use to sum up the Primare's sonic signature. The R32 gives off a sense of having oodles of power in reserve, able to cope with anything that's thrown at it calmly but not without passion.

The resulting soundstage is unforced yet expansive, with bass that's deep and lithe. Detail is plentiful and natural: with the Harvest album, the full emotion of Young's voice was laid bare on every track and the guitar and harmonica had a lush sparkle that showed why this artist has gone the distance. This kind of quality for well under a grand is what constitutes a top-flight bargain, making the R32 our clear winner. ☺

"The Creek interface deserves a 'hats off!'"



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