

Vertere Phono-1 MkII

HIFICRITIC
BEST BUY

While Ed was exploring Vertere's latest arm and cartridges, Chris Kelly received a sample of the company's revised version of its £1100 Phono-1 moving coil/moving magnet phono stage.

Over the past few years I have had the good fortune to review two Vertere turntables, both of which I thought were outstanding products, not to mention visually striking. The Phono-1 MkII is a much more restrained design, its functional rather than flashy looks appropriate for its sole purpose, which is simply to amplify the tiny signal (measured in fractions of a millivolt) from the cartridge, boost it and pass it on to the main amplifier without adding any unwanted noise. To achieve this, Vertere has used gold-plated PCBs for the main phono circuit and the mains power transformer, as well as using stainless steel shields to protect the RIAA and pre-amplifier circuits. Power circuits are kept as far away from the delicate audio signal as possible.

The plain fascia has no more than a central on/off toggle switch, with a white light to show when the unit is powered on, while the back panel is also very straight forward, with just RCA inputs and outputs, a grounding post and an IEC mains input, plus a chassis grounding terminal and a three-way switch marked "Phono Earthing". Settings are changed on the underside, where two banks of switches allow 10 gain settings to be selected, along with 15 resistance and nine capacitance settings, allowing the user the freedom to choose almost any cartridge. There's even a tool to change these switch settings – no danger of broken fingernails here.

The bottom plate's four clear feet are designed to minimise vibration within the unit, which is vital when dealing with such weak signals on the input side. More on this later.

Starting the review period using my Dynavector XX2 moving coil cartridge mounted in the Ittok on my modified LP12, even with my ear close to a loudspeaker there was absolutely nothing to be heard from the Phono-1 when no record was playing. The phono earthing switch had been set to position 3 when the unit arrived and I left it there throughout the review period.

Sound Quality

The Phono-1 had been used before me, so no running in was required, but I wanted to give it a chance to warm up properly after its transit, so I chose at random Steely Dan's *Greatest Hits* and cued up the first side, not intending to sit and listen. All that went



wrong with first notes of 'Do It Again': I abandoned my plans and sat absolutely engrossed, only moving to turn the record over as needed. This was as good as I have ever heard this rather excellent compilation sound, and all four sides they sounded as fresh as they had when I first bought the album back in 1978.

From then on, I fed the Phono-1 a very eclectic mixture of musical genres, with classic rock, jazz and classical forming the majority of the listening material, with occasional forays into modern pop, folk and some modern hard rock. Whatever I played flowed effortlessly from my speakers.

By chance I had a set of four Vertere Iso-Paw feet, which were designed, according to the leaflet with which they arrived to "enhance the performance of your... Phono-1 cartridge amplifier". With the Iso-Paws deployed under the Phono-1 there was a slight, but appreciable, improvement in the clarity and in the separation between instruments, and an enhanced sense of realism – the Iso-Paws stayed in place.

Shortly after this I also received a sample of the Vertere Sabre cartridge, and in conjunction with the Phono-1 MkII it sounded spellbinding – clearly this is a very felicitous pairing. The richness of the sound was intoxicating: I've never heard a better sounding moving magnet replay system than this.

Conclusion

There is no doubt in my mind that the Phono-1 is a very fine piece of audio engineering, representing exceptional value for money for the serious vinyl fan. Yes, it may be overkill for those for whom other sources take precedence over records, but if you are like me and choose to play records regularly, this device simply has to be shortlisted. It is versatile, it looks purposeful but above all it sounds absolutely terrific. It works very happily with both moving coil and moving magnet cartridges, it is relatively straightforward to set up, and feels extremely well made. It should work really well with most turntables and cartridges, meaning that when the time comes for me to shop for a new phono stage, the Vertere Phono-1 MkII will be at the top of my shortlist.