

Four Phono Stages

As the LP has faded from the mainstream market, a new business has opened up: black boxes for adding a phono input to a resolutely digital amplifier.

With a lot of amps and preamplifiers, plugging in your turntable is no longer a matter of finding the jacks marked "phono." There aren't any. Bummer! On the other hand, this is another opportunity to do some more mixing and matching. No matter what other electronics you have, you can buy someone else's phono stage.

Just don't forget the interconnect cable. And if you're looking for top quality you had better make it a good one.

For this review we brought together four phono stages, all of them below \$1000 Canadian. We used a Wireworld Equinox E1-W to connect each one to the CoplandCTA-301 preamplifier in our Alpha system. The point of reference was of course the Copland's excellent triode phono stage. For the Copland and one of the Creek preamps, we used a Bryston TF-1 stepup transformer.

For all of the tests we used two LP's. The first is *West of Oz*, the famous direct-cut disc by singer Amanda McBroom, pianist Lincoln Mayorga, and a number of other musicians. The song *Dorothy* (preceded by a segment from *Over the Rainbow*) is especially challenging, because McBroom's voice is very smooth, the choral introduction is complex and fragile, and a number of instruments sound glorious when they're reproduced right, not so good otherwise. The second disc is *Trittico*, the first of the *Reference Recordings* discs with Frederick Fennell and the Dallas Wind Ensemble (RR-52). The title composition, by Vaclav Nelhybel, is a powerhouse of a piece, with brass, percussion, woodwinds...and a lot of things happening at the same

time that can easily go wrong.

And they sometimes did, as we shall see. Let's proceed in approximate order of cost.



Creek OBH-8 MM Phono Preamp

Creek is a familiar brand to those familiar with the better British amplifiers...and that takes in a lot of audiophiles. We last reviewed a Creek product (the A52se amplifier) in *UHF* No. 54, and we liked it. Indeed, a number of previous Creek products have offered a lot for a relatively small investment.

Which is of course the rationale for Creek's series of small modules, which include two headphone amplifiers (to be reviewed in our next issue) and three phono preamps (two of them reviewed here). The OBH-8 costs just \$299 in Canada, much less than most others. It comes in a pleasant little box, with the (somewhat cheap) input and output jacks at the rear, and a power switch and LED indicator at the front. Because it is designed for a moving magnet cartridge, we ran our low impedance moving coil cartridge through the

same Bryston TF-1 transformer we use with our reference preamplifier.

The OBH-8 does not contain a power supply, we should mention. It comes with a little "brick" supply like the ones supplied with desk calculators, but Creek recommends the OBH-2 accessory power supply, which is much larger but costs an extra \$149. A first listen confirmed that a difference exists, though the small "free" power supply performs better than we had feared. However we carried on the main listening tests with the better supply.

There's only so much you can offer for less than \$300, and we were reminded of that fact right at the opening of the first selection. There was some confusion in the instruments, and also in the voices of the backup singers, as though they weren't singing quite together. The image was flattened somewhat. McBroom's voice didn't have its customary smoothness, nor its warmth.

Still, there was considerable detail and the rhythm held up well. Though the impact of the percussion was somewhat excessive, the Creek didn't exhibit any of the screechiness of mass-market phono preamps, despite the dangerous sibilance of the singer's voice. Albert considered the sound reasonably good, and quite acceptable considering the price.

Would the percussion also sound too punchy in the *Trittico* wind band piece? It did, despite the adequate top end. The snare drum (which you get to hear a lot in this lively piece) was too rough, and the brass was too. Reine pronounced it too aggressive. She noted that the bottom end was somewhat light, with the midrange tones not quite managing to bridge the gap between highs and lows. Al-

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sometimes did.**

bert admired the dynamics, but Gerard expressed disappointment. "Perhaps I was expecting too much," he said.

We listened briefly with the little brick power supply that comes with the OBH-8. It was better than we had feared, but it sounded somewhat worse than with the upscale power supply.

Creek makes a premium version of this unit, for \$550, which price includes the better power supply. We haven't heard it.

The quality of the OBH-8 is in line with the capabilities of most entry-level turntables, and so it no doubt has a market. But *Creek* is capable of doing better than this even for such a low price...as we shall see in a moment.



Creek OBH-9MC Phono Preamp

We photographed it "going the other way," otherwise you would have suspected us of using the same picture a second time. The OBH-9 looks and works exactly the same way as the other, and it has the same \$299 Canadian price tag...but it is extra sensitive, for use with a low impedance moving coil pickup. For this listening test, therefore, we didn't use our TF-1 transformer.

Because the two *Creek* units look alike and cost alike, we also expected them to sound alike. They don't. The OBH-9 is considerably better.

But we should add that we weren't unanimous on this. There's a good reason we use a panel to listen to products rather than a single reviewer as most other magazines do. Though we often agree on everything but small details, in this case we were split. Which is fine. The house policy is not to discourage dissension. We

disagree? So what? One of the panelists is moved to say disgustingly personal things about someone who advertises in the magazine? Assuming the comments follow the rules of fairness, so be it. That's why people read us.

The majority judged the OBH-9 to perform much better than the other one on *Dorothy McBroom's* voice was smoother and more natural, and there was less of the confusion that had plagued the opening choral segment with the other unit. The depth was back, and the harmonica solo was quite pleasant to listen to. The only aspect not improved: the bottom end, which remained somewhat thin.

The holdout was Albert, who had considered the OBH-8 quite adequate for the money, but didn't consider this one superior. He still found the sound too dry and a little tilted toward the highs.

The second recording (*Trittico*) didn't change his mind, but Gerard and Reine were pleased with the lively sound. The woodwinds were improved, and the snare drum and brass were smoother and more pleasant. "The trumpet is more brash than harsh," said Reine, "except during the finale, which is a little much." Added Gerard: "This is what I had been hoping for with the other preamp."

The OBH-9 sounds like a *Creek* product, and that's good. But we wondered whether audiophiles with low-level moving coil cartridges are likely to shop for a phono section in this price range. For those who are, this is absolutely, positively the one to get.

We wish Mike Creek would look at what he did right in this unit. Whatever it is, he should do it in the OBH-8 as well.

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The Lehmann Black Cube

This plain black box is from Germany, the work of Norbert Lehmann. The first time we heard it we figured it was going to be a sales sensation. Of course it was supposed to be much cheaper than, but even at its new price (\$995 in Canada, \$695 in the US) it is the sort of bargain that audiophiles dream of running across before everyone else does.

The metal box is not tall enough to be a cube, of course, and it's quite large, even though the power supply is outboard, linked to the Black Cube by a nondetachable cord. The power supply itself takes a standard IEC power cord.

The input and output jacks are adequate but no more. They are somewhat recessed, like those on some *Bryston* gear. We were still able to put on the *WBT* locking connectors we use on our *Wireworld* Equinox E-1W cable, but only just. Some very plump connectors may present a problem. The Black Cube may be set to accept either an MM or an MC cartridge. The changeover can be done only internally, however, by opening the case (which requires an Allen wrench) and by resetting tiny DIP switches like the ones on computer motherboards. If you lose the instruction sheet you're out of luck. The same switches can be used to vary the load resistor. We set ours to 20 ohms with moving coil sensitivity, to match our pickup.

While the case is open you may notice something disconcerting: the amplification is done with integrated circuits, not discrete transistors. Is this a bad sign? Well, that's less certain that it once was. A few clever design-

ers have gotten good sound from chips before so...who knows?

The RIAA equalizing circuit does not, however, use feedback. The equalizing network (necessary to compensate for the treble boost applied in cutting records) is entirely passive, placed between two stages of amplification. That arrangement is risky, often causing noise and distortion. Fortunately, in this unit it causes neither.

We listened to Amanda McBroom's *Dorothy*, and we were more than pleased. The voices of the choral group in the introduction were coherent and organized, with rich lows and midrange. McBroom herself sounded as smooth as she did with our reference. The depth was very good, and there was an unusual degree of transparency to the sound...we could hear the backup singers in the background even while Amanda was singing louder passages. We liked the harmonica too. "It really sounds like a harmonica," said Albert approvingly, "not like some sort of whistle."

The synthesizer accompaniment sounded pleasing, but were the lows as solid as with our reference? Possibly not.

Indeed, the wind band piece, *Tritico*, confirmed that the lows were slightly slim, that the Black Cube took away a little of the Dallas Wind Ensemble's weight. But there was so much that was clearly right that we scarcely cared. The excellent depth gave us a sense of the space in which the recording was made, and the clarity of the ensemble was impressive. Everything hung together coherently, but without melding into a solid homogeneous block. The large bell used in the piece was impressive, its harmonics rich and clear. We could hear "through" the louder instruments, to hear softer ones, but the great clarity was never translated into shrillness.

Norbert Lehmann has other products on the market and in the oven. We'd love to hear what else he can do. With his Black Cube phono preamp, he has a winner.



The Audiomat Phono-1

This is a French product, and a relative newcomer in North America. *Audiomats* known for high-quality tube equipment, but this small phono stage is of course solid state. Its Canadian price is \$1500, equivalent to about \$1000 US.

It is at once attractive and discreet, easy to hide, but by no means ugly if you choose to display it. The case is black and sleek, and the connectors — all of them at the rear — are of good quality. The power supply is in a sealed "brick" permanently attached to the power cord, which is also attached to the Phono-1 itself.

At the front is a small switch and two light-emitting diodes. The switch chooses between low sensitivity (about 2 mV, for moving magnet pickups and some moving coil types) and high sensitivity (about 0.4 mV, for low impedance moving coil cartridges). The appropriate LED lights up. There's no more to it than that.

Since its MC input turned out to have very low noise, we put aside our transformer and plugged our *Goldring* Excel cartridge directly into it.

We listened without speaking to *Dorothy*. Was this as good as our reference phono stage? It was *at least* as good. The electric bass had good weight, but without excess. Amanda McBroom's voice was very good. A lot of detail was audible, as for instance the small sticks in the percussion kit, used to good advantage in this piece. And the whole came together well, in perfect coherence.

On second thought this was actually better than the reference. The soprano in the opening chorus, who is sometimes a little shrill, sounded full-

er, with a lower register that Albert characterized as "generous." The harmonica solo was simply magical, and it too sounded fuller. Our enthusiasm for this device was building fast. "It's worth the \$1500," said Albert.

The *Audiomat* also worked beautifully on the large wind band ensemble of *Trittico*. The fullness of the bottom end made the entire orchestra sound rich and full, but in good bal-

ance with the higher frequencies, which were also very good. "There's tremendous separation of the instruments," said Reine, "but there's never any shrillness, because everything is in perfect balance." Gerard commented on the superbly realistic timbre of the brass instruments, whose natural dissonance was clearer than ever. The snare drum made us jump, because it was so clear, and the bass

drum...well, the bass drum...

Reine noted that the reference was also excellent, and thought it might come down to a matter of preference. Albert disagreed. "The reference isn't this refined," he said.

But we agreed on this much: this is an outstandingly good phono stage. If you have a quality turntable, this is the piece of electronics that will bring it to life. ○

CROSSTALK

Let's see now. If your vinyl corner will always consist of a dozen LP's and a dusty turntable with squeaky hinges, then look for the cheapest phono section you can find. You'll even hear your crackles and pops in stereo.

If, on the other hand, you've been secretly upgrading your source, and LP's are starting to invade every available shelf and closet space as you sneak them in at night, then you must already have a phono section. If you want *real* improvement, you need the best phono section you can afford. After all it is not just another accessory, it is the preamp stage for your LP's. Its musical qualities should be superior to those of your power amp and your speakers.

In that specific situation, neither of the *Creek* phono sections qualifies as an option. They are okay at their price, I guess, but when you need a significant improvement, you don't want to save money at the preamp stage, you want to save music.

The Black Cube did that wonderfully; it preserved the warmth and sweetness of a well-recorded voice, it separated solo instruments from the crowd of massed performers, and it placed everyone solidly in space. Bass was abundant, reaching deep through the floor and highs were particularly good, revealing a wealth of sparkling details.

All those qualities, and many more, are found in our reference preamp but what actually topped the reference, in my opinion, was the *Audiomat* Phono-1. Besides all the qualities already listed, the music was played with such finesse that the performance appeared to have been taken over by a much more talented group of musicians, and a better recording crew besides. It went from flowing smoothly to bursts of sudden impact with

a sense of ease and mastery, always providing uncannily accurate instrumental timbres.

And as I sat there, taking in the sheer beauty of the music, I kept thinking "Now, *this* is right."

—Albert Simon

If you have the budget, and of course the turntable, to justify this sort of expense, the choice is easy: the *Audiomat*. It has all of the qualities I would look for, including smoothness, excellent separation, coherence, and richness in the middle tones and the lows. Oh, and it's quiet besides. Who could ask for anything more?

But this takes nothing away from Norbert Lehmann's astonishing Black Cube, which has all of the same qualities, and sounds less than superb only in a direct comparison with the *Audiomat*. . .and of course with our reference. You can drop a Black Cube even into an expensive system, and you'll be thrilled with the results. It isn't really cheap, but it still offers great value.

The two *Creek* puzzled me. I think the OBH-9, the one with the MC input, sounds very good, and is a great buy. I fully expected the OBH-8, which costs the same, to sound nearly identical. But for some reason it doesn't, and it isn't quite as interesting. But then again, perhaps it is what you have to expect for \$299...and it is in fact the OBH-9 that gives you the bargain. Is your glass half full or half empty?

—Gerard Rejskind

How to choose among the many phono stages available? As we went through these four models, you'll note the crescendo of my appreciation, which follows exactly the order of the tests.

First, the *Creek* MM stage. I noted much detail and good rhythm, but a certain roughness in both voices and instruments.

It was followed by the MC stage from the same company, which I liked a great deal for its surprising image. I appreciated the very plausible harmonica, the clear words, and the abundance of detail and subtleties. The dynamic range was excellent and the percussion energetic. It cooks!

Bravo for the Black Cube, which took nothing away from the magnificent musical works we used in this review. Female voices came out naturally, and I could hear the tiny inflections of the harmonica. The bottom end was very good. All timbres were superb, and the low notes sumptuous. The excellent transients gave an impression of great energy. I especially liked the natural timbres of the bell, the snare drum and indeed the entire percussion kit.

And finally there's the *Audiomat* with its complement of advantages and qualities. Let's start with the image, which is remarkable, especially in its breadth, giving each instrument the space it needs to show off the beauty of its sound without stepping on its neighbors. The excellent definition and the perfect separation of timbres delighted me.

But that isn't all. I have to add that those lovely, those gorgeous timbres formed a sumptuous whole. Soprano voices were superb, the harmonica magical, the words clear, the low notes sumptuous. The rhythm and the emotion pick you up and plunge you without warning into the ambience created by the musicians.

I haven't done a poll, but I think I can say we were unanimous.

—Reine Lessard