



# PHONO PREAMPS

Only a few years ago phono preamps didn't exist. Why would you need one if your amplifier already had its own phono input? Sure, you might have wanted a *better* phono section, but if the phono section wasn't up to your aspirations, you would probably opt to upgrade the whole amplifier anyway.

But the world has changed. A lot of high end preamplifiers and integrated amplifiers come without a phono input at all. And if one is available as an extra-cost option, it may well be an afterthought, with performance that is no more than adequate.

Not all add-on phono preamps are the sort of thing you'd want to spend hours listening to, of course. We know that from earlier tests of these little boxes. In this review we tried two relatively inexpensive preamps, plus an upgraded version of a more expensive one we know well.

We selected three particularly revealing LPs. From the original (discontinued) LP release of *Harp Spectacular* (Klavier K11044) we selected Marcel Tournier's delightful *Vers une source dans le bois*. We then added two discs

we had used in listening to the Rega P9 turntable: Walton's *Façade* (RR-16) and Eric Bibb's Gospel Blues *Needed Time* (Opus 3 LP19401).

## Musical Fidelity X-LPS

This cute little phono preamp is one of what was originally a series of "X" components from Musical Fidelity, all of them built into the same futuristic tubular box. Back in *UHF* No. 62, a similar-looking digital-to-analog converter can be seen on the cover, floating through deep space.

Like that DAC, the X-LPS is powered by one of those little power "bricks" that makes it look more like an accessory than a full-fledged component. The real power supply is inside, however — the brick contains only the power transformer. An LED power

**Even if you already have a phono preamp, one of these could be right for you.**

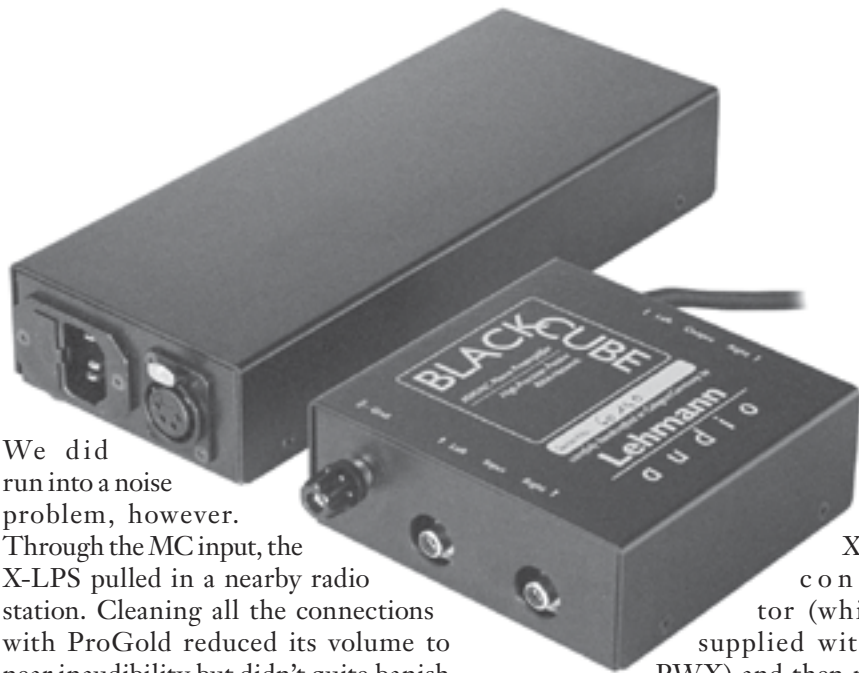
indicator is the only device on the front panel. At the rear are the jacks, including separate input jacks for MM pickups and low impedance MC pickups, as well as a switch for choosing one or the other. The output jacks and the power switch are also there. The X-LPS can of course be tucked out of sight, and it's up to your aesthetic sensibilities if you'll hide it or give it a place of honor.

The X-LPS costs C\$400, equivalent to about US\$256.

Perhaps because the X-LPS looks so much like a design exercise we didn't really expect it to do all that well. We were surprised. The gossamer structure of Susann McDonald's harp wizardry, which would have been destroyed by an inferior preamp, came through with most of its magic intact. Certainly it didn't sound quite the way it had with our reference (the phono section of the Copland CTA-301). The notes had a bit more punch, though not enough to be truly disturbing. The tonal balance was by no means thin, though we were less impressed with how low this often self-effacing instrument can dig. Albert found the tone cooler. Reine liked the fluidity of the sound. "Even in those very soft passages you never lose the flow of the melody," she said.

The X-LPS also did well with *Façade*, with especially strong rhythm (which Walton used cleverly in the suite's various tableaux. There was a very good balance between clarity — necessary to enjoy the often sensuous timbres of the instruments — and smoothness. The depth was quite good, though not really as good as with our reference. "Is it my imagination," asked Albert, "or does it sound just a little more ordinary? With our reference you could *walk* into the scene. With this preamp you can't, but it's nice all the same."

*Needed Time* was also more than pretty good, with well-reproduced guitar work (but with the bottleneck sounding louder, thought Reine), and a thousand details. Eric Bibb's voice was gorgeous, with only a slight dilution of the startlingly natural sound of this 45 rpm LP. The percussion came through with near perfection, and even the often-difficult harmonica was well reproduced.



We did run into a noise problem, however. Through the MC input, the X-LPS pulled in a nearby radio station. Cleaning all the connections with ProGold reduced its volume to near inaudibility but didn't quite banish it. The fault may be partly that of our Alpha room, which is soundproofed with lead panels that, unfortunately, are not grounded (one expensive preamp actually brought in Radio Moscow in that room...and *only* in that room). The station was not audible when we tried the X-LPS in our Omega system.

This is a great little preamp, at a price that can be justified even if you're not buying an expensive super turntable. Musical Fidelity now makes only two "X" components (the other is a head-phone amp). We're glad this is one of them.

### The Black Cube with PWX supply

Originally reviewed in *UHF* No. 56, this small German-made phono preamp sounded so good that we were prompted to add it to our Audiophile Store.

It has undergone some changes since. The tiny DIP switches that allow choosing the MM or MC input, and also the load resistance, are now accessible without opening the box. The major alteration is the addition of the optional PWX power supply. Yes, power sources matter. The PWX, however, is expensive: at C\$400 (US\$256) it adds 50% to the cost of the Black Cube. Is the improvement worth that extra cost? We would soon see.

Unfortunately, the upgrade has been poorly implemented. The original "plain" power supply is captive. That means you have to cut off its cord, solder on a four-

pin XLR connector (which is supplied with the PWX) and then plug it into the PWX. For most people this is not a do-it-yourself project, and it gets worse when you get a look at the PWX instruction leaflet. It indicates which voltage has to be connected to which pin, but it doesn't identify the wire colors, so without instruments you're flying blind. That should be fixed.

We connected the Black Cube to our J-1 turntable. Noise was lower than with our reference preamp, with hum slightly louder than the hiss, but with both unnoticeable when actual music is played.

It took but one recording to determine that this augmented preamp is a delight. The Black Cube digs out a *lot* of detail, but never sacrificing either finesse or detail. "The melody floats above the notes themselves," exclaimed a delighted Reine. "Most music has soft ppp passages, but this piece goes down to ppppp...and you can *still* follow it."

Of course with a delicate (but — as the title says — *spectacular*) piece like this one, you notice the higher notes first. But at one point Susann McDonald goes way down into the nether part of the spectrum, reminding us that a harp resembles a grand piano turned on end. The Black Cube delivered those low notes perfectly. Delightful!

With *Façade* the Black Cube sounded much like our reference, with no notable change in color. The clarity was superb, but without an attendant increase in brightness, not even in that difficult piccolo passage near the opening of the

suite. The snare drum had its customary solidity, but sounded farther back than usual, which Gerard took to be a good sign. The often troublesome cymbals were exactly as we like to hear them. "I think they're even more refined with this preamp," commented Gerard.

With *Needed Time* the Black Cube confirmed our suspicions: the addition of the PWX power supply really does propel it a notch ahead.

Its superiority was evident right from the first measures, when Eric Bibb's guitar supplies the melodic introduction. But it isn't alone. Behind it are subtle little percussion instruments. No other preamp we have tried allowed us to hear them with such clarity and realism. That prepared us for what was to come.

The entire range of frequencies came through in exemplary fashion. The two guitars had their full weight but without any slowing of rhythm. We could hear Bibb's fingers slipping on the guitar strings. His voice, already clear with all of the other preamplifiers, took on an added clarity which, however, never sounded even faintly electronic. "What more can you ask?" asked Gerard rhetorically.

What indeed? Is the power supply worth the extra cost? Oh yes!

### The Rega Fono

Rega will be bringing out an expensive upscale phono stage, presumably to match its renewed P9 turntable (reviewed on the previous pages) and its moving coil pickup. This isn't it. The Fono is an inexpensive (C\$400) accessory meant to accompany its more affordable turntables. It handles only MM pickups, though the "MM" sticker at the rear hints at more to come.

Like the Musical Fidelity X-LPS, the Fono's power transformer is in a separate "brick" (using the same connector as common DC supplied, alarmingly enough). It is quite small, with a shape recalling that of recent Rega amplifiers and other components. Since we use a moving coil pickup, we added our Bryston TF-1 stepup transformer...now discontinued, alas.

This phono stage caught us totally off base. How can it cost so little and be so good? Let us count the ways.



The harp piece left us with goosebumps. It seemed to go by in a flash, and we wanted to hear more, more, *more*. The richness of the midrange was delicious, but then it *all* was. Even the silences between notes had an electric quality. "If Heaven doesn't have harp music like this," said Reine, "I don't want to go."

The Rega did a beautiful job on

*Façade* too, with the timbre of each instrument realistically projected in 3-D space. The preamp's great silence let us hear to the back of the hall, where more happens than you'd suppose. The changing moods of the Walton suite came through gorgeously, as did the all-too-fragile counterpoints.

Would the piccolo get shrill if we turned up the volume a bit? We did. It didn't.

On *Needed Time*, the opening measures told the story. "From the start there's a delicious presence," said Albert. "You can call it depth, or you can call it whatever you want, but it's there." When Bibb's guitar was joined by the bottleneck guitar and the harmonica, the joy of the musicians was palpable, and we all laughed. From there, we just kept on smiling. "This is reference quality," said Albert.

What will Rega do next? We can hazard a guess. A better power supply (as big as the P9's?), better jacks, and of course an input for a low impedance moving coil cartridge

But it won't cost what this one does. It isn't often you get this kind of quality at a price you don't have to spend months budgeting for. But Rega has been building turntables long enough to know the truth: *this* is what analog is all about.



## CROSTALK

For me there were two surprises here. No, make it *three* surprises.

First, I doubted that the Black Cube's optional power supply could actually add 50% to its value. Wrong. It does. Its level of refinement rises to well above what we heard when we tried the original Black Cube.

The X-LPS was a surprise too. Does anyone else make a phono stage of this quality with switchable sensitivity for this price? If they do, they haven't told me.

And the biggest surprise is the Rega Fono, whose timid appearance lowered my expectations to the basement. If you don't need an MC input, look no further.

—Gerard Rejskind

I keep thinking that nobody knows with any certainty how good LPs *really* sound. Every improvement in phono preamps uncovers another degree of musical potential in those vinyl grooves.

The Musical Fidelity did not measure up to our reference, but it provided very good reproduction nevertheless. It did reveal fine details, and lyrics were clearly audible. I know it didn't create a deep sense of stage, and at times I would have liked more warmth.

No such complaints with the Rega Fono. It took me by surprise and held my interest in the music effortlessly. Everything seemed to flow easily, with refinement and subtlety.

Bass deepened, space widened and I could feel the sheer presence of the musicians, right there in the room. No need to check for those subtle details to reproduce; not only did I hear them clearly but I discovered some that I had not even noticed with our reference.

These same applies to the Black Cube with its new power supply, and let me tell you that you can actually feel the *power* in that power supply. Highs were silky soft, mids rich and naturally warm, and yet bass filled the lower regions of the room with authority and — it seemed — more volume. It made me wonder if it was reproducing the original venue or adding its own powerful voice. I can't answer that.

Take the time to compare, if you can, and hang on to those LPs. There is more music than you thought in them thar grooves.

—Albert Simon

I've just lived through some splendid moment. How to explain the immense pleasure the Rega Fono gave me? Let me try.

Textures of both voices and instruments are delightful, warm and rich, with no cheating. A singer's sensitivity can be *felt*, not only through the melody but also through the perfectly audible words. Musical notes, from the guitar, piano or harp, are well separated but without hardness. They flow

like spring water over rocks, which says a lot about the breadth and depth of the image. And I still haven't gotten over the rhythm. Whatever the tempo and the tempo changes, it is always involving. I was taken with the urge to sing along, or to let myself be swayed, to be moved emotionally. Now and then, a smile rose straight from my heart to my lips. Extraordinary, I tell you.

Whew! What's left for the other two?

The X-LPS also has an excellent list of qualities. I was struck by its excellent image and timbral separation. Everything emerges with detail: modulations, inflections, dynamics, bass, highly acceptable sibilance, plausible percussion...great music, to make a long story short. I was happy.

And I was astonished by the enhanced Black Cube. What better way to spend the earnings of a tough year's work than by giving oneself incomparable hours of music without having to leave home?

The session reminded me that a phono preamp is not a mere accessory, but is an important part of the source, whose signal will — for better or for worse — be amplified and reproduced downstream. The Black Cube is sensational, and I'm not even certain that it isn't superior to our own tube phono preamp.

Need I once again list the qualities that make it a dream preamp?

—Reine Lessard