

ANALOG CORNER

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Phono Preamps from Ypsilon & Audio Research

In case you hadn't noticed, I enjoy being the center of attention. So when the gadget website Gizmodo asked to send an emissary to visit me in preparation for his writing a piece about audiophiles (and, I assumed, how nerdy, snobby, and deluded they are), I said yes. As anyone will tell you, even negative press is better than none.

Fortunately, they sent John Mahoney, who is more in love with music than with gadgets, and who later admitted that his visit was, indeed, simply to confirm the unflattering impression he had of audiophiles and audiophilia.

After hearing the first tune on my system, Mahoney exclaimed, "I've never heard *anything* like that before!"—which is what most non-audiophiles say when first experiencing high-performance sound. He was turned. You can read his story at: <http://gizmodo.com/5213042/why-we-need-audiophiles>.

Judging by the near-hysterical tone of some of the comments posted later on the site, Mahoney's story struck a nerve with Gizmodo readers, who were outraged by a semi-flattering portrayal of our hobby, and especially—given how many went after me personally—of the hobbyist. Bring it on!

No sooner had that furor subsided than a writer for another tech site, Boing Boing, said that the "well-crafted" Gizmodo story was "sad" because it hypothesized that, even if "normal" people can't hear what makes "ultra-expensive gear special," audiophiles claim that we *can* (<http://gadgets.boingboing.net/2009/04/15/gizmodo-audiophile.html>). But the Gizmodo story had posited no such hypothesis, and I was forced to write a lengthy rebuttal and defense (<http://gadgets.boingboing.net/2009/05/06/on-being-gizmodoed-b.html>).

The responses to *that* story were even more hysterical, including this jaw-dropper: "Make no mistake why it is this way: the *real* problems of audio need real engineering to fix them. You need competence and skill to design speakers properly, or to record and replay a fully immersive sound field—

whereas anyone can build snake oil products—especially the advertisers in the magazine that employs Michael." That's from someone who purports to represent the "objectivist," "rational" wing of the audio populace.

In other "objectivist" news, many took up my invitation to download two vinyl-sourced files of the same tune, one before, one after "demagnetization." Spectrum analysis of the two files showed clear differences similar to what was heard, but that didn't satisfy some commentators, so a new, more formal test protocol was suggested. I will comply and again post the files. I'll let you know the results in a future edition of "Analog Corner."

Ypsilon VPS-100 phono stage & MC10 step-up transformer

In the November 2008 issue I reviewed True Life Audio's Reikon phono preamplifier and step-up transformer from Greece, which cost \$43,500. The Ypsilon VPS-100 moving-magnet phono stage, also from Greece, is pricey as well: \$27,700, including \$2700 for the MC-10 step-up transformer for moving-coil cartridges. Still, that's \$15,800 less pricey than the three-box Reikon.

Like the TLA, the Ypsilon is beautifully built, with custom-extruded and -annealed silver wire hand-wired point-to-point, and housed in a substantial aluminum case. Also like the Reikon, the VPS-100 uses tubes in its rectification and amplification stages. But the single-box Ypsilon is no copy-

cat design. It uses a 6CA4 rectifier tube and choke filter. RIAA is accomplished passively with zero feedback, using a transformer-based LCR network instead of the commonly used capacitor/resistor (CR) type. This is said to prevent capacitors' dielectric absorption, which causes a delayed release of energy that produces a ringing character.

Ypsilon drives its split RIAA network using its own transformer, which features paper insulation and a core made of a special amorphous material. The 2123Hz filter pole uses an air-core inductor with "practically no stray capacitance" at the first gain stage, Ypsilon claims, with the 50–500Hz pole at the output of the first of two gain stages, both of which use Siemens C3g tubes specified for 10,000 hours of use. The first gain stage and 2123Hz-pole coils are mechanically decoupled from the rigid chassis. Ypsilon claims its LCR design sounds more natural, musical, and open than CR networks, and produces "better defined macro and micro dynamics."

The Ypsilon VPS-100 is expensive, but it's also beautifully built and impressively specced. Other specifications for this moving-magnet preamplifier include: Gain: 39dB. Input impedance: 47k ohms. Input capacitance: 200pF. Output impedance: 1200 ohms. Frequency response: 10Hz–40kHz, –3dB. RIAA accuracy: ±0.5dB, 20Hz–20kHz.

There are three wideband step-up transformers available: the MC20, (8Hz–60kHz), MC16 (8Hz–65kHz), and MC10 (8Hz–70kHz), intended for



Ypsilon VPS-100 tubed phono preamplifier.

use with cartridges having output ranges of 0.2–0.3mV, 0.3–0.4mV, and 0.4–0.6mV, respectively, producing gains of 26dB, 24dB, and 20dB. Input impedances terminated into 47k ohms are respectively 140, 200, and 500 ohms; parallel RCA input jacks permit additional loading, if desired. The custom double-coil transformers are shielded

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with mu-metal and potted in 10mm-thick enclosures coated with soft iron-nickel. Each transformer costs \$2700.

Sound: There are many great phono preamps in the category of Reasonable to Reasonably Expensive (under \$8000), including the Einstein Turntable's Choice, the Audia Flight, and the Manley Steelhead, two of which I own and enjoy. There are also some insanely expensive great ones, such as the Boulder Amplifiers 2008 and the True Life Audio Reikon. I haven't heard the Boulder in a long time, but I hope to again soon; Boulder is about to introduce the 1008, a simplified, less expensive model based on the 2008's circuitry.

The best tubey-sounding phono preamp I've heard is the expansive, smooth-flowing, treble-extended TLA Reikon. The best solid-state phono preamp—and by far the most dynamic I've ever experienced—is the Boulder 2008. There's a reason that, despite its costing over \$30,000, Boulder has sold over one hundred 2008s.

If you find the TLA too "tubey," with insufficient weight and grip on the bottom, and the Boulder too analytical

and "clean," with not enough lushness and magic in the middle, the Ypsilon combined the best of both while costing considerably less than either. It produced an absolutely intoxicating blend of stupefyingly extended high frequencies, resolution, clarity, and transient precision, along with tight, deep, nimble, nonmechanical bass, and an ideally rich—ie, not *too* rich—midrange with just the right amounts of body and harmonic structure.

Whether or not all this was the result of their LCR network, the first time I played a familiar record through the VPS-100, I easily heard everything Ypsilon claims for it. And when I played John Atkinson a few tracks, he heard it immediately: more natural, more musical, more transparent, more open, and especially, "better defined macro and micro dynamics"—as claimed.

I heard the high-frequency clarity, air, and extension of the best solid-state phono preamps, as well as the harmonic expression and musical flow of the best tube phono preamps, with none of the negatives of either. The Ypsilon was so quiet; so well-damped, clean,



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and extended on the bottom; and so fast, airy, and open on the top, that I'd never have guessed I was listening to tubes. It had the best high-frequency definition I've ever heard from a phono preamp, and its ability to separate out musical strands in the higher frequencies was absolutely unprecedented in my experience.

In fact, the VPS-100's midband was so clean, flowing, and generous that I found myself wondering how a solid-state phono stage could even *do* that—the absence of any of the sonic signature of tubes was so complete that I kept forgetting that tubes were what I was hearing.

The soundstage was exceptionally expansive and deep—ask JA. Images were solid, dimensional, and of proper size—not inflated, as can sometimes happen on large stages.

The VPS-100 did a better job of clarifying and separating musical strands, particularly in the top octaves, than any other phono preamp I've heard, with perhaps the exception of the Boulder 2008, and did so with no hint of grain, glare, or etch—and I mean *none*. It abso-

lutely did not sound “electronic,” even as it set new standards in my listening experience for high-frequency extension, transient speed, and clarity. Cymbals, bells, xylophones, snare drums—all were reproduced with a fineness of resolution unprecedented in my listening experience . . . with one exception I'll get to in a bit.

The Ypsilon didn't particularly shine with any particular musical genre. It sounded as excellent reproducing electric music as it did with acoustic music. I played and recorded on CD-R a 45rpm lacquer of “Underture,” from the Who's *Tommy*, that I was fortunate to get from Chris Bellman at Bernie Grundman's mastering studio. I'll be sure to bring the CD to the Rocky Mountain Audio Fest in October so that everyone can hear a reasonable approximation of the Ypsilon's abilities.

Shortcomings? Perhaps the VPS-100 didn't produce quite the last word in macrodynamics. Perhaps it wasn't as explosive as the best solid-state phono preamps. But I'm not really sure—I'm just scrounging around for something negative to write.

Another issue was hum. While the VPS-100's transformer is well shielded, I found that, to keep hum to a minimum, I had to position the unit carefully, dress the interconnects with equal care, and experiment with ground wires. Even at its worst, the hum was masked by even the quietest program material, and when I used the balanced outputs, it went away completely.

The Exception: I convinced On Track Audio, US importer of the True Life Audio Reikon, to send back the Reikon's separately housed transformer. It's not available separate from the \$43,500 Reikon, but if it were, it would cost \$10,000. The Reikon transformer added to the Ypsilon's high-frequency performance another dimension of shimmering clarity, without edge or harshness, but the differences weren't so great that I couldn't get over them once Ypsilon's MC-10 was back in the system and the Reikon had gone home.

Conclusions: I've gone to the expense of buying a number of good phono preamps so that I don't have to rely on my aural memories of their sounds. I compared all of these refer-



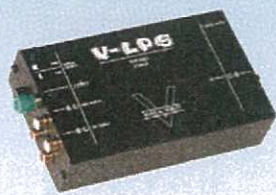
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