

PHONO STAGES £129-£3,999

# Stage managed

The missing link between your turntable and amplifier of choice, these six phono preamplifiers are an essential addition to any audition list



## Creek OBH-8mk2

PRICE: £129 TELEPHONE: 01442 260146  
WEB: creekaudio.com REVIEWED: HFC 439

A straight forward moving-magnet phono stage, the OBH-8mk2 has fixed loading and no user adjustments. The new design uses an integrated circuit for the gain stage powered by a 24V supply. The reason why this relatively hefty voltage has been adopted is because it is split inside the phono stage to +/- 12V via a custom circuit. This means the OBH-8mk2 can be DC coupled with no in or output coupling capacitors. Additionally, by using a capacitor to roll off below 5Hz and capacitance smoothing, Creek ensures that there is no unwanted noise.

### Sound quality

The boisterous *Love Is Dead* by Chvrches has a hugely potent and entertaining sound as the OBH-8mk2 does an excellent job of delivering the sweeping and powerful *Heaven/Hell*. The most immediately notable aspect of the performance is the bass response. There is plenty of low-end output, but there is also sufficient detail and texture to ensure that the sound is constantly believable and well integrated into the rest of the frequency response. Impressively, it is revealing enough to highlight the different presentation available from Gold Note's £382 Vasari Gold (HFC 425) and Nagaoka's £350 MP-200 (HFC 434), and is no less happy working with the equivalently priced Ortofon 2M Blue 100 (HFC 435).

**WE SAY:** Does a fine job of delivering the character of the record with low noise and a useful level of gain at the price



## Lindemann Limetree Phono

PRICE: £595 TELEPHONE: 01334 570666  
WEB: eliteaudiouk.com REVIEWED: HFC 441

According to Lindemann's chief technical officer, the circuit in the Limetree Phono is derived from a valve-based design but is entirely solid-state and uses high-quality components. The input stages are separate and there are independent moving-magnet and coil inputs on the rear. The moving-magnet section offers 40dB of gain while the moving-coil goes for a fixed 60dB, which should be enough for all but the lowest output cartridges and limited gain setups. The resistance of the MC input is adjustable via a series of dip switches on the underside.

### Sound quality

Once properly set up, noise levels drop to negligible and performance is delivered with a fine balance of energy, space and refinement. The top end in particular manages to bring a little sweetness to the way it handles vocals, but never sounds syrupy or overly warm. It doesn't have the most prodigious bass, but what it offers is detail that's well defined and integrated into the rest of the frequency response. But the real highlight is the moving-magnet input, which has a wonderful tonal richness that is present with the moving-coil section but underpinned with a propulsive energy and sense of urgency that engages the listener the moment anything with an upbeat time signature is played.

**WE SAY:** A decent performance with moving-coil cartridges that becomes outstanding with moving-magnet ones



## Pro-Ject Phono Box S2 Ultra

PRICE: £200 TELEPHONE: 01235 511166  
WEB: henleyaudio.co.uk REVIEWED: HFC 450

Replacing Pro-Ject's DS and DS+ models with a smaller, simpler design, the Phono Box S2 Ultra has adjustable loading and impedance options to offer a useful degree of set-up flexibility. It is also fully discrete, with no op-amps in the circuit, while polystyrene capacitors are used in key parts of the audio chain and there's a split RIAA circuit so that it adheres closely to the recognised equalisation curve. Finally, the Phono Box S2 Ultra uses an external wall-wart type PSU to reduce noise levels.

### Sound quality

Moving-magnet operation is commendably quiet at idle and you need to raise the levels to bombastic for unwanted noise to creep in. This gives it the dynamic space it needs to shine and the results are impressive. The S2 Ultra provides the headroom to ensure music has the necessary impact and scale it needs to shine. Vocals are well defined and the ideal of a warm and harmonious sound is achieved without the performance feeling soft or sluggish. Moving-coil performance is natural and lifelike, but the switch to the 60dB gain setting allows for some noise to creep in during more idle and quiet passages.

**WE SAY:** A flexible and consistently impressive performer that shows its best with moving-magnet cartridges

