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Manley Labs Steelhead Phono Section

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Once in a long while, as HP has said of things such as the original Koetsu MC phono cartridge, a truly great product comes along that, in a flash, redefines an entire genre of devices, and, like a star going supernova, eclipses all others that have the misfortune to be milling around in the same vicinity. Such a wondrous and captivating new piece of work is the Manley Labs Steelhead hybrid (tubes/FET/autoformers) phono section.

This product was conceived, as I understand it from EveAnna Manley, as something she had wanted for a long time so that she could listen to all of the LPs gathering dust on her shelves! So, she says, she figured "if we are going to make something, let's do it right."

So what do you get from such a vision? A two-piece (power supply and head unit), vacuum-tubed phono section that amplifies any known phono cartridge, be it moving magnet or moving coil, with whatever output (from the highest to the lowest), that is fitted with two MC and one MM cartridge inputs, and that features both a fixed output for use with preamps, and a variable output for those who want to use it directly into a power amplifier. This thing is designed to take no prisoners and to make no excuses.

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Let me get right to the point: This is, and by a good margin, the finest phono amplifier I have ever heard, in my system or anyone else's. Now, please take into account that there are other, more expensive (and yes, more esoteric) phono sections on the market, and some will listen and feel that another is better (the big new Zanden from Japan, courtesy of Bertrand Audio Imports, comes to mind as a possibility, as well as the famed FM Acoustics phono stage), but to my ear, and in the ways I believe are musically important, the Steelhead comes closer to doing it all than any other.

Where to start? I suppose with areas nearest and dearest to my heart: quality and quantity of bass and overall visceral dynamic impact. The first thing that grabs your attention when you listen to this thing (and do not make the mistake, as I did, to dare to listen to it until it has been turned on for at least 4-5 hours the first time; after initial warm-up and burn-in, it sounds quite decent 15-30 minutes after coming out of stand-by, which is where you should always leave it. Never turn it off completely or you have to start all over, in the manner of the Plinius M-14, my reference phono section.).

The first time I heard the Steelhead was in the Coincident Speaker Technology room at the 2001 CES in Las Vegas; there was a sound emanating from that room that shook me to the bones and sucked me in to see what all of the commotion was about. Israel Blume, Coincident's front-man and designer, was playing some of Chad Kassem's recent direct-to-disc blues recordings, and the realistic bass, in amplitude, tonal correctness, and tight, dynamic punch, was a revelation. Almost a year later, in my listening room with the same and other records, the impression remains the same: No other phono section can slam and wail in such a realistic manner in the bass frequencies as the Steelhead. Whether on blues, rock, jazz, or classical recordings, the lower registers are exceedingly well-served, and makes you realize why this area of frequencies is referred to as the foundation of all music. If the bass is incorrect or not as good as it can be, the entire spectrum suffers, all the way to the highest highs. (When you listen to a system that can convincingly reproduce truly low bass [below 30 Hz], you realize that the highs sound better, as well, and that the ambient cues of a recording are more convincingly lifelike). Recordings with excellent low bass, combined with a sense of recorded ambience, such as Elgar's *Coronation Ode* [EMI ASD 3345], are reproduced with a bigness and sense of spaciousness that is not only appropriate, but realistic in the sense of human scale. Then throw something rowdier on the turntable – Joe Harley's AudioQuest direct-to-two-track all-analog recording, Mighty Sam McLain's *Give It Up to Love* [AudioQuest AQ-LP 1015], for example, and feel what R&B is suppose to do to your booty, as well as your soul.

Hand-in-hand with the stunning bass quality of the Steelhead is its ability to capture the full dynamic impact of any recorded performance and bring it back alive. I have been playing disc after disc in an effort to see just how far I could go, and if there were a limit to the Steelhead's ability to give back all that was pumped through it. I gave up before the Steelhead did. The Plinius M-14 is my reference and an excellent phono stage, but in this area, the Steelhead edges it out just a bit.

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That last 1-2 dB of punch is revelatory on many recordings. Take my old favorite, Elgar's *Caractacus* [EMI SLS 998]. There are sections where orchestra, organ, and large chorus are all in full cry, making a wondrous and spectacular noise; when I listened to this through the Steelhead, it was as if the room had come alive, with a great writhing musical beast storming out of the loudspeakers into the room. Spontaneous shouts of joy and even tears, as when I played the last movement of Mahler's *Eighth Symphony* [London OSA 1295, with Solti and the Chicago Symphony and Chorus], were all but involuntary. This is, to me, one of the truly great marks of music reproduction in the home – when emotional impact is squeezed from the listener without conscious effort or thought.

Next up with this remarkable phono stage is its purity and lack of distortion artifacts. I have played a number of records I was convinced were either over-modulated or just plain hard to track and guess what I found out? While the occasional record is poorly cut or too hot or impossible to track, many have just been overloading the phono section! For instance, some of the passages on Joni Mitchell's *Blue* [Reprise MS-2038, early pressing] are notoriously difficult for a cartridge to navigate, let alone for a phono section to decode. But with the Steelhead and a great cartridge, like either of the two moving-coil models I have been listening to of late, the Sakura Systems/47 Labs Miyabi or the Dynavector DV XV1, Mitchell's style, with all her inflections and timbre/pitch swings and modulations, comes through intact and with a soaring intensity and vibrancy that I had not heard before. Likewise with Chad Kassem's state-of-the-art 45-RPM double album of Nancy Bryant songs [*Neon Angel*, Acoustic Sounds APO 2013]. Bryant's voice is three parts Heaven and one part Devil. It is beautiful and, at times, stupifyingly difficult to reproduce cleanly, without invoking the cringe factor, either in the equipment or the listener. But through the Steelhead, in the system that I have been listening to for the past couple of months, she rings true as a bell and with a beautiful purity and dynamic nuance that sends shivers up my spine.

The bottom line: The Steelhead makes music; records and artists come to life in my room and bring me unsurpassed joy and a deliverance from the daily pressures and disappointments of life. I reveled in the depth and complexity of my record collection, as if I were in the grip of a time machine. Would that I could afford it. When I take it to HP's for the big system, it shall be greatly missed.

What the Steelhead does *not* do, however, is romanticize or warm up recordings. There is a large-geometry JFET in front of the first tubed gain stage, so the thing is not fully a vacuum tube design. But this device's solid-state signature is quite benign (in other words, warm and soft recordings sound warm and soft). The sonic characteristics of any given record are rendered with an even hand. I find the thing refreshingly neutral and, to a fault, truthful to the recording. Some may feel that its stark portrayal of the signal is a negative, wishing for a bit more additive warmth; I, however, want to know what is in the grooves, and the Steelhead tells me the truth.

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In comparison to the Plinius M-14, the Groove, and the Aesthetix Io, phono sections I know well, the Steelhead is, in its character, most like the Plinius; both have a remarkably extended and stompingly powerful bass capability, as well as exceptional high-frequency air, and both are unfazed by any incoming signal, no matter the level or complexity. Both also do not add or subtract from the signal. This is not to say that either sounds transistorized; they are merely truthful. The Steelhead has a tad more body and weight to its images; things are a bit more fully fleshed. But it should be so, given that the Steelhead costs more than twice the Plinius. The Groove is, despite its totally modern and compact solid-state origins, a bit warmer and bouncier in a friendly sort of way, and has a slightly richer tonal quality. But it is not as dynamic in the bass or as wide-open in the treble as the Steelhead. Again, the price differential dictates that the Steelhead *better* be better. As for the Aesthetix Io, well, it is tubed all the way. Never overly warm or mushy, but musical and open in a way that only pure tubes can be, but with a price in noise and heat and rather short tube life, never mind the fact that the two rather large and clumsy black boxes that make up the Io are not the last word in style. But if the Steelhead did not exist, I might opt to give overall top honors to the Io, at least when it is in its perfect zone of tube life, if I could live with the heat and the vast number of tubes that need replacing at re-tubing time.

But the Steelhead *does* exist, and anyone who is serious enough to consider spending \$7,300 on a stand-alone phono section, and who has a large enough record collection to make the thought of purchasing one less than insane, should somehow find a way to listen to the Manley.

Sidebar

EveAnna Manley on the Steelhead

EveAnna Manley granted me permission to quote from her website her explanation of the rather complex features and technical aspects of the Steelhead. She says it with more flair and humor than I could; I find her a breath of fresh air in an industry full of stiffness and hot wind much of the time. She says:

The Steelhead ... is an "upstream" device, and has a clever MC variable load auto tranny that Mitch Margolis (on-staff Manley hi-fi designer) designed and our very own Manley Magnetics department executed (which makes the MC stage so clever). It has two moving-coil inputs with selectable impedance loads of 25, 50, 100, 200 and 400 ohms via Mr. Clever "Steelhead" transformer/autoformer. Iron = transformer = "steel"; makes sense to me...

It also has variable and selectable Moving Magnet input impedances too: 25, 50, 100, 200 ohms and 47Kohms. Very nifty is the selectable-dial-able-in-able-from-the-faceplate-able capacitive loading for all three of the MM & MC inputs: 0 to 1100 picofarads in 10 picofarad steps. Very cool! Equalize baby! Ten picofarad steps!

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It's got six tubes. 2 x 6922 plus 4 x 7044. It's got a big honkin' volume control. It can drive an amplifier directly if you want, if you don't "do" digital. Hey, and if you happen to have three turntables set up, we give you 2 x MC and 1 x MM selectable inputs! It's got variable and fixed volume outputs. And all-tube really low-Z tube buffered outputs. Like inherently 20 ohms plus the little 47 ohm "OK drive those high capacitance audiophile cables why doncha" resistor, so its real output impedance is only 67 ohms. No wanky cathode follower (oh bor-ing) output here like the other guys. We got your real low impedance all-tube outputs right here!

It's got selectable gain: 50, 55, 60, 65dB on a switch that even auto-mutes as you change it so no nasty bangs. Gain switch markings are referred to from the input of the 1st active electronics at 1 kHz to the fixed output @ 10k load, regardless of whether source is MM or transformer stepped-up MC. It is not really practical to include MC step-up gain on the front panel markings due to the variable SOURCE impedances of the MC cartridges and the variable loading that the input XFMR will have on any given cartridge. All of this total MC gain variability should be confined to about 3 to 12 dB of range, though. Transformer step-up gain plateaus as the load Z on a given MC cartridge is optimized...producing no VOLTAGE gain but in fact a bit more power gain... The user should set a load Z which sounds best with his/her particular MC cartridge and adjust gain to suit their system's operating level. Bottom line: there is plenty of gain... enough to do justice to your fave lo-output MC cartridges).

It's got a mute switch. It's got a "just turn it down while I cue up so I don't throw my woofer cones across the room but I still want the same volume I was listening at before I turned the side" DIM switch. And what goes with DIM better than SUM, which would be the MONO button... It has a killer hyper-regulated outboard power supply that plugs in on the huge-est connector you ever saw. And you can just hit the "standby" button to keep everybody (in the phono section) off while you take a small holiday to Tahiti. A backlit "MANLEY STEELHEAD" badge illuminated by an old-fashioned lamp (remember those?) reflects back to vinyl-days-of-yore while the millions of BLUE LEDs remind you that this is modern tube engineering design, baby!

A couple of caveats: Although the Steelhead itself is well shielded and quite free of any hum, noise, and RF interference in its own domain, I was able to induce rather bad RF into it when using interconnects from my turntable that were a bit long (almost 2 meters). I suggest that the Steelhead be situated such that lengths greater than one meter are avoided, or you may be listening to your local radio stations as well as your records.

Also, despite the fact that the MC input autotformer transformers in the Steelhead are remarkably transparent and quiet, transient response and ultimate high-frequency air are slightly compromised compared to connecting via the MM inputs. Also, the background noise signature of the MM input is just a bit of low-level hiss, while the same artifacts through the MC input modulate as an ever-so-slight hum. Not obtrusive at all, and I could only really hear it when listening with the 97-dB sensitive Coincident Speaker Technology Victories, but it was there.

Manufacturer Information

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Associated Equipment

VPI HW-19 MK IV turntable w/ JMW Memorial 10.5 arm and SAMA (Stand Alone Motor Assembly)
VPI Synchronous Drive Unit motor controller; Sakura Systems/47 Labs Miyabi and Dynavector DV XV1 MC cartridges; Marigo Audio Labs MR 20.2 PH/F, Hovland Groove 2, and EX Cell Power Solutions Groove Tube phono interconnects; Siltech Gen 3 and Gen 5 interconnects, Siltech LS 180 Gen 3 speaker cable
Audio Magic silver interconnects; Stealth Audio Silver and gold interconnects and silver ribbon speaker cables; Wyetech Labs Jade (tubed) and Plinius CD-LAD (solid-state) linestage preamplifiers; Forsell Air Reference CD Drive; EAD TheatreMaster DAC; Custom Power Cord Company Green Hornet coaxial digital cable; Coincident Speaker Technology SIP 300B SET stereo integrated amplifier; Wyetech Labs Topaz 572B stereo SET amplifier; Dehavilland Aries 845 SET mono amplifiers; Custom Power Cord Company Top Gun HCFi A/C power cords and super power blocks; Arcici Suspense Rack