

Minitest

We examine four of the best phono stages to make your vinyl experience the best it can be

Firestone Audio Korora

PRICE: £295 CONTACT: 0845 345 1550
WEBSITE: FIRESTONE-AUDIO.COM

FIRESTONE'S RANGE of tiny boxes covers most audio functions and though this is the only phono model, it seems to have plenty of options that make it quite the all-rounder. Some of these require access to the inside to flick board-mounted switches, which makes something of a nonsense of the rear-panel warning about the risk of electric shock. Mind you, even with the supply disconnected, there is still the theoretical possibility of an electric tickle from the internal batteries – yes, this is a battery-powered product. That has some clear advantages when one is dealing with such tiny and vulnerable signals produced by cartridges. You can, however, use the supplied wall-wart while listening.

Gain is applied by op-amps, and not particularly fast ones, which limit output level at high frequencies, though this is probably academic with any real-world LP. What does slightly concern us is the rather high minimum gain, which may cause overload with MM cartridges when playing very 'hot' LPs.

Indeed, we did see signs of that with a couple of discs and on the whole, we'd consider this phono stage as best suited to MC cartridges, including 'high output' ones which will suit the lowest gain setting well. The sound is a shade on the bright side, but it's very lively and engaging and we particularly enjoyed the sound with well-recorded dance music – the epitome of foot-tapping! Bass is well controlled, perhaps just a shade lean, but rhythmic and powerful and detail is good.

VERDICT BEST SUITED TO MC cartridges, this unit offers forthright and direct sound that's energetic and involving, with excellent rhythm: a little bright tonally.



Lehmann Audio Black Cube Statement

PRICE: £335 CONTACT: 01235 511166
WEBSITE: LEHMANNAUDIO.DE

THERE SEEMS TO BE a double misnomer here – for a start the shape is a low-profile square, not a cube, and 'Statement' seems odd for the bottom of the range. But no matter, for the aim is clear enough: this is a no-nonsense budget audiophile product, unusually but practically designed with inputs at one end and outputs on the opposite one, with gain suitable for moving magnet or moving coil cartridges selectable via bottom-mounted switches which also give some choice of loading resistance.

With the use of an internal jumper, gain is selectable in 10dB steps, which should cater for practically any cartridge, while the maximum output of six volts ensures adequate headroom as long as the gain is set sensibly. Gain is provided by op-amps, with good-quality passive components of the through-hole variety, including fast rectifier diodes (the inevitable wall-wart supplies AC to the main module).

We found this unit something of a winner with good-quality MM cartridges. It's good with MCs too, but less obviously so and its noise performance isn't quite the best. With MM types, though, it is very clear sounding and beautifully detailed. It is tonally neutral with any cartridge type, its treble notably sweet with no sense of constriction or rolloff, while the bass is solid but never overblown. High-end MM cartridges can be very fine devices and this would appear to be the ideal device to partner them.

VERDICT ALTHOUGH PERFORMANCE with MC cartridges is merely good, this phono amp is a very distinguished performer with an MM source, offering excellent detail and tonality.

