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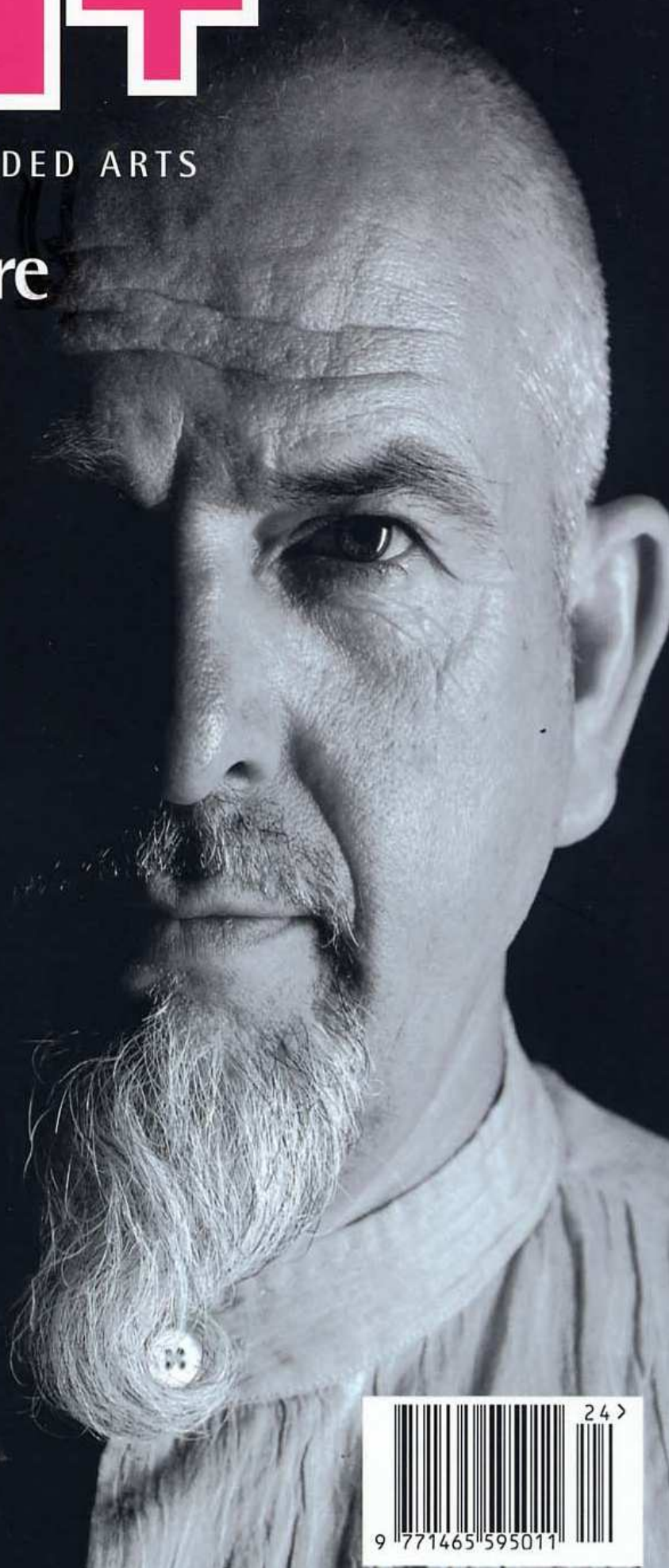
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Moving On Up... Mid-Price Phono-Stages

by Alan Sircom

There's a temptation to compare and contrast when evaluating similarly-priced products that do the same job. But in the world of high end audio, each product stands on its own performance. So, don't look for 'the best' phono stage here, this isn't that sort of review!

All four phono stages were given a thorough run-in before critical listening. Each played records from an SME Model 10 turntable and a trio of cartridges designed to show what these phono stages can do: a still-serviceable Audio-Technica ATOC9 low-output moving-coil, an Ortofon MC-7500 really low-output moving-coil and a Shure V15VxMR moving magnet

(where appropriate).

Benz-Micro Lukaschek PP-1

Some think a phono stage should be basic, verging on the ugly: sound good, style bad. Benz-Micro (and its boss Albert Lukaschek) is not a subscriber to this utilitarian viewpoint; the tiny PP-1 phono stage is



immaculately finished in mirrored chrome metal and looks a class act.

It's a moving-coil phono stage only. There isn't even a power switch; just a pair of gold-plated phono sockets for turntable input, another pair for output to the amplifier and an earth tag, all on the shiny chrome top of the PP-1. Throw in an external plug-top power transformer and that's about it. There are no jumpers or DIP switches to adjust the loading, or allow switching between MM and MC cartridges. This is a deliberate action; such switchery would add extra, potentially sonically deleterious components in the signal path. So, it's minimal on the outside and minimal on the inside. ▶

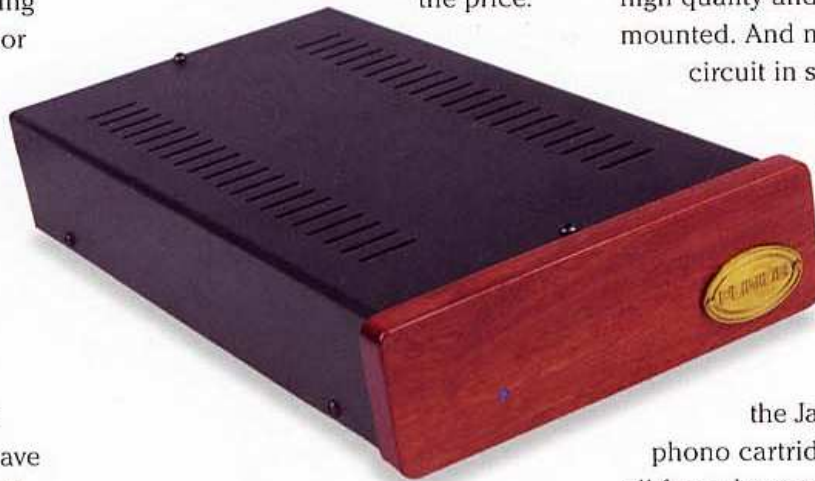
▶ The PCB is extremely small, with just two bipolar transistors in each amplifier stage, making exceptionally short paths. The bulk of the PP-1's circuit-board is taken up with sophisticated power supply regulation. Those components are all of extremely high tolerance, featuring extensive use of sonically-superior polypropylene and metal/plastic film capacitors and metal film resistors.

There is an innate sense of 'rightness' to the PP-1's sound, thanks in part to powerful and well-defined, yet not overblown bass, the sort of attention to detail chess grandmasters would be proud of and a soundstage so wide it could have its own post-code. But most of all, this is one of the most beautiful sounding phono stages around at the price. My prize LP possession – a late 1950s Decca recording of the D'Oyly Carte company performing *The Pirates of Penzance* – is so dynamic, so expansive and so detailed you can almost hear the make-up artists at work backstage. But, best of all, the sound is so magically performed through the PP-1, it makes you almost cry.

That sonic beauty doesn't mean the PP-1 is somehow veiled or rose-tinted. It simply delivers the full range of instrumental colour and harmonics. Paradoxically, that is proved by more raw and gutsy recordings like 'Trouble With Classicists' from *Songs For Drella*, by Lou Reed and John Cale. This stays raw and stark, but the humanity of Lou Reed's voice comes through the hard edged, digitally-recorded sound. Something big, warm and audiophile will sound like a big, warm audiophile's dream through the PP-1, but the detail and authoritative bass of the PP-1 also make this great for those who break out in hives at

the merest brush with audiophile sensibilities. Pinched or etched it isn't.

In short, this is the most expensive phono stage in the group and it looks and sounds like it. The Benz-Micro Lukaschek PP-1 has a luxury sound that's hard to get, even at twice the price.



Price: \$690
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 Audiofreaks
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Plinius Jarrah

The jury is out on the plank of Jarrah wood that passes for a fascia on the Plinius. Either it's a rich and luxurious touch of class; or looks as tacky and dated as a hostess trolley. You almost expect a pair of valves sticking out of the top



plate of the product, but if you are looking for valve sound, this is not the place to go.

There are no valves inside the Jarrah at all, but there are stacks of discrete solid-state components. Hundreds of 'em, all of extremely high quality and not a one surface mounted. And not an integrated circuit in sight, either. There is provision for adjusting the gain and loading of the cartridge connected; although not in the same league as the Trigon Vanguard,

the Jarrah covers most phono cartridge bases. And, like all four phono stages in the group, it comes with a plug-top power supply.

The Kiwi-built phono stage makes a big, keen and dynamic sound, in the style of classic Krell electronics. It paints soundstages with broad strokes and huge dynamic range. It sounds heavily engineered, as if the densely-packed circuit board bestows some kind of bolted-down authority to the sound. This is very much a phono-stage for the cerebral listener, wanting to delve into the hidden recesses of the soundstage. Those who frankly couldn't give a stuff about image depth just so long as it can cope with Metallica at full thrash will not be disappointed, either. That sheer dynamic drive and energy can grip hold of any amplifier and drive it to its end-stops without any trouble. Add to this the sort of bass that delves into the darkest pits without being over-blown or emphasising the rhythm too greatly, and you have a performance that is extremely well balanced from top to toe.

Few phono-stages at this price sound so confident, so capable of being played with all forms of music equally well. It is perhaps ▶

▶ the best all-rounder of the bunch. Perhaps too competent; for this is the antithesis of the likes of the Trigon, and can be a bit of an excitement-free zone. While it is stunningly open and large, making the D'Oyly Carte appear vast and precisely detailed, the entertainment factor is less of a highlight. You can hear every voice in the chorus clearly delineated from every other, you can hear precisely what they are saying, you just don't get as emotionally involved with the performance compared to phono stages with more veiling but more fun.

But many people want a phono stage that adds or removes nothing to the performance, and the Plinius does just that. A winner for the cerebral.

Price: \$600
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 Absolute_Analogue@email.msn.com
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Tom Evans Audio Design Microgroove

Vinyl replay got a massive shot in the arm in the 1990s thanks to the Michell Iso phono stage. The Iso forced people to rethink just how good turntables could be and this is its spiritual heir.

It's a hard product to test. The Microgroove is more bespoke than it has any right to be at this price. Like the Benz-Micro PP-1, it has no adjustment, but unlike the PP-1 you can get the Microgroove tailored to fit



whatever cartridge you are using when you buy it (in fairness to Benz-Micro, the company has its own range of cartridges that are a perfect match for the PP-1, so has little need to push flexibility to suit the idiosyncrasies of other cartridge manufacturers).

Inside the Microgroove's opaque plastic exterior, the circuit-board is populated by chips like most phono stages sport resistors, but the type, make and design of these chips are strictly hush-hush. Tom Evans is secretive about his component selection and even breaking open the case won't help, because the chips have all identification removed.

Unless you cut your hi-fi teeth on DNM equipment,



the whole Microgroove ethos may seem a bit inverted.

Heavy metal cases are out; acrylic is in, and although there is an upgrade to the Microgroove Plus, the change involves an upgrade to the power supply regulation. The Plus version gains Lithos circuitry, making it in effect, half of the larger, dual-mono Groove so beloved of the Editor.

It might be the baby in the range but the Microgroove gives you an enticing taste of what the state of the high-end art is all about. It's immediate, detailed beyond compare, dynamic to the ends of your speakers and as precise as a fencing master. It's the precision that grabs you first. 'Sweet Jane' by The Cowboy Junkies on their classic *Trinity Sessions* LP retains all that languid, subdued nature of Margo Timmins voice, but the guitar often simply sounds strummed without any passion behind it. Here, the intensity of the strumming takes on an almost malevolent air. If you can call anything from the Timmins folk 'malevolent'.

However, it is just a taste. You don't get the liquidity of sounds or the space around the soundstage; you just get an impression of that. But, like any decent drug, that taste is enough to get you hooked. When talking of drugs, it seems fitting to mention Lou Reed, and the *Songs for Drella* track shows you

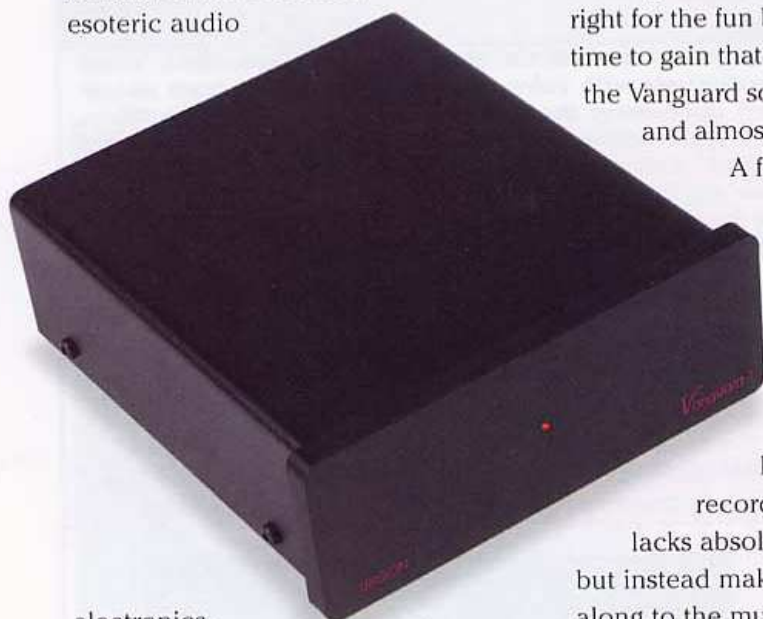
what the Microgroove is capable of; Lou's voice is sublime; physically 'there' in the soundstage, precise and accurate enough to hear hidden scads of vocal intonation and more, but the sense of acoustic is somehow less stunning than the voice. ▶

▶ Upgrading will improve this, but you don't need to upgrade immediately. The Microgroove manages to leave you both satisfied and hungry for more at the same time.

Price: \$400
 Tom Evans Audio Design
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Trigon Vanguard

Trigon is not one of the best known names from the land of Volkswagens, but it hails from one of German hi-fi's most respected names, Restek. The designers of Trigon electronics cut their audio teeth making those familiar chrome-fronted, esoteric audio



electronics, so it comes as a bit of a surprise to find that the Vanguard is one of the bluffest black boxes around.

It may not be the most stylish box, but the Trigon is by far the most configurable. On the underside of the square black case are a series of white on blue DIP switches, to adjust input gain, resistance and capacitance. Armed with the manual to explain what switch goes where, the Vanguard

will cope with practically every cartridge from the most 'umble moving-magnet to a low output moving-coil. (Well, almost – owners of super-low output cartridges like the Audio Note I0 LTD would need some kind of head amp, but such beastly outputs are rare, will not work with any 'real world' phono stage and are certainly not intended to be used with a \$300 phono stage).

The Trigon is well made, with solid aluminium casework and a plug-top power supply. Beneath the case, the design is solidly IC based and uses good quality components throughout. There is also an upgrade to be had, by swapping that plug-top power supply for the (perhaps unwisely named) Volcano power supply.

Don't expect magical sonic transparency or sublime fidelity to the original recording; the Trigon goes right for the fun button. But it takes time to gain that sense of fun; at first, the Vanguard sounds clinically precise and almost, well, frankly boring.

A few discs into the warm-up process and you can't help reaching for record after record with a smile on your face.

So, for example, the Decca D'Oyly Carte recording from the 1950s lacks absolute 3D transparency, but instead makes you want to sing along to the music and kick back and enjoy G&S in a thoroughly Victorian manner. The sound is large and likewise, *Songs for Drella* goes straight for the heart-strings instead of the detail. And then there's the bass; it is warm and rich and extremely tuneful, capable of keeping a beat, no matter how challenging that beat is. It's expansive, too, with a big cuddly soundstage.

There is an parallel between the sound of the Vanguard and

that of a classic Linn LP12 turntable. Both have that tuneful, almost euphonic fun factor that may not be the most cerebrally precise response around, but who cares when the sound is this enjoyable? The Linn LP12 still sells in droves, and so should this fun-packed phono stage.

Price: \$300
 UK Distributor:
 Audiofreaks
 Tel: (44)(0)20 8948 4153
 E-mail: info@audiofreaks.co.uk
 Website: www.audiofreaks.co.uk

Conclusion

How do you rank the Trigon's exciting musical energy against the absolute detail of Tom Evans' Microgroove? What is the formula to balance the sonic beauty of the Benz-Micro PP-1 with the authoritative solidity of the Plinius Jarrah? Each one of these phono stages is beyond serious reproach and criticism, especially given their respective prices; they are simply different flavours of technology designed for matching your cartridge to your amplifier and your tastes. Spending more money on a phono stage will combine these musical threads, but you will often need to spend a lot more money to get that next step.

