



A B S O L U T E   A N A L O G

## Lector Phono-Amp System Mk II

Jacob Heilbrunn

### A two-box, tube-driven, Italian phono preamp

**S**ome audiophiles are perpetually on the quest for the “ultimate” piece of equipment. You know the type—megabuck preamplifier in today, out a week later. The latest and greatest cable that finally, finally promises to deliver sound just like you hear it in the concert hall is extolled by your chum as offering unearthly performance one day and banished the next.

**The longer I listen, the more convinced I’ve become that it can be a bit delusional to think that there is some Holy Grail that’s going to deliver, in one fell swoop, audio Nirvana**

And so on. The truth is that these equipment-churners move so quickly that they leave a wake behind that would be the envy of an Olympic swimmer.

There is, one hastens to add, nothing felonious about such behavior, despite whatever tut-tutting you may hear from more sanctimonious audiophiles, who want to lord it over everyone else by

engaging in the reverse snobbery of condemning someone for burning through equipment. For those with oodles of the green stuff, it may even be a rite of passage or, for others, simply part and parcel of the addictive pursuit of chasing the best and the brightest in the audio firmament. More power to them.

Still, the longer I listen, the more convinced I’ve become that it can be a bit delusional to think that there is some

Holy Grail that’s going to deliver, in one fell swoop, audio Nirvana. It would be nice if this were the case. But it’s often rather tricky to say, with complete certainty, that one top-notch piece of equipment is, in absolute terms, better than another, isn’t it? Did that last preamplifier you heard really smoke yours—or is it just presenting a differ-

ent sonic picture? Sure, every so often an epochal piece comes along that redefines the state of the art. But more often than not, good equipment tends to emphasize (and illuminate) different aspects of musical truth.

These thoughts are prompted by the Lector phono stage. The Lector, which is imported from Italy, is a deluxe component that comes with cherry boards on the sides of the main unit and the separate power supply (you can also order it with cherry boards only on the main unit or with none at all). In spite of the bling, it is not an all-out assault on musical reproduction. It does not have crushing dynamics, Stygian bass, or killer resolution. Rather, it excels at delivering a suave and silky sound that is well nigh irresistible.

Some of these qualities can likely be traced to the Lector’s lack of a step-up transformer that, in many tube phono stages, supplies the necessary gain to amplify the tiny signal coming from the cartridge. It’s a bit of a mystery to me how Lector pulled this off because it’s very hard to get away from a step-up transformer—if you rely solely on tubes



for gain you run the risk of excessive noise. Admirers of the Aesthetix Io, which uses a boatload of tubes, swear by its lack of a transformer (though critics complain about excessive tube rush). After hearing the Lector, it's not hard to see why Aesthetix fans rave. It sounds grainless and non-fatiguing.

At first this wasn't the case. Initially, I wasn't even sure I'd be able to use the Lector because it was humming so badly. But after trouble-shooting with the importer, the urbane Victor Goldstein, I reset the tubes and, after that, experienced no problems—though I should

### **As far as I'm concerned, one of the great pleasures of having an audio system is being able to play LPs**

note that it's more of a hassle to open the unit than it should be because the top plate is rather tenaciously and awkwardly clamped around the body of the chassis. In any event, it proved to be pleasingly immune to RFI and other nasties; the owners' manual (which is something of a hoot to read as it rather literally translates Italian into English) suggests keeping it at some distance from power amplifiers

and observes that it takes about 24 hours before it really warms up properly. Its solid-state power supply undoubtedly helps to provide a blacker background from which notes can emerge. You can also roll the tubes (three E81CC and two 6922 tubes), almost always a good idea if you're up for it, to further improve the sound, though I did not. Consistent with its purist approach, the Lector also comes with loading plugs, rather than a dial in front, to set the impedance. In fact, apart from on-off switches, the Lector has no controls on its front panels, which means that you need to make sure that your amplifier is off when powering the unit up or down, or it can shut down your amp if it has a protection circuit—or worse.

None of this would matter much if the Lector were a musical snooze that offered adequate performance. In this case, however, the purist approach has really paid-off.

It is precisely the nuances that the phonostage captures that help make it so appealing. One of the first things that became apparent was its translucent treble; I've seldom heard jazz vibraphone, whether it was Milt Jackson or Lionel Hampton wielding the mallets, emerge with such clarity and precision from the Magnepan ribbon tweeter. With the wrong front-end equipment, the ribbon can be prone to a bit of tizziness. Not

here. Sure, the VPI HR-X wasn't exactly hurting the sound and Harry Weisfeld's new and much heavier 30-pound platter for the table, which is a marked improvement over the original acrylic one, brought the music to an even higher emotional pitch. But the Lector proved fully capable of revealing these changes, whereas a lesser phonostage would have glossed over them.

Another thrilling moment came in listening to Classic Records 45rpm reissue of Heifetz playing the Beethoven Violin Concerto. Early on in the first movement there is a haunting pianissimo passage in which the trumpets play a measure of quarter notes, followed by a whole tone that foreshadows the strings playing the same theme fortissimo; the Lector almost perfectly replicated the space between the trumpets' articulation of each softly sounded quarter note. This wasn't about pulling out details for their own sake, but rendering them as part of a greater whole. It was the kind of sound that leaves you slack-jawed even as it pulls you into the music and makes the emotional connection we all seek when listening to a good system. Those are the moments that make it all worthwhile, that any music lover will cherish, and that the Lector delivers in spades.

Could the Lector's restraint and gracefulness prove to be too much of a good thing? To find out, I schlepped it over to

---

---

#### SPECIFICATIONS

Phono Inputs: MM and MC

Gain and Distortion: MM, 46dB @ 0.1%;  
MC, 66dB @0.15%

Dimensions: Phono preamplifier 12" x  
18" x 5"; power supply 12" x 14" x 5"

Weight: Phono preamplifier 19.8 lbs.,  
power supply 11 lbs.

#### ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Magnepan 20.1 loudspeaker; Messenger preamplifier and phonostage; Classé Omega and Omega Omicron monoblock amplifiers; VPI HR-X turntable and JMW 12.6 tonearm; Meitner DCC2 and Meitner CDSD; Dynavector XV1-S and Lyra Titan Mono cartridges; Jena Labs Valkyre and Hovland Music Groove 2 interconnects; Jena Labs Fundamental Power One power cords; Shunyata Hydra-8 line conditioner

a friend's house to listen to it on the new SoundLab Majestic loudspeaker, which looms some 9 feet tall. On this Paul Bunyan of a loudspeaker, which tends to ever so slightly soften the sound, the Lector more than held its own. The ease of presentation was mind-boggling. A lot of this is attributable to these magnificent loudspeakers, but the Lector sure wasn't hurting. On a Chet Atkins disc, the guitar has never sounded so natural, vivid, and lifelike. On Louis Armstrong's "St. James Infirmary," the amount of decay on the shimmering cymbal as it fades out at the end of the cut was nothing short of hallucinatory in its sonic realism. And Satchmo's gravelly voice, especially when he chuckles to himself that he's "braggin'" was nothing to sneeze at, either. Bass didn't plunge down too deeply, but it was taut and forceful. I couldn't honestly say that the Lector was excessively romantic

in its presentation; rather, it strikes a nice balance between warmth and clarity.

As much as the Lector revels in shadings of timbres and nuances, it also offers a very coherent soundstage. On orchestral works it spaces out the instruments deftly and there's no shifting of images. Everything is securely in place. You might wish that it would pull string sections apart with more grandeur and sweep, but the soundstage isn't shrunk-en. It's also noteworthy that the Lector does not appear to emphasize unduly the bass or treble at the expense of the midrange. The overall sound is extremely unified and the all-important midrange never gets less than its due. It would be entirely mistaken to deem it lush or voluptuous. It is nothing of the kind. Instead, it impresses with its serenity, clarity, and, above all, velvety finish.

There's no question that more excit-


---

ing phonostages than the Lector exist. The Manley Steelhead, for example, provides the kind of thunder and lightning that's missing from the Lector. It also has a tighter grip on the bass, maybe the tightest I've heard. But while the solid-state Manley power supply may provide more resolution and bang, I don't think it sounds as pure as the Lector, which caresses the music. This is really saying something, because the Manley costs over twice as much as the Lector. The Messenger phonostage that I now use is the best that I've heard at combining powerful dynamics with a golden sound, but it's plugged into a massive tubed power supply that makes any comparison with the Lector unfair. The surprising thing isn't that the Lector has shortcomings, but that it offers as much as it does.

The Lector performs above its price-

point and, as far as I'm concerned, one of the great pleasures of having an audio system is being able to play LPs, many performances on which are not available on CD. Forget the tiresome debates about CD versus vinyl. The blunt fact is that there's great music out there to be had in both formats. When you factor in the cost of a turntable, cartridge, extra cables, and phonostage, it's not an inexpensive proposition to enter the world of analog. The Lector, however, offers a reasonably priced choice. When I think back to the venerable Dual turntable that I listened to as a child and how far vinyl has come, the progress is simply astonishing. The Lector is another testament to that.

No, it's not the ultimate phonostage (wherever that elusive creature may reside), and it doesn't aspire to be, either. Detractors will find it lacking in

body and a little too relaxed, forgiving, and warm for their tastes. So be it. But if you're investigating phonostages, then don't be fooled into thinking that you have to pay a fortune. It just ain't so. The Lector is a lovely piece that effortlessly gets out of the way of the music. It might even serve you as a kind of roadblock on the seemingly endless upgrade path. Give it a listen. It may not start a revolution among phonostages, but it does represent something of an insurrection. 

---

#### DISTRIBUTOR INFORMATION

##### FANFARE INTERNATIONAL, INC.

500 East 77th Street  
New York, New York 10162  
(212) 734-1041  
fanfareintl.com  
Price: \$3250