

the ear

HI-FI MUSIC GEAR

hardware review



Cyrus Phono Signature & PSX-R2

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It would have been easy for Cyrus to have made a straight forward phono stage, they could undoubtedly have made one that sounded great and it would have sold to fans of the marque. But instead they chose to do it a little differently, to make a product that had features not found on any other phono stage, it must have been a slower R&D process but the Phono Signature is a unique product that should bring attention to a brand that could use a little loving as the saying goes.

The distinctive cast aluminium chassis that has been the hallmark of Cyrus products since its inception in the early eighties and which has numerous sonic advantages has perhaps lost its sheen in marketing terms. It doesn't look as slick as the competition and some might argue that the compact form factor limits the brand's appeal to enthusiasts looking for male jewellery. But the products themselves have continued to develop and improve over the years as the Phono Signature proves, as well as having more features than most it is also a very nice sounding piece of kit. So nice that both René and I have managed to have a good listen.

What makes it different? Well it has four inputs for one and each one is configurable by remote control, having either one of these options would be enough so I wondered why so many inputs. Peter Bartlett explained that it didn't cost a lot more to include them and offers enthusiasts the option to have different inputs set up to suit different cartridges or even different records. The Phono Signature does not offer alternative EQ settings as is the case with some of the competition but does allow the user to change impedance and capacitance on the fly and store those settings. The thinking is that we don't know what any given pressing of an album should sound like, and the older the record the harder it is to predict how it was EQ'd at the mastering stage. By offering such ease of adjustment you can establish the balance that sounds most convincing in your system.

Each input can be MM or MC, you can choose from four levels of gain and use a bar graph to establish when you have found the optimum gain for a given cartridge – which seems to be the one that produces an output voltage from the phono stage that's equivalent to a CD player, ie two volts. There are ten impedance settings between 11 Ohms and 47 kOhms and four capacitance options, and while MCs don't generally specify a capacitance setting this can apparently be used to tune the balance. In fact that's how you tweak the sound, by adjusting capacitance and impedance, there are no alternatives to the standard RIAA equalisation.

Peter Bartlett tells us that the Phono Signature has the quietest power supply that the

company can make but there is the option of upgrading this side of things with the new PSX-R2 external power supply. This replaces the 25 year old PSX-R and incorporates new components that allow the audio electronics to run more quietly, he points out that when amplifying an audio signal the sound quality can only be as good as the DC supply. And with a moving coil cartridge the amplification factor is enormous, so any noise will be considerably amplified. The final element in the mix is the remote control, this has movement sensitive backlighting and can be used to run any piece of Cyrus equipment, as a result you need the manual to hand to figure out how to adjust this phono stage, for the first few goes at least.

In the system the Phono Signature reiterates just how phenomenal a turntable and cartridge the Rega RP10/Aphelion is. Playing a selection of classic live albums from the glory days of rock; Zappa's *Roxy & Elsewhere*, Big Brother and the Holding Company's *Cheap Thrills* and Led Zeppelin's *The Song Remains the Same* reveals the phenomenal performances those that musicians put down without the aid of modern technology. The drums on 'No Quarter' out do the guitar and that is saying something, no wonder Percy had to credit John Paul Jones at the end, no one would have noticed him otherwise!

Adjusting resistance alters the presentation of the music and you can quite often create a bigger picture in this way, it doesn't noticeably change the balance but the sense of drive is also changed and finding the right figure is easier than it is with dip switches hidden underneath the box. That said, once the right impedance has been found it seems to hold, I



tried much newer recordings and some pretty awful sounding ones, *If You Want Blood* by AC/DC being a prime example, and in all cases the same 330 Ohm setting seemed most appropriate. Perhaps my record collection is not diverse enough or I'm not sensitive to the subtleties revealed but I am easily distracted by the music as long as its 'good music'.

Ultimately this is such a good phono stage that you don't need nor want to spend time comparing balances, you just want to play more vinyl. The RP10 revealed the blinding guitar work from McLaughlin on 'Sister Andrea' on *From Nothingness to Eternity* (Mahavishnu Orchestra), it's not just speed either, but that didn't hurt. The Cyrus revealed how different this track sounds to the one that precedes it, which doesn't even sound live because it has bass where 'Trilogy' doesn't. Violin is not a rock instrument but Jerry Goodman in Mahavishnu made a better stab at establishing it as one than most. This is a bright recording because it was a bright sounding event, that is the sound of the band at the time, and you cannot offset this with loading variations, that would require tone controls.

The Cyrus revealed a massive contrast between a Classic records Quiex pressing of *Hot Rats* (Frank Zappa) which sounds super soft and shorn of dynamics and highs for that matter against the vibrant if slightly rough and ready sound of James Taylor Quartet's *Bumping on Frith Street* pressed by Gearbox, the latter revealing the steam coming off the audience and players alike, the former somewhat emasculated by the absence of edges in the sound. Tom Waits' *Swordfishtrombones* turns out to be even better than I thought it was, and I thought it was good, but the depth that the Cyrus reveals is remarkable. This was via the Townshend Allegri, Naim NAP 300 DR and Vivid Audio B1 Decade speakers with a Rega RP8 and Apheta 2 MC, I know that all these elements are good but this brought home how good they are and makes the digital alternatives sound positively uninspiring by comparison. The track '16 Shells from a Thirty Ought Six' sounds absolutely stonking through the Cyrus, it has fabulous rhythm and timing, real depth of tone and proper stereo solidity. A similarly priced alternative, the Rothwell Signature 1 (£2,200), contains a moving magnet phono stage with step-up transformers onboard. It has no loading adjustment and fixed gain but the use of transformers to provide



the first stage of voltage amplification gives it a sonic advantage over the Cyrus and PSX-R2. Essentially it's more transparent, it has less character so more musical detail is evident which benefits dynamics, low level detail and realism and provides a more relaxed end result.

The Cyrus Phono Signature has excellent build and finish quality and enormous flexibility in terms of loading and gain, for those with multiple cartridges to chose from it represents a bargain. The ability to save loadings for specific records is not perhaps as interesting as the alternative EQ settings offered by competitors but there's a lot to be said for being able to quickly and easily compare the effect of different loadings which is usually a fiddly affair. Overall the Phono Signature is an excellent phono stage on its own and especially with the optional PSX-R2 power supply.

René's take

René van Es listened to the Phono Signature and PSX-R2 with his Transfiguration Axia MC cartridge in an SME 5009 arm atop a Transrotor Super Seven turntable with Konstant M1 power supply. This is what he heard: serious listening started with an STS Digital recording by the German singer/songwriters Carolin and Andreas Obieglo, performing under the name of Carolin No. The couple plays most of the (acoustic) instruments themselves, compose the music and write the mostly English lyrics. The Cyrus Phono Signature has a flowing and rich character that the instruments on this record show off rather well, the plucked guitar producing such realism that it feels like you are present the recording. Carolin has a wonderful voice that stands free from the background where a cello is softly moaning. The voice of Andreas compliments the female voice and the whole November Songs album is one to enjoy late at night as the Cyrus reveals just how soft and gentle the music is. Stacey Kent has a more obviously trained voice, better studio facilities, better recording technique and this shows off on her album *The Changing Lights* when played on the Cyrus. I dare state that the Cyrus Phono Signature has a lot in common with my tube phono stage, it preserves the intense pleasure of listening to vinyl, the ability to present all the small details alongside firm and detailed bass notes. Some solid state phono stages tend to be too technical, too cool or too sober, for the designers at did their utmost not to take that route while preserving immediacy and detail. After I played the first two tracks from the Kent album it was time to drop in an extra power supply, the Cyrus PSX-R2.

The PSX-R2 adds more space and opens up the stereo image further. Piano has more body and the Stacey Kent's voice becomes more individual, it's a step forward in realism. Percussion that was formerly set in the background comes forward and is more present. The lower notes, already tight, get an extra dimension, but mostly it is the extra dynamic capability that you hear. Dynamics expressed with the drums and the saxophone. It also sounded like the volume increased when adding the PSX-R2, but I checked with a meter and it's not the case, it's all about impact. Which makes it hard to listen to the Phono Signature without a PSX-R2. The combination is a must have and fully justifies the extra cost of the additional power supply. It seems strange that a 300VA transformer adds more listening pleasure to a phono stage that hardly needs all the spare power the PSX-R2 has on board, it looks like madness on paper, but shows what an important role the power supply plays in high end audio equipment. The actual amplifier circuits almost seem less important, see brands like Naim, Octave, Modwright and others for similar examples.

On the Run

I experiment with an original pressing of Pink Floyd's *Dark Side Of The Moon*, tracks like 'On The Run' and 'Time' are useful. The Cyrus is so pure and clear that although I've played this record many, many times I notice some small details I was not aware off before. True dynamics are apparent in the frightening loud ticks from this oft played vinyl. With 'On The Run' the stereo

image shrinks when removing the PSX-R2, less impact is present and the character becomes more ordinary. The bells and clock's get harsher, although this is not the main difference because that is in the heartbeat, with the PSX-R2 this is far more present and reaches deeper in the frequency response. The Cyrus Phono Signature on its own is a fine product indeed, but those who hear the difference will definitely want to upgrade. Now or when funds permit in the future.

I pull my favourite reference recordings out of the cupboard. Juliette Gréco shows the first real limitation of the Cyrus, the lady should be sweeter and more French to my ears. A tube phono stage often adds that little extra to regain reality, on the plus side, extra detail appears with the Phono Signature. The voice image is free and none of the instruments stick to the speakers. Other winners are the bass notes on 'Misty' played by the Tsuyoshi Yamamoto Trio, my favourite dynamic test recording and it's really exciting listening to the piano, bass and the soft hissing percussion. For dynamics the Cyrus plus PSX is definitely amongst the better phono stages, although tubes have the edge in this respect due to the high voltage swings possible within a tube. Apart from this the Cyrus is a joy to listen to. Overall just as, or sometimes even more enjoyable than small tube phono stages can be. Listening to *The Weavers in Carnegie Hall*, recorded live in 1963, I reached my conclusion on the Phono Signature and optional PSX-R2 power supply. This Cyrus proved to be a versatile product for vinyl lovers with one or more arm/cartridge combinations, it's a pleasure to listen to and worthy of the Signature label.



Specifications

Type: Solid-state MC phono stage with remote control
 Phono inputs: Four single-ended via RCA
 Analogue outputs: Single-ended via RCA, balanced via XLR
 Gain levels: 40, 50, 60, 70dB
 Input impedance options: 11, 16, 33, 47, 100, 150, 333, 500, 1k, 47k Ohms
 Input capacitance options: 220pF, 1nF, 2nF, 3nF
 Input sensitivity: 4mV
 Signal to Noise Ratio MM/MC: -87dBA/-79dBA
 Dimensions (HxWxD): 75 x 215 x 365mm
 Weight: 4.1kg

Manufacturer

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