

Audio Research • LP1 Phono Stage

"...an attempt to offer ARC's proclaimed 'high-definition sound' and solid construction to a wider audience."

by [Eric Hetherington](#) | October 8, 2013

Whatever enthusiast publication I read -- whether one devoted to cycling, watches, or audio -- I can't help noticing the preponderance of expensive gear: page after page full of equipment that costs so much the prices must be incomprehensible to the neophyte or the uninterested. Watches that cost more than a car? Speakers to rival the cost of a vacation home? Check and check. Yet once someone is initiated into a hobby, such prices start to sound, if not reasonable, then at least understandable. Most readers might never be able to afford such luxuries, but that cold, hard fact doesn't mean there's nothing to be gained from reading about them. Knowing what technical or artistic hurdles had to be overcome to produce the latest cutting-edge innovation can increase our appreciation of that artistry and technology, even if the results never end up in our living rooms. Knowing what characterizes luxury gear gives us a benchmark against which we can hold all other gear accountable.

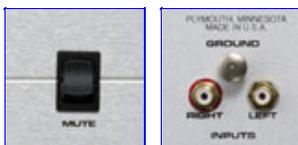


Price: \$2195

Warranty: Three years parts and labor.

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So there is value in reading about equipment that lies beyond affordability, but it can have the pernicious effect of making one think that the goal of the hobby is to build up to those expensive items. I fell into that trap when I started to take stereo systems seriously. Not only did magazines concentrate their coverage on expensive components, but a good

take stereo systems seriously. Not only did magazines concentrate their coverage on expensive components, but a good deal of online discussion seemed predicated on the notion that we should always be working toward costlier products. Stepping back from the hobby for a bit, I decided that the constant-upgrade approach was not right for me; I'm much happier and get much more satisfaction from my stereo if I set a budget and learn to enjoy what that budget can buy. So while I remain interested in cost-no-object gear, I'm much more interested in products like the Audio Research LP1, a phono preamplifier that achieves great sound while remaining within my self-imposed budget.

The LP1 is the least expensive phono stage from Audio Research Corporation (ARC), and, like all ARC products, it's designed and built in Plymouth, Minnesota. It joins four other phono stages in ARC's current lineup: the PH6 (\$3495), the PH8 (\$6995), the Reference Phono 2 SE (\$12,995), and the Reference Phono 10 (\$30,000). All of those products lie beyond my budget, but the LP1's retail price of \$2195 makes it not only ARC's least expensive phono preamp, but the least expensive component of any type that they currently offer. Some of the pricier models are rich in features, including switchable gain, balanced and single-ended outputs, multiple inputs, and the ability to select various equalization curves (RIAA, Columbia, or Decca). The LP1, in contrast, is designed to do just one job: offer preamplification and RIAA equalization for one high-output cartridge via one single-ended output.

ARC components have always evinced a minimalist, lab-style industrial aesthetic; the LP1 continues that tradition on a smaller scale. There are none of the big rack-mount handles or vacuum-fluorescent display panels seen on other ARC products -- no surprise, given that the LP1 measures just 13" wide by 4 1/2" high by 8 5/8" deep. Its silver faceplate shares a family resemblance with those of its bigger siblings but features just two switches: Power at the lower left, Mute at the lower right. A single green LED indicates that the LP1 is powered up. The rear panel houses the input and output connections, as well as the IEC socket for the power cord. The single-ended connectors are robust and spaced far enough apart for even the largest cables.

Before using the LP1, the owner will need to insert its single 6H30 tube, a task that requires removing the top panel and allows you to admire the LP1's clean, neatly organized interior, which attests to both thoughtful planning and careful assembly. The LP1 is a hybrid design: the 6H30 tube works in tandem with J-FETs, the entire circuit fed from a custom power transformer designed by ARC. The company markets the LP1 as a moving-magnet phono stage, but its 47dB of gain should accommodate any cartridge, moving-magnet or moving-coil, that has an output greater than 1.0mV. The thorough and clearly written owner's manual inspires confidence, as does the three-year warranty (90 days on the tube).

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The LP1 is virtually plug 'n' play: insert the tube, then connect the power cord along with the input and output cables -- setup is complete. Some may try to characterize such design simplicity as limiting functionality, but I think it's appropriate for this model. Some vinylphiles may have more than one turntable, a cadre of cartridges that require a variety of gains to sound their best, and/or a record collection that requires switchable EQ curves, but they aren't the LP1's intended audience; for them, ARC offers those four other phono preamps. The LP1 serves the music lover who simply wants to play records and appreciates the benefits of buying a straight-line design from a premier manufacturer; it's an attempt to offer ARC's proclaimed "high-definition sound" and solid construction to a wider audience.

Then there are those who need only the ability to replay an existing record collection alongside the digital sources they increasingly rely on. For those people, not needing to fiddle with gain settings or loading may well come as a positive relief. The fact is that most people, including me, don't have multiple turntables or tonearms, and are not interested in frequently switching cartridges. Taking the high-output path might be seen as limiting the LP1's ultimate performance, but this model's standardized loading and electrical characteristics should make its buyers' lives simpler, and in many cases will probably deliver better-optimized performance as a result. Besides which, there are plenty of great-sounding cartridges that will work well with the LP1.

Having the LP1 at home led to a massive vinyl-buying spree, a sure indicator of the qualities it can impart to a moderately priced stereo system. As my children get older, I find myself having to consciously make time for serious listening; it can no longer be the automatic leisure activity it once was. Music has to compete for the little time I get between basketball games and figure-skating practices, and it's not always music that wins. The presence of the LP1 pushed music right back to the center of my leisure activities, and for that I was grateful.

A good portion of my buying spree comprised reissues of Blue Note albums by Music Matters -- discs that never fail to impress. I tried to begin my critical listening with their pressing of Eric Dolphy's classic *Out to Lunch* [Blue Note/Music Matters MMBST-84163], but the first time through I took no notes. It felt as if the LP1 wanted me to just listen, to enjoy the music more than pick it apart -- but life is hard, and I persevered. During the opening track, "Hat and Beard," I was aware of a phenomenal increase in the level of detail compared to other phono preamps I've heard. The delicate tones of Bobby Hutcherson's vibraphone played naturally, the transient tones taking longer to fade away. The horns' tones were beautiful and physically hefty: they took up more three-dimensional space with the LP1. Between tracks or during a

pause, the playback was silent -- from my listening position, I heard no noise at all. The flute-and-vibes opening of "Gazzelloni" contrasts, sonically and musically, with Richard Davis's bowed-bass opening for "Something Sweet, Something Tender": the latter was palpable, the notes staying tight and clean. And "Gazzelloni" has a fluttering flute and sustained vibraphone notes that displayed the LP1's ability to differentiate competing highs with aplomb. The lower end of the music hung together slightly better than the highs, which occasionally felt forced while the bass moved with ease. What the LP1 did better than any other phono stage I've had in-house was convey a continuous sense of movement -- not punctuated moments of sound, but a continuous flow of music.

Herbie Hancock's *Inventions & Dimensions* [Blue Note/Music Matters MMBST-84147] shows the pianist working with two Latin percussionists, Willie Bobo and Osvaldo "Chihuahua" Martinez. The opening of "Succotash" provided a good example of the great clarity the LP1 could bring to percussion instruments. I could easily sense the movement of the congas as the track opens, movement I could hear with other phono stages only if I tried -- and only after I'd heard it through the LP1. The LP1 also resolved the competing percussion instruments, defining their distinct identities without losing the musical relationships among them. The soundstage was wide, passing well beyond and above the speakers. With mediocre recordings or systems with lower levels of resolution, some Latin percussion instruments can end up sounding almost like low-level static; here they were reproduced clearly and naturally. As with *Out to Lunch*, the delicacies of percussion and bass on *Inventions & Dimensions* were revealed with the aid of the very low noise floor of the LP1.

My buying spree also netted favorite recordings that I'd previously owned only as digital media. In "Bob Dylan's Blues," from *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* [Columbia/Mobile Fidelity Sound Lab MFSL 2-378], the dynamic shifts in the guitar lines were reproduced superbly, with a real sense of shape and depth to the guitar's body as well as to the strings. Throughout this album, Dylan's harmonica never sounded harsh, as it sometimes does when I play the Columbia SACD that was released a decade ago. Dylan's harmonica may shriek in "Don't Think Twice, It's Alright," but on the MoFi LP it shrieks with a warmth and a three-dimensionality that bring it closer to reality. *Freewheelin'* sounded more natural than it ever had and easily beat the digital versions I'm accustomed to, allowing me to listen closer for longer. I didn't once feel the need to take a break, as can happen with digital.

Carefully produced reissues such as the Dylan and Blue Note LPs may well be the pinnacle of contemporary vinyl production, with their vigilant treatment of every link in the production chain, but many records we prize for the music on them, despite their lower quality of sound. One such for me is *El Jazz Mexicano de Tino Contreras* [Jazzman JMAN LP 043]. Tino Contreras was a mid-20th-century Mexican bandleader who was interested in forging a truly Mexican jazz. Because reviews I had read of this record compared Contreras with Juan Garcia Esquivel, I expected more space-age or exotica-tinged jazz. The music was much more straight-ahead than that, and while this album is interesting as a document of Contreras's music, I'm still not sure what he saw as essential to Mexican jazz. Sadly, and more to the point, it is far from a sonic delight. The tracks are drawn from a variety of sources, and although some sound like a good radio broadcast, others sound as if I've stuffed my ears with cotton.

While no one will mistake *El Jazz Mexicano* for a Music Matters release, the LP1 did provide a vast improvement. It imparted to "What Is This Thing Called Love" an obvious sense of space between the instruments, and to the percussion a tight snap and pop. The flute line of "Rescate" lost a harsh nasal quality, and the choir in "Kyrie" resolved into individualized voices. The dynamic range remained pretty limited, but clearly demonstrated that the sonic benefits of the LP1 aren't limited to "audiophile" recordings. The improvements I heard across a whole variety of records that wouldn't pass any "you are there" audiophile test are almost more important than the obvious lift the LP1 brings to expensive, lovingly produced reissues. This is a phono stage that can make the most of what a record can offer, rather than punishing the listener for what it doesn't.

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The LP1 was just as capable of working its magic when it came to the reproduction of contemporary digitally derived LPs. Listening to *Eight*, the latest album from Deadbeat [BLKRTZ 004LP], a Canadian electronic-music artist, I was removed from the acoustic space of the Blue Note LPs and transported to a digitally rendered soundscape. Traditional audiophile concerns of "sounding like the real thing" are meaningless for such music, but *Eight* showcased two of the LP1's strengths in pretty forceful fashion. The bass notes were deep, clean, and fast, and thumped my chest in the best possible way. The dynamic shifts from quiet electronic bleeps to loud percussive snaps or deep, quickening bass lines were solid, and easily induced a potentially embarrassing desire to dance. I'm not sure vinyl is essential to the appreciation of this music (except maybe for DJs), but the LP1 did its job dutifully -- even manfully!

The LP1's core strengths were conveying clarity, depth, bass weight, and dynamic shifts. It is in a class above the two much more affordable phono stages I had on hand during this review. I bought the Cambridge Audio Azur 640P years ago, when I decided to finally unpack my record collection after years of relying on digital. The Azur does an admirable job for its \$199 price, but the LP1 surpassed it with three obvious, no-doubt-about-it improvements across the board. First, depth and dimensionality were vastly improved with the ARC, instruments having more physical

presence and more space between and around them. Second, soundstages were wider, extending well beyond the speakers in every direction. Third and most difficult to describe, the LP1 had a sense of fluidity and naturalness that made it easy to listen to it for hours. Nothing sounded forced or harsh, and it just seemed to pull me into and along with the music. I've also been using the Alpha Design Labs GT40 (\$450), which combines a USB DAC, phono stage, and headphone amplifier. It does a great job in my office system, and I easily recommend it for such use. But, again, the LP1 beat it on all fronts.

If my budget demanded, I could be happy with the Cambridge Azur 640P; but I also know just how much better the LP1 really is -- and how much happier I'd be with it in my system.

In recommending the LP1, my only caveat is the question of competition. There is no shortage of phono stages at or near the LP1's price, and even if we further limit the choice to phono stages that use vacuum tubes and are made in the US, there are two clear alternatives. The VTL TP-2.5 III costs \$2500, is built in California, and has user-selectable gain and a moving-coil stage. The Rogue Audio Ares is made in Pennsylvania, sells for \$2000, and offers three gain settings that should make it more compatible with a far wider range of cartridges than the ARC LP1. Whether these features are necessary, and whether they add interest or only complication, are matters that will depend on the buyer; and, short of a head-to-head comparison, I can't know whether the swings of complexity outweigh the sonic roundabouts of simplicity.

The LP1 incorporates a laundry list of aesthetic and design elements that more than justify its \$2195 price. It is a physically attractive piece of kit that successfully incorporates ARC's industrial aesthetic into a smaller package, with beautiful build quality inside and out. More important, it makes great music. ☺

Associated Equipment

Analog: Thorens TD-309 turntable, Audio-Technica AT-440MLa cartridge, Cambridge Audio Azur 640P phono stage, Alpha Design Labs GT40 DAC/phono stage/headphone amp.

Digital: MacBook Pro using both iTunes, Decibel and BitPerfect.

Integrated amplifier: Rogue Audio Tempest II Magnum.

Speakers: Quad 21L.

Interconnects: Analysis Plus Silver Oval-In.

Speaker cables: Analysis Plus Big Silver Oval.

Headphone amplifiers: Rogue Audio Tempest II Magnum, HeadRoom Total BitHead, Benchmark Media DAC1, ADL GT40 USB DAC/phono stage.

Headphones: AKG K701, Grado SR-60, Sennheiser PX200, Shure SE315.