Subject: The Manley Steelhead phono preamp....
Posted by Mr Vinyl on Wed, 16 Mar 2005 14:04:46 GMT
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Hi,I thought I would tell everyone about the Manley Steelhead phono preamp that I recently purchased. Before I get into my likes and dislikes of the Steelhead, I would like to put in a good word for Bob Visintainer president of Rhapsody Music and Cinema, where I purchased the preamp. I am not the easiest person in the world to please. I ask a lot of questions and expect very good customer service from companies I deal with. Mr. Visintainer, not only quickly answered all of my questions but also went out of his way to make sure I was happy. Mr. Visintainer even contacted Manley in my behave on several occasions to help make sure my Steelhead arrived on time as promised. I have never dealt with Rhapsody Music and Cinema before this, but will be using them again for future purchases. I highly recommend them to anyone looking for an honest audio dealer with good customer service. My system is listed below. I was looking for my first separate phono preamp to match with my turntable system. I was considering a used Aesthex IO signature as well as a new Aesthetix Rhea. I eventually ruled out the IO signature not because of sound quality but because I just didn't want to deal with it's 24 tubes and huge size. The Rhea seemed to be a good choice as well, but in the end decided to go with the Steelhead because it was more in line with what I was looking for. It took between two and three weeks for the Steelhead to arrive once the order was placed. It came very well boxed and protected. Good quality packing job I think. After the Steelhead was in place in my system I made a quick listen to make sure all was working properly and to get a feel for it's sound. I thought it sounded excellent right out of the box with only 15 min of warm up time. I also purchased a Phono Stage break-in CD from Granite audio that another member here recommended. Basically it's a CD that is recorded at the same volume output as a standard MM and MC cartridge. I played the break-in CD from an old CD player I had into the Steelhead preamp for two days to "break it in". For what it's worth, I didn't hear much difference between the new out of box Steelhead and the "broken-in" Steelhead. After break-in I played my Shure v15xMR through the MM inputs of the Steelhead. What can I say? People always seem to rave about purchases they have made. But the Manley Steelhead is a big step forward in my system. I am literally hearing stuff from very familiar lp's that I have never heard before and this was with a $200 cartridge! The Steelhead's resolution is superb. The Manley web site describes the Steelhead as a "microscope for the ears". This is exactly the way it sounds. It picks up every tiny detail that is on the records. On par with the Steelhead's excellent resolution is it's musicality. All of this extra detail helps tremendously in the illusion that you are listening to a live performance and not just a recording of a live performance. All aspects of the Steelhead's sound I think is top notch. Bass, treble, midrange and imaging are all the best I have heard in my system. I used the Steelhead as my main preamp, running it straight into my amp. I have more than enough gain using it this way. This actually saved me a lot of money because I was planning on buying a new line stage. Now I don't have to. A big savings for me. The sound this way was so good that I didn't bother trying the Steelhead into my preamp. As for the MC inputs, I tried my Audioquest 7000 FE5 MC cartridge through the Steelhead as well. The sound through the MC inputs was a little warmer to my ears than the MM inputs but was still excellent. In the end I ended up running my MC cartridge through the MM inputs of the Steelhead. I had enough gain and it sounded better to my ears and in my system. The sound of my MC through the MM inputs was absolutely first rate. This is one of the great things about the Steelhead, you have so many options that you can use whatever settings sound best to you in your room with your system to your ears. I will comment that I heard little difference, if any,

adjusting my Audioquest cartridge with different loads or trying the different capacitance settings. They all fell into the "I think it might have sounded different but it may be all in my head" category. I will add that I am using an MIT phono cable that has an interface box on it. The MIT interface box is adjustable for impedance as well and may have been the reason I wasn't hearing much difference with these settings.Using the line input for my SACD/CD player was also very good. Basically if you could imagine what it sounds like running your digital front end directly into your amp (bypassing the preamp) then you can imagine what this sounds like. Crystal clear. Just make sure your player has enough output, as the Steelhead doesn't supply any gain to the input signal. In my case I had enough but feel I could use a bit more. A comment about tubes. I did all of my listening with the stock tubes that come in the Steelhead. Although I have quite a few NOS tubes lying around I don't feel the need to put them in. The Steelhead with stock tubes sounds that good. Great to know that I don't have to go crazy trying to find expensive tubes to make the Steelhead sound good. I will however try some of my NOS tubes in the near future just to see if it makes much of a difference.On the negative side. As you can tell from my above comments I have no complaints about the sound of the Steelhead. There are a couple of things I feel I should mention that I think could be improved upon with the Steelhead. First is the amount of screws that need to be removed to get into the Steelhead to change tubes. If you like to experiment with tubes a lot you should know that there are screws on the top and the sides of the Steelhead that need to be removed. My Steelhead is in a wall unit and because of this the side screws are not accessible. This means I have to disconnect all of the interconnects from the back and remove the entire preamp to take off the cover and remove the tubes. It would be much easier IMO if all I had to remove were top screws. The screws are also very small and I think could strip out if care is not taken when tightening. Another thing I think could be improved upon is the color of the lettering on the front panel. The front panel is gray and the lettering is white. For me this makes reading labels to knobs and buttons difficult. Of course after a while you know which knob and button does what, but until then I had to keep moving my head around so the light hit the front panel just right to read what it said. I will add that the lighting in my listening room, though not dark isn't the best. But I think it would make things easier to read if the lettering were black. Also you should know that the Steelhead does not have any balanced inputs or outputs. I would have preferred at least one balanced output especially since I am using the Steelhead as my main preamp. Well that's about it. As you can tell, I am extremely happy with my Steelhead. I feel it has lifted my system to a whole different plane. The Steelhead accounts for probably one of the biggest jumps in sound quality I have heard thus far in my many years in this hobby. The sound of the Steelhead is so good that I can now forget about preamps, amps, wires etc. and start truly concentrating on the music. If your in the market for your final phono preamp I think you should consider listening to the Steelhead. I can't imagine anyone not being happy with it's sound. My System:Turntable - Oracle Mk IV with Graham 2.2 tonearm and either a Audioquest 7000 FE5 or a Shure V15 XMRDigital - Phillips 963SA or Marantz CD-63Preamp - Audio Research SP9 Mk II (replaced by the Steelhead)Amplifier - Krell KSA300S or Threshold Stasis 500Speakers - Thiel CS7'sCables - MIT Shotgun S1 interconnects and speaker cables. (Shotgun S1 Phono cable)Tice Power Block and Titan power conditioner (everything but amps connected).

Subject: Re: The Manley Steelhead phono preamp....
Posted by Wayne Parham on Wed, 16 Mar 2005 15:48:27 GMT
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Excellent review, thanks for taking the time to write it!

Subject: Your welcome and thank you for the kind words.(NT)
Posted by Mr Vinyl on Wed, 16 Mar 2005 17:16:18 GMT
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NT

Subject: Re: Your welcome and thank you for the kind words.(NT)
Posted by Manualblock on Wed, 16 Mar 2005 17:57:41 GMT
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Nice review. The Threshold Stasis 500 is the best SS amp I have ever heard. It has a feeling of warmth and effortless power that is amazing to hear. One of the only SS amps I would not mind owning.

Subject: Re: Your welcome and thank you for the kind words.(NT)
Posted by Mr Vinyl on Wed, 16 Mar 2005 18:33:12 GMT
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I love my Threshold 500 amp. It was in my system non stop for 15 yeas or so. It made some great music. It wasn't until recently that someone I trust suggested that the Krell KSA300s would sound better with my speakers. I got a good price on a used Krell and tried it out. The Krell is truly a monster amp. A lot of current. Regardless of the Krell bashing that I read about on the web, I think it sounds better with my hard to drive Thiel CS7's. But I still have and will never sell my stasis 500. It will hopefully be part of a home theater someday.
