



Price: \$1499

Feature Highlights

- Fully Balanced Circuitry
- Current Mode Amplification
- Automatic Cartridge Loading for Moving Coil Cartridges in Balanced XLR mode
 - No Integrated OP Amps in The Signal Path
 - No Overall Global Feedback

- *Single Ended Class A Technology*
- *Option to Bypass Output Capacitors*
- *Adjustable Gain Balance on the front knobs*

What do you do if you need long interconnect runs for a vinyl based system? I have a moderately sized L-shaped room where structurally it makes more sense to isolate the electronics from the power amp with a longer cable run of around 12 feet or so. Because of this, I chose balanced equipment running with XLR connections to reduce the common mode noise. One of the challenges of having this configuration is the need for the source to be able to drive longer interconnects. This is relatively easy to do with digital sources, but balanced phono stages are more uncommon. When I first heard how inexpensive this product was I had to try it for myself. The high gain 55 dB -75 dB (in current mode) is an added bonus.

My analog front end consists of a TW Acoustic Raven One with a Graham Phantom tonearm and a Dynavector XX-2 MkII cartridge. I would characterize the sound as dynamic, rich with tonal density and deep powerful bass. I have a Cardas Golden Cross balanced phono cable specifically acquired for this phono stage.

The front panel consists of a power on off switch as well as an unusual feature; gain potentiometers to adjust channel level and balance as well as a subsonic filter for badly warped records or if you see your woofer cones pumping excessively. The pots are not in the signal path and careful listening while adjusting them seems to confirm this.

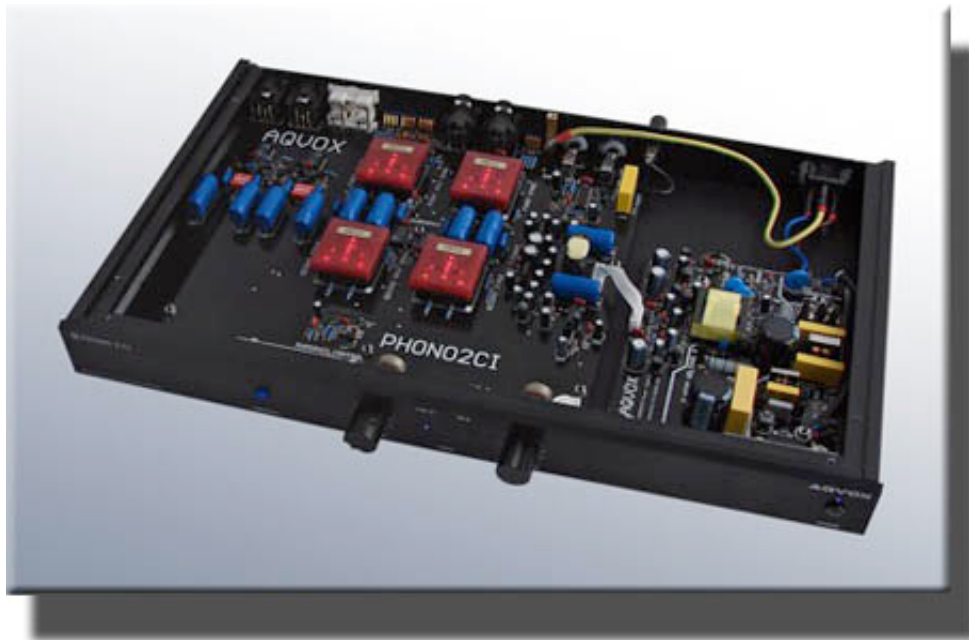


The rear panel consists of RCA inputs and outputs, balanced XLR inputs and outputs and an array of capacitive (47pF plus 0, 47, 100, 220, or 470pF), resistive (1kOhm or 100 Ohm)

and gain(+6 or 20 dB) loading. An IEC power cord plug and the option of floating the ground rounds out the very generous options.

The 2CI has the option to be used with conventional voltage amplification with RCA interconnects or current amplification with fully balanced XLR connections in and out. Voltage mode can be configured with various capacitive, resistive and gain settings. This resulted in a pleasant if non-outstanding sound. Not much to criticize but also not much to write home about either.

Most compelling about this product is the performance with current mode amplification. **Current mode is only to be used with moving coil cartridges in balanced configuration.** Moving coils generally have low resistive impedances acting as a near short. The current amplification takes advantage of this property by converting to a higher voltage which in turn damps and automatically loads the cartridge. No need to adjust any DIPs or switches as they are now “electrically damped”.



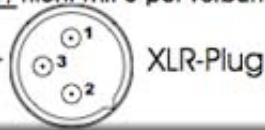
ABOUT BALANCED PHONO CABLES

XLR male - to Phono2Ci - current amplifier input
XLR Stecker - zum Phono2Ci- Stromverstärkereingang

1. Screen - Schirm ! Not connected to 5-pin / nicht mit 5-pol verbunden

3. Negative - / Minus -

2. Positive + / Plus +



Normally balanced connections have 3 conductors: positive, negative and ground, but cartridges and microphones for example are balanced sources with just 2 conductors, positive and negative. The technical term is *floating balanced* or balanced without ground. Yes, this is true balanced. The positive signal is connected to one dedicated amplifier stage and the negative signal is inverted and also connected to one dedicated amplifier stage = differential amplifier.

Sound

The general sonic character of the 2Ci is of a slightly lean, very extended sound with a spacious wide and deep 3 dimensional soundstage. The impression is of a fast, clean, clear sound, but never harsh or bright, always musical and very light on its feet. The sound out of the box is quite impressive. Burn-in took about 3 or 4 days. Before any critical listening, I replaced the stock power cord with a Furutech G-320Ag-18 power cable. I also substituted a HiFi Tuning fuse. The power cord gave a more organized extended sound and the fuse provided greater dynamics and a quieter blacker background. I simply love the way this product conveys the emotional content of a recording. The clarity, purity and transparency allow the musical

emotion of the recording move a bit closer. By this I don't mean a closer soundstage presentation, I mean a closer emotional connection.



Listening to the dreamy, shimmery Dusty Springfield tribute LP, "Just a Little Lovin'" was like moving up from the middle to the front row. A bit of the bloomy bass ambience has been replaced with greater clarity and precision. The bass was light on its feet, perhaps a bit lean, midrange picked up clarity and the highs are now much more sparkly. It's a bit like watching a ballet performance from the front row. One gains a deeper appreciation for the strength, technique and power of the dancers. One of the sonic highlights of the 2CI is the ability to convey micro as well as macro dynamics against a jet black backdrop without losing the rhythm or meaning of the song.



Metallica's *Black Album* may be a bit of a disappointment to the die-hard Metallica purists. A cleaner, more commercialized arrangement with more radio friendly songs resulted in Metallica's greatest selling album to date. The Simply Vinyl reissue highlights the jaw dropping dynamic swings of the heavy rhythms, yet also the subtle interplay of the electric sitar in "Wherever I May Roam" is clearly evident, balancing the Middle Eastern feel with the raw power of James Newsted's bass.

Hearing James Hetfield scream out "*Roamer, wanderer, nomad, vagabond, call me what you will*", almost makes you want to reach for a napkin to wipe off the spit.



There's nothing like the interplay between seasoned professional musicians. The precision and clarity of the 2CI can really take you for a musical journey.

Sonically, *Groove Note's reissue LA4 "Just Friends"* on 45 RPM is one of my favorite recordings. Compared to the original 33 RPM version, this one is quieter, with more resolution - simply better in every meaningful way. During the beginning of "Love Medley", there is a section where Bud Shank changes the tempo of his saxophone line. When he slowed down, I thought my turntable's drive belt had snapped, only to hear Ray Brown's propulsive bass moments later keeping the tune moving along. Whew! Wow what a roller coaster ride.

TWEAK IT!

Admit it, as audiophile we all love extracting that little bit extra performance whether through modification, judicious set up or whatever it takes to get that little extra.

****Caution: Enter At Your Own Risk****

I contacted Norman Leubke of Aqvox to discuss capacitor or resistor modifications to further improve the sound. I thought a worthwhile upgrade would be to change the output caps. It turns out that the 2CI MKII has the option to *bypass* the output caps. Just open the top and on the left hand side just above the center there is a row of DIPS. All you need to do is to flip them in the opposite direction. **A word of extreme caution;** your preamp must have input caps or you can run the risk of damaging your speakers. A musical waveform behaves like AC. The purpose of the output cap is to remove DC from the signal to protect your speakers. If in doubt, find out from your manufacturer.



The end result of bypassing the output caps is even greater purity, transparency and speed. After all, the best sound is no output caps at all.



The Aqvox 2CI MKII Phono Preamplifier is ideal for vinyl based systems with long balanced interconnects and for those who wish to upgrade the sound of their analog front ends to new heights by switching to a balanced tone arm cable. If you have balanced amps, preamps and digital players and you hear the benefits, why not go the distance and turn your table into a balanced unit as well? The bass leanness can be ameliorated with an aftermarket power cord. Some channel imbalances due to the cartridge (cartridges often have substantial differences in left and right outputs) can also be leveled with the front panel potentiometers. A lot of bang for the buck at the current \$1499 USD price, it's got to be one of the better bargains in audio.

[Back to HOMEPAGE](#)

