

Manley Steelhead Phono Stage Reviewed

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EveAnna Manley's Steelhead phono stage achieves reference-quality sound with tubes. With variable gain, and input loading available via its front panel, changes can be made without resorting to jumpers or internal hard-to-get-at switches.



Amongst the many products we in the UK have been denied, or so I thought, are the valve products from Manley. The last time I ran into the captivating EveAnna Manley – hi-fi's only biker chick – she grabbed me by the lapels, shoved me up against the wall, pressed her forearm against my throat and spat out, 'We debuted a bad-ass, real frikkin' cool phono stage at CES 2001. Time you reviewed it.'

Well, that's not quite how it happened, as she's a Grade-A sweetheart, but it would have suited the product. Named after a Harley-Davidson or a shark or something equally butch, the Steelhead is so bereft of weenie-ness that it ought to be sold like T-shirts at a WWF match. The power supply alone fills a box measuring 13.5×12.5×5in (WDH); the main unit is a staggering 19×16×4in (WDH). A phono stage, remember, not an amp!

Additional Resources

Her point was simple: Manley's other main business is pro audio, and although they didn't have UK representation for domestic audio, their British pro importer happened to have a Steelhead sitting around. So, now would I care to have a play with it?

You bet. I'd just finished with the magnificent EAR 324 and was revelling in its full adjustability, so I was pre-primed with three cartridges all ready to go. The EAR, though, is a major bargain. The Steelhead, on the other hand, is part of a breed of Take No Prisoners phono stages with high price tags and the ability to impart a sense of finality to your purchases.

For openers, it has two mc inputs – one through phono sockets and one, oddly, through a DIN-type socket (but see the box, 'Steelhead The Sequel'). They're blessed with selectable impedance loads of 25, 50, 100, 200 and 400 ohms through a custom-made, dual-primary, bi-filar wound, multiple-shielded, nickel core transformer/autoformer. For mm users, too, there's variable and selectable input impedances of 25, 50, 100, 200 ohms and 47Kohms. These auto-mute when you select them – no nasty bangs. Better still, in an era when vinyl diehards seem even MORE finicky than in the pre-CD epoch, is selectable capacitive loading for all three of the mm and mc inputs, over a range of 0-1100 picofarads in 10 picofarad steps.

Bear in mind that all of this is available through front-panel controls: no rummaging around inside looking for dip switches or wire links or plug-in module sockets. And it's a crowded front panel, too, the sort that tells you that you're getting your money's worth. Across that massive front panel is a veritable light show and enough buttons and knobs to suggest a pre-amp, not a mere phono section. And EveAnna has her own ideas about layouts.

At the extreme left are two rotaries to select gain settings of 50, 55, 60 or 65dB and one to choose from the three inputs. Each setting is illuminated by a blue LED so there's no guess-work. Next to these is a big, illuminated Manley logo, above the five rotaries that choose the capacitance and impedance. To the right are four buttons with LEDs indicating standby, mute and DIM and SUM. (Geddit? Dim-sum?) Finally, there's a volume control, because the Steelhead has both fixed and variable outputs, the latter allowing you to drive a power amp directly in a vinyl-only system.

DIM and SUM, which only work with the variable outputs, are respectively, a 20dB level cut, perfect for reducing volume when you change LPs, while SUM is a mono switch. It combines two channels into a mono signal, but the manual recommends cutting the feed to one of your speakers as well if you want to hear true mono. Mute cuts the signal on both variable and fixed outputs, while Standby 'toggles the Steelhead between normal operating state and a near zero-power sleep mode. No operating voltages are present when in sleep mode, except for some keep-alive CMOS system control logic, energized by a separate small mains transformer in the power supply.'

At the back is an array of inputs and outputs with one curious omission: no balanced inputs or outputs, odd at this price point and with such a truly professional pedigree. Dead-centre is the DIN input for mc2 and the massive connector for the power supply feed. To the left (looking at it from behind) are the right channel fixed and variable outputs, a pair of linked earthing terminals for the circuit and chassis

and the right channel inputs for mm and mc1. On the right are the requisite inputs and outputs, mirror-imaged, plus a separate chassis earth, which is the one I used for my turntables.

Inside, on a mirror-image, dual mono board are the six valves, two 6922 and four 7044. EveAnna explains: 'It's all-tube, really low Z tube-buffered outputs. Like inherently 20 ohms plus the little 47 ohm, "OK-drive-those-high-capacitance-audiophile-cables-why-doncha" resistor, so its real output impedance is only 67 ohms. No wanky cathode follower (oh bor-ing) output here like the other guys. We got your real low impedance all-tube outputs right here!'

Fortunately, the Steelhead encourages tweaking and is accompanied by a lucid owner's manual that tells you how to configure each setting, how to compensate for cables, even how to change LEDs and valves without incident. It is as complete a package as you could want, right down to the pre-drilled holes for 19in rack-mounting.

I fed it the outputs of the mid-to-high-ish output Koetsu Urushi moving coil in the SME 10 turntable with Series V arm, the exceeding low-output Ortofon SPU m-c in a 12in Ortofon arm on a Thorens TD-124 and the London (nee Decca) cartridge in a Decca arm on a Garrard 301. Aside from the Koetsu, which seems to work under any conditions, I thought that the others would test the mettle of the Steelhead. Auditioned through the McIntosh C2200 pre-amp and MC2102 power amp, driving Wilson WATT Puppy System 7, wired entirely with assorted Transparent MM cables, I needn't have worried.

Aside from a tiny trace of hum I couldn't eradicate, the Steelhead demonstrated a self-assurance that reminded me of early Krell amplifiers, military Jeeps and Solingen cutlery: absolutely total fit-for-the-purpose suitability. Whatever cartridge I fed it, the Steelhead would allow me to tweak it to degrees rarely achieved even with other well-specified, highly-flexible phono stages; whoever chose the assorted settings chose wisely. Best of all, it allowed tweaking 'on the fly', no opening of lids held by 16 tiny screws. You want a shade more warmth, a touch less sizzle, a reduction of grain, an opening of the soundstage, there was an easy-to-reach control to access it.

Of course, they're not labelled that way, and experimentation is the rule for a day or two, before you feel that you know which knob to twiddle for a specific result. Most obvious was fine-tuning the cartridges for gain, balancing noise levels and dynamic range, such that even the whisper-quiet Ortofon SPU was sounding more robust and dynamic than I've ever known it to be: this unit has gain to spare. The Decca was allowed to deliver all of its characteristic sparkle, while its

tendency to spit or misbehave was dealt with through the judicious trimming of the capacitance/impedance options. And it sure beats tuning the sound by changing cables. As for the Koetsu, wow....

Think 'Asia', and you might think 'silk'. (I usually think 'chicken satay', but that's just me.) The Steelhead, despite its heavy metal nomenclature, styling and Mother Figure, will demonstrate precisely why Koetsus push certain buttons for certain listeners, especially draping a silken texture over the proceedings, including shimmering treble and a warmth around vocals that begs for a pair of LS3/5As, a mint Radford STA25 and a glass of Maker's Mark.

Particularly gorgeous are the lower registers, taxed by Glass Onion, the recent anthology of jazz and blues Beatles covers from the Atlantic vaults. There's a mass to the sound that CD just can't match; I know, because I A/B'd the vinyl and CD. Tight when funky, warm when acoustic – deep voices, too, benefited with a depth that will make you tingle. It's as if digital never happened.

Bearing in mind that I've only heard the Boulder, FM Acoustics and Audio Research rivals at shows, I'm prepared to say that the Steelhead is the best-sounding phono stage I've ever experienced. Let's qualify that with In My Own System. With a UK tariff of 5995, it's nut-case money, but just you try letting go of it if you get a home demo.

Raper & Wayman Limited 0208-800 8288

SIDEBAR: Steelhead – The Sequel

Quietly slipped through is a new version of the Steelhead, with the following changes and a kick-ass addition: a line level input so you can use it as a complete pre-amp. (Add a Manley Skipjack, and that line input will take two sources.) The line input comes after RIAA stage, but before the volume control. A new button selects line or RIAA stage, so Version 2 has five push buttons. Also added are new anti-RFI grounding options that are user-selectable via dip switches on back panel.

Wisely, the DIN mc2 connector has been scrapped for a second pair of RCA sockets, while another pair of phonos added to the outputs will allow users to bi-amp or drive amps and a subwoofer directly from the Variable Outputs; the second set of outputs is wired in parallel to the Variable Outputs. (Manley will wire them to the Direct Outputs on request.) Badge illumination has changed to 'nice looking white LEDs which will never burn out.' The Output Muting relays have been changed

to short outputs if power is turned off, and the STANDBY button now called SLEEP. Manley assured us that the audio circuitry remains the same as the original.