

A Visit With the Steelhead RC from Manley Labs

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I have only a couple of more days with the Manley Steelhead and that makes me sad. But at the risk of throwing out a spoiler as my lead, I have to say that I won't actually miss it. Maybe.

I think I mentioned in an earlier post how the Steelhead made its way into my system? Well, if I didn't, here goes. Ready?

I recently bought the best turntable in the known universe, the Blackbird from Dr. Feickert. Yes, the Blackbird is the greatest thing in turntables since sliced bread and handily slays giants while curing cancer. Happily for me (no waiting!), I bought it right off the floor of my local dealer Jeff Fox, the owner of Command Performance A/V in Falls Church, VA. That left Jeff in a bit of a pickle as he'd also sold a couple of his older turntables in the weeks prior — so that lovely Steelhead of his was just sitting there with no one to play with. Well, being the amiable and helpful guy that I am, I generously offered to let it come and play at *chez moi* while he rectified his inventory "issue". Imagine my shock and pleasure when he shrugged and said, "sure". Yahoo!

Lets get this out of the way right up front: the Manley is a hunka-hunka audio love. I don't think it's any surprise that it was the reference for Stereophile's vinyl-guru, Michael Fremer, for something like a decade. The reason for this is pretty obvious as soon as you see the unit — there are more knobs on this phonostage than on the rest of my entire stereo rig. Let's just say that it's ... err ... complete.

The forums are all abuzz with the rumors of a big price hike for all things Manley, so I tracked down the skinny on the Steelhead. The price has been \$7500 for the last several years (since the RC version, released in 2008); as of February 15th, that price is going to get a small bump to \$8,000. The resale value on these units are strong. For example, AudiogoN has the used pricing on the Steelhead RC as averaging \$4900.

The sound quality of the Steelhead has been discussed at some great length elsewhere, so I won't spend too much time here other than to say that this is a reference-class phonostage. I swapped some emails with Michael Fremer about it, and yes, it still remains one of his top recommendations for a phono-preamplifier in the sub-\$10k price point. It really is just dynamite.



Here's an interesting comparison. I cued up a couple of tracks on my MacBook Pro (fed through Amarra 2.1.1, with cache playing enabled, into my Legato from AR-T and from there into my Alpha from Berkeley) and fished out their matching LPs. After level matching with my handy-dandy Radio Shack SPL meter, I had some fun *a/b* switching.

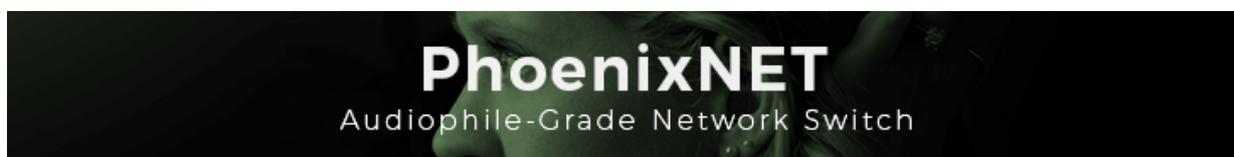
Generally speaking, the vinyl playback was better. The soundstage was larger, the separation was cleaner, the sound was more spacious, the decays more natural. On the flip side, the noise floor was higher and the transients were slightly rounded. That said, I *far* preferred the Steelhead over the Alpha, which seemed much leaner by comparison.

Some of this may well be the music itself, and I freely acknowledge that. I have quite a few 180g and 200g (both 33rpm and 45rpm) pressing with remastering that may simply outclass the CD offering. Can't be helped.

When I swapped back in my reference, the Joule-Electra OPS-2 (and rewired and then remounted the Cadenza Black), the two phonostages proved extremely close in performance, once I let my OPS-2 fully warm up and reset all the levels. If I had to nit, I might say that the Manley was a bit more “lit up”, but it’s hard to say — like I said, they’re close.

Where they really separate is usability. The Manley has all those knobs — there’s a control for everything. I suppose one might consider that to be a detriment, too — with all those options, there’s no real way to reasonably expect that the signal path would be “optimized”. In fact, this is *exactly* the criticisms I’ve heard — usually from dealers selling something else.

Well, the Joule-Electra OPS-2, at \$4400, *is* an optimized phonostage. That’s all it does. There is one knob — which turns the unit on. Both the Steelhead and the OPS-2 are two-chassis units, with separated power supplies. Both are tubed units (the Steelhead has more of them).



To switch from low-gain to high-gain on the OPS-2, you have to open the chassis, click two trigger switches, and then rewire the cartridge as this position inverts phase (PITA). On the Manley, you turn a knob to rotate through the available gain positions (50, 55, 60, 65) and the box auto-mutes, makes the change, and pops back on. Frankly, this is incredible.

I should note here, also, that the gain on the Manley is *not* equivalent to the gain on the Joule-Electra — for whatever reason, the Steelhead is just louder at the same setting. Like 5dB at least — I was using my .3mV Ortofon Cadenza on both the 55dB (80dB at 12 o’clock-ish) and 60dB (80dB at 10 o’clock-ish) settings with no problems whatever. The OPS-2, by contrast, has a max gain of 62dB — which is perfect for the Black cartridge (80db at 11 o’clock-ish), but if you wanted to run a .25mV Dynavector, you *might* be pushing things. I wish I could test this out, but I don’t have one on hand, sadly.

Last thing — loading. To set the loading on the Manley, you turn a knob ... yeah. The flexibility is pretty addicting here. Anyway, on the OPS-2, you need to order some shorting plugs. My MC cartridge really likes 100Ohms and the default is 47kOhms, so plugs are a must. Luckily, Jud Barber will ship you a free pair with your choice of loading when you order; additional sets are \$35 per set.

Ok, so what this comparison tells me is that the Steelhead is a *very* fine phonostage. And no, you’re not just paying for flexibility — the damn thing sounds great and very easily competes with a purist-design. At almost 2x the price of the Joule-Electra, what you get is a (nearly) plug and play phonostage with endless configuration options supporting just about every known cartridge currently made — and the ability to run *two* tonearms simultaneously into your rig. Very nifty as my Blackbird has, yes, two armboards!

Oh, another aside before I wrap. The Steelhead has a volume knob and two sets of variable outputs! So, yes, you can run it as a full function preamp (I believe EveAnna Manley uses hers this way) — there’s even an additional line-in, so you can switch between phono and, say, digital (the horror!). I ran the Steelhead both ways and I preferred it as a dedicated phonostage — the sound was just clearer and cleaner using the volume control on my reference Joule-Electra LA-150SE preamp. Ditto the line-in on

the Steelhead (only usable when you also use the variable-outs) — I hooked my trusty old Accuphase DPS-85 SACD player into this line-in and played it through the variable outs as well as the fixed outs. It sounded more open, with a clearer treble and tighter bass, when played directly into the Joule-Electra preamp, instead of through the Steelhead.

The Steelhead goes back to Command A/V on Friday. In the meantime, I'm going to do a couple more a/b swaps before the week is out just to confirm my "findings", but I don't expect much to change. My OPS-2 is really, really good. And since I only have just the one cartridge in use at the moment and don't have immediate plans to add a second tonearm, the OPS-2 is perfect. Why muddle things? Well ... because tweaking is fun, and you never know, *some day* I might have more funds for another cartridge and tonearm. And well, the Steelhead is so *pretty*. I guess you could say I'm a fan of the aesthetic. Very MANLEY.

[Sigh]. It never ends, does it?

[Addendum]

Well, the Steelhead went back last Friday. Jeff is cruel with his toys that way. Well, it's hard to blame him; he does have to make a living at this, after all. Damn you, Other Customers! [Sigh].

Anyway, I just wanted to add that I miss the Steelhead. Turns out that I was a bit hasty in my favoritism. Yes, it appears that the Steelhead *might* have an edge in soundstage and tone. Ok, it's more than that, but the differences aren't huge or anything, so don't get all uppity about it. Fine, yes, the Steelhead is better. Will I be selling my OPS-2 and investigating a more long term relationship with Manley's very hunka hunka phono preamp? Well ... Maybe.

I know, I'm pathetic. Riddled with shame, am I. But the aesthetic qualities aside, the phase inverting that the OPS-2 is kinda irritating when I want to swap things out — I have to remount the damn cartridge each time. Un-fun. And there *is* something about the soundstage on the Steelhead that is pretty remarkable. I wish I had it here so I could compare it to the built-in on the Luxman L-590all, but sadly that was not to be.

Ah, well. Just wanted to throw that out there.