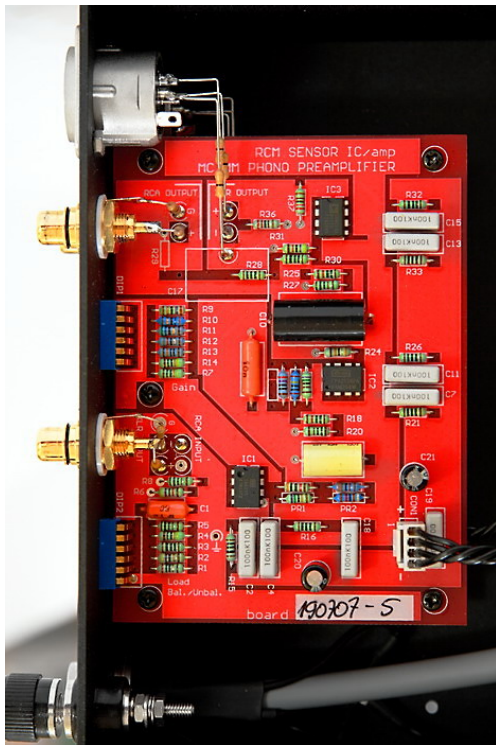


Review: RCM Audio Sensor Prelude IC Phonostage



Sensor Prelude

The Sensor Prelude IC is a classy looking solid-state Phonostage with a variety of load- and gain-settings and double output connections. Although the product that put this manufacturer on the map - the Bonusus - is a pure tube amplifier, RCM decided to build their Phonostage around high quality IC's (just like Rogue Audio). The Sensor Prelude has a sturdy chassis, finished in black textured paint. The clear anodised aluminium frontpanel carries timeless looking screenprinting and a LED that doesn't light up blindingly blue but instead gives off a rather modest green hue. Very nice. Also nice is the fact that the powersupply isn't set in a plastic casing. It actually has a full metal chassis, a good quality umbilical cord and a metal 5 pin plug with a locking ring. At the back of the RCM Phonostage we find not only RCA in- and output connectors but a set of balanced XLR outputs and a sturdy ground-post as well. Four DIP-switch blocks (two for each channel) are directly accessible at the rear, which means that one doesn't need to open up the amplifier to make adjustments. There are six impedance-loadings; 20, 50, 200, 400, 1000 and 47000 Ohms.

The (fixed) capacitance-loading is 150 picoFarad. The last switch on the loadingblock can be set for single-ended (coax) or balanced tonearm cables. There are seven sensitivity settings, ranging from 0,3 to 5 miliVolts. The maximum gain is a rather high 76 dB which means that even classic low-output Moving Coil cartridges (like older Ortofon models) can be used. The nominal output voltage is 2 Volts (8 Volts maximum) and the signal to noise distance is a respectable 85 dB (at the lowest gain setting). The Sensor Prelude has a passive split RIAA network with two separate RC filters. Low-noise, low tolerance resistors and polypropylene capacitors are used and each component is handselected in order to guarantee a tolerance of 0,3% over a 20 Hertz to 20 kiloHertz bandwidth. As a result, every Sensor Prelude performs as well as the reference Phonostage at the factory. The Sensor Prelude measures 7,5 by 21,4 by 21,4 centimeters (HXWXD) and weighs 2 kilos whereas the powersupply measures 6,5 by 12 by 16 centimeters and weighs a not unsubstancial 1,7 kilos. The warranty of the manufacturer lasts two years but the Dutch distributor East West Audio adds an extra year to that, making a total of three warranty-covered years.



Listening

After checking the correct orientation of the Schuko powerplug in the AC outlet, the loading values for our cartridge (an Ortofon MC 15 Super II) were set. It has to be said that the Sensor Prelude was an absolute joy to work with, from the easily set DIP-switches to the high quality connectors. When the (already played-in) RCM Phonostage was sufficiently warmed up, it was time for some serious listening. The Hans Theesink LP Call Me was taken off the shelf to play the track 'Late Last Night'. Right from the first few bars, this music was presented with such a strong Pace, Rhythm and Timing (PRaT) that it actually became quite difficult to take notes. The slideguitar playing sounded like flowing water and the low, dark voice of Hans Theesink was presented with good imaging, free from the speakers. The rhythmsection was rolling along like a steamtrain, as it should be, and the brushed drums were finely etched.

As a whole, the group was presented with a copious, open soundstage and a very good sense of flow. The high-mids sounded slightly more white but also more airy than with our own Moth Phonostage. The Sensor Prelude invited us to long, very long listening sessions and that's always a good sign. The Lightnin' Hopkins LP Goin' Away (Analogue Productions) was put onto the Scottish felt so that the Gyger II tip could trace the track 'Wake Up Old Lady'. The double bass was rendered with a good physical presence while the guitarplaying was conveyed with a lot of musical expression. Lightnin' Hopkins' singing, which can sound rather accentuated on sibillance was indeed reproduced by the RCM Phonostage as such, without sounding brash but rather with gusto. The hard brush-strokes on the drums were reproduced with a rich sounding punch, followed by a large ball of air. The sweepes and strokes were rendered with well-defined 'Pffffff-Pffffff' sounds (no sandpapery grittiness). The RCM Phonostage is very good at unraveling complex music but at the same time, it manages to keep the drive going. It presents detail and energy in equal measure. This is no wussy, The RCM has balls and plenty of gain; the volumecontrol on the Exposure XXV seldomly came past the ten 'o' clock position whereas with the Moth, it would be close to the twelve 'o' clock point. Time Out, the Dave Brubeck Quartet jewel was taken out of the record cabinet to play 'Take Five'. The hi-hats had a natural brass sound with a delicate, airy shimmer. The articulated saxophone playing and its rich vibrato along with the hall-reverberance came out very well. The lower registers of the piano were easy to follow, even during the sax- and drum solo's. The plucks on the double bass strings had more weight to them than with the residential Phonostage and the hard drum-wacks sounded more solid (though less bloomy) as well. Tonally, everything sounded excellent but more important is the way in which this music came forward rhythmically 'cause it was presented with an addictive swing. It soon became apparent that we were dealing with a Jazz-Phonostage of the highest order so we popped another Jazz-classic on the platter; Art Pepper's The Way It Was! (Contemporary) LP.

This album was listened all the way through and with each track we noticed how well the acoustics and the air in it were reproduced. Art Pepper's breathy style of playing sounded supple and powerful at the same time, without any nasality or veiling. The piano was presented in a modest way but the keystrokes sounded free-flowing. The hi-hats had a natural shimmer and the hardest hits on the drums sounded explosive, as they had been with several other good recordings. The excellent harmonizing of each group on this record was reproduced with seeming ease by the Polish Phonostage. By this time, we were completely in a swing-mood so we listened to 'Sliding', from Ellen McIlwaine's album *We, The People*. The unbridled enthusiasm and spunk of this red-haired lady was never before conveyed with such impulse and swing in our listening room. The result: a big, wide grin on the face of this writer.



Conclusion

The RCM Sensor Prelude IC clearly isn't a 'me-too' product but the result of thorough investigation and long listening sessions. Sonically, it has a rather unique mix of clarity and grooviness. Many a 'clear' sounding component tends to sound somewhat lean or even stuck-up. The RCM is fully fleshed out in its presentation which, in combination with a strong PRaT factor results in a moving reproduction of swing (obviously, that had to be present at the time of recording; a below-par rhythm section will be reproduced as such by the RCM). The most special thing about this Phonostage is that it doesn't position itself at one side of the 'pleasure verses perfection' dilemma. Detail? Yes. Transparency? Absolutely, but combined with a very good sense of musical communication. The Sensor Prelude IC raises the delicate signal of a Moving Coil cartridge with care, dedication and enthusiasm. Very,very, highly recommended.

Kilian Bakker – www.hifi.nl

Equipment:

Analogue Source:

- Heed Orbit 2
- Linn Sondek LP12
- Linn Akito
- Ortofon MC 15 Super II

Amplifier: Exposure Super XXV rc

Transducers: Monitor Audio Studio 2SE

Cables: Linn Analogue, QED Qunex 2, QED Profile 4X4

Power: Lapp/Popp strip, Belden IEC, Kemp SNS Plug

More info: www.eastwestaudioshop.nl