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Electronics Focus



Gold Note PH-10 Phonostage

La Dolce Vinyl

Stephen Scharf

A trend I've noticed over the last few years is that a number of audio companies are producing a range of audio products intended for younger customers. Companies such as Dynaudio, Devialet, KEF, Elac, Innuos, etc., are developing innovative products for people who have always appreciated and loved fine music reproduction, but have busy lifestyles. These customers likely prefer a "set it and forget it" experience rather than the hassles associated with traditionally designed audio products. Gold Note, founded near Florence, Italy just over seven years ago, has been creating just such a range of very attractive audio products with extensive features that are easy to set up and use. Part of Gold Note's 10-series entry-level line, the PH-10 is an innovative solid-state phono stage with an interesting feature set and an impressive number of functions.

Design

The PH-10 (and matching optional PSU-10 power supply) are half-width components, which make for easy and flexible placement in, or on top of, a cabinet or rack. Three colors are available (silver, gold, or black), and the overall fit and finish is excellent. Sleek and stylish diagonal vents cut into the top, sides, and bottom gives the PH-10 the rakish air of an Italian sports car. The

Gold Note logo is stamped into the top and is repeated in a small gold medallion on the 1/4"-thick front panel of each component. Very classy!

Except for the front and rear panels, the case is made of a single piece of aluminum. Imagine an approximately 9" x 3" x 10" rectangular box without front and back sides. The 1/4"-thick front panel, with the phono stage's circuit board attached, is bolted to the rear panel with long rods that tie the entire structure together. This assembly is inserted and fastened to the single-piece outer case, effectively floating the circuit board within the chassis, and creating a structure that provides rigidity and vibration damping for the circuit board.

Features and Functions

A key feature of the PH-10 is that all functions can be adjusted on-the-fly while playing music, allowing specific individual settings to be made for every record. Three different LP equalization (EQ) curves can be selected: RIAA, America-CBS-Columbia, and Decca-London. Moreover, each of these can be configured as an "enhanced" mode, providing a slight boost at the upper end of the EQ response curve. Additionally, nine impedance loading settings (10, 22, 47, 100, 220, 470, 1000, 22k, and 47k ohms) can be selected on the fly to allow optimal matching with a large number of cartridges quickly and easily. The PH-10 also provides four different gain settings (-3dB, 0dB, +3dB, +6dB) to adjust the nominal gain of 65dB for moving-coil and 45dB for moving-magnet cartridges.

Front Display and Single-Knob Control

One of the most innovative features of the PH-10 is its 2.8" color TFT display and proprietary control system, referred to as Single-Knob Control (SKC). All of the phono stage's settings, such as cartridge type (moving-magnet or moving-coil), equalization, gain, and impedance loading can quickly and easily be set using the SKC and color display.

The front panel's color monitor and SKC are powered by a micro-controller using proprietary firmware from a micro-SD card. This firmware can be easily updated when required by attaching a mini-USB cable from a computer to the rear panel. The micro-controller circuitry is separate and independent

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Specs & Pricing

PH-10 phonostage

Frequency response: 20Hz–20KHz

THD: <0.05% MAX

Signal to noise ratio: -89dB

Dynamic range: 105dB

Output impedance: 50 ohms

Gain, moving-magnet: 45dB

Gain, moving-coil: 65dB

Subsonic filter: 10Hz 36dB/octave

Weight: 6.6 lbs.

Dimensions: 8.7" x 3.1" x 10.2"

Price: \$1599

PSU-10 power supply

Dimensions: 7.8" x 3.15" x 10.25"

Weight: 6.6 lbs.

Price: \$1099

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Associated Equipment

Digital sources: Schiit Gungnir Gen 5 USB Multibit DAC, SOTM SMS-200 UltraNeo network bridge, Mac Mini Roon Core Server, Sonore OpticalModule fiber media convertor, Uptone Audio EtherREGEN Ethernet switch, Uptone Audio LPS-1.2 power supplies

Analog source: Michell Gyro SE turntable, SME V tonearm, Koetsu Urushi Vermilion cartridge, Bob's Devices Cinemag step-up transformer, Uni-Pro protractor

Phonostage: E.A.R. 324

Preamplifier: Conrad-Johnson CT-5

Power amplifier: Conrad-Johnson LP70S

Loudspeakers: Harbeth 40th Anniversary 30.2, Dynaudio Contour S3.4 with Esotar 2 tweeters, REL R-305 sub

Cables: Shunyata Research Sigma NR V2 (Denali & power amp), Alpha NR V2 (preamp), Venom NR-V10 (DAC), V14D Digital (digital components), Black Mamba CX (phonostage) power cables, Delta and Venom interconnects, Sigma Ethernet & Alpha USB digital cables, Delta V2 VTX-Ag speaker cables.

AC Power: Shunyata Research Denali 6000/S V2 and SR-Z1 wall outlet

from the audio signal path to avoid any interference.

The selected EQ curve is always indicated on the front display, and the enhanced mode, when selected, is superimposed with a dashed red line. The equalization curves are realized by analog circuitry utilizing integrated circuits and low-noise compo-

nents. Each curve's setting is implemented using electronic switches which, according to Gold Note, permits shorter signal paths.

The rear panel has a power switch and a full suite of inputs: an IEC power receptacle, two sets of unbalanced RCA inputs with dedicated ground posts, a connector for the PSU-10 power supply's umbilical, a mini-USB firmware port, and what is presumably a service or test port. Outputs comprise a set of balanced XLRs and unbalanced RCAs. Before evaluating the PH-10, I downloaded and installed the latest firmware from Gold Note's support website.

Setup

Setting up the PH-10 couldn't be easier. The half-width case easily fits on a shelf or the top of a rack or cabinet. If using the optional PSU-10 external power supply, Gold Note recommends placing the PSU-10 on the left side of the PH-10 for easy connection of the DC power umbilical and to minimize noise between the two components. After you turn on the master switch on the back panel, the PH-10 powers up into a standby mode until the SKC is pressed. Holding down the SKC for three seconds switches the PH-10 into active mode and turns on the control display. Once the display is visible, the SKC is used to make selections for input (Phono 1 or Phono 2), cartridge type, EQ curve, gain, input, and impedance loading, etc.

As noted, any setting on the PH-10 can be selected in real-time by turning the SKC to the desired function, which is highlighted by a bright white outline. Pushing in and

turning the SKC, the outline turns red, and you can rotate the knob to scroll through the various choices. Once you've settled on the desired setting, pushing the SKC again activates a relay that selects the chosen setting. Once set, the function outline turns white to indicate the setting is locked. The current settings are always depicted on the front display, so you can see what's set from a glance across the room. It's simple to get the hang of using the display and SKC, and once you do, it's fast, easy, and darn cool.

For this review, I listened to the PH-10 with my reference turntable, a Michell Gyro SE with SME V tonearm and Koetsu Urushi Vermilion moving-coil cartridge. While the PH-10 has 65dB of gain, suitable for most moving-coil cartridges, it didn't provide quite enough for the Urushi Vermilion's 0.2mV output, so I used my Bob's Devices step-up transformer and the moving-magnet input. With this configuration, the PH-10 is quiet, and even at higher volume on the preamp, there's virtually no detectable background noise.

Listening

Right out of the box, the PH-10 sounded detailed, slightly warm, with very good imaging, though just a bit rough around the edges. Like a fine wine, I thought the PH-10 needed some time to "breathe," so I left it powered on continuously to burn in, and enjoyed listening to it "non-critically" for the first month or so.

In his review of the Gold Note IS-1000 integrated amp/DAC, Neil Gader noted that the musical atmosphere

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Gold Note PSU-10 External Power Supply

While I spent about the majority of my time listening to the PH-10 phonostage plugged into my Shunyata Denali 6000/S V2 power conditioner, I also evaluated the optional PSU-10 external power supply that Gold Note sent along for review.

The purpose of the PSU-10 is to provide cleaner DC to the PH-10's circuits, resulting in more realistic and lifelike audio from the PH-10 powered from its integral supply. To do this, the PSU-10 utilizes a dual-choke design powered by a double inductor to drive the negative and positive high-current stages, and also features an inductive filter on the analog stage to eliminate electrical noise and EMI coming from the AC power source.

To provide a controlled foundation for evaluating the PSU-10 independently from the Denali's >60dB of noise reduction, I connected the PH-10 and PSU-10 to my Shunyata Hydra 4 power distributor with Shunyata Venom 3 power cables, providing identical AC power to both components. Connecting the PSU-10 is as simple as connecting its DC umbilical cable. As soon as it is turned on, it automatically switches power from the PH-10's internal power supply to the PSU-10.

Listening

When I listened to the PH-10 by itself (without the Shunyata Denali 6000/S V2 power conditioner), its overall character remained the same, albeit slightly diminished. Highs, though still detailed, warm, and natural-sounding, were not as extended as when I was using the Denali. Soundstaging was somewhat curtailed, and the ability to hear into the symphony hall or recording venue somewhat lessened. Most notably, the instruments were not as clearly resolved and focused, and the separation between them was less spacious. I attribute this to the higher noise floor from the PH-10's internal power supply, which results in lower transparency, expansiveness, definition, and resolution. As a result, you can't hear as deeply into the presentation, and the music has less liveliness and flow.

Use the PSU-10 to power the PH-10, though, and its benefits become immediately apparent: Paul Chambers' bass on "So What" [Miles Davis, *Kind of Blue*] had improved resolution, articulation, timbral accuracy, textural and pitch definition and solidity. The soundstage had greater depth, width, and ambience, and the overall presentation became notably more lifelike and involving. The PH-10 propelled Rachmaninoff's *Symphonic Dances* [Donald Johanos & the Dallas Symphony] forward with an impressive energetic drive and tight dynamic control. Near the end of Movement I, the interplay between horns, cymbals, and timpani scaled cleanly with impressive speed, weight, and power.

As power quality is highly variable with respect to locale, time of day, and other system-specific factors, it's difficult to accurately predict the degree of improvement the PSU-10 will bring to any system. My recommendation would be to audition the PSU-10 along with the PH-10, if possible. The PH-10 is a very fine-sounding phonostage when used as a standalone; using the PSU-10 makes it into an excellent one.



conjured up by the IS-1000 reminded him of Italian music, food, and culture, and I found that same parallel fully evident with the PH-10. Specifically, the PH-10 reminded me of savoring a good pinot noir. Full-bodied in overall character, pinots are beloved for the way they strike a balance between flavor, complexity, and drinkability. Interestingly, the PH-10 elicits a similar experience: Full-bodied and complex, the overall presentation was transparent, neutral with a slightly warm tone, and a weighty mid-range with body. Voice and instrument fundamentals and overtones were accurate and lifelike. Drummer Jimmy Cobb's brushes on the cymbals on "Fran Dance" [Miles Davis, *Saturday Night in Person*] were wispy with a fine metallic sheen; the bass drum's ground beat was deep, tight, and snappy. Highs from Miles' trumpet were near-perfect, with a sweet brassy tone.

One of the strong points of the PH-10 was its excellent imaging. On Haydn's String Quartet No. 8 from John Williams' *Haydn Guitar Quartet & Paganini Guitar Trio* [Columbia MS 71630], guitarist John Williams is left, with cello and viola on the right, and violinist Alan Loveday in the center. Imaging was so stable, well-defined, and palpable that you felt you could walk in and plunk down a chair right next to the musicians as they played. Individual instruments were accurately rendered with resolution and body. Williams' guitar was resonant with a broad tonal range and a subtlety of timbre that gave it an almost palpable quality. The *pizzicati* of Loveday's Guarnerius violin on Movement IV (*Finale—Presto*) had excellent texture and tactile definition, and the imaging was so precise you could practically visualize the movements of his bow on the strings.

With the Decca-London EQ setting, listening to Peter Maag and the London Symphony Orchestra's legendary performance of Mendelssohn's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was a delight. The PH-10's tonal accuracy, imaging, hall ambience, and sheer dynamism gave a "you are there" experience. Timbres were accurate and lifelike, and the subtle yet complex interplay between the instruments in this intricately scored and lively piece was finely resolved. In the last movement for chorus, "You Spotted Snakes," the female soloists Jennifer Vyvyan and Marion Lowe and the Women's Chorus of the Royal Opera House were so beautifully and sweetly reproduced it literally gave me goosebumps. The "Quarrel" scene of Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet* [Lorin Maa-

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zel and the Cleveland Orchestra] was forceful, vibrant, and incredibly energetic. The crescendos from the timpani during the “Quarrel” felt like they would damn near blow the walls down, and the climactic “Fight” scene was reproduced with impressive transient response and dynamic slam. Let me put this way: The PH-10 kicks ass on classical music!

The PH-10 also plays to its strengths on acoustic jazz, where its tonal character and medium-bodied weight gave vocals and instruments a subtly burnished glow. Johnny Hartman’s baritone voice on “Lush Life” [John Coltrane and Johnny Hartman] was rich and resonant; Coltrane’s tenor sax was brassy without being biting or overly bright. Julie London’s “come hither” voice on “Cry Me a River” [Julie Is Her Name] had an alluring huskiness, and the low noise floor allowed me to hear deeply into the reverb as her voice faded at end of the song. Another standout was “April in Paris” from *Ella and Louis*, where Armstrong’s gruff voice provides counterpoint to Fitzgerald’s silky soprano. On some digital versions, Armstrong’s trumpet solo can be too edgy and strident, but the PH-10 played it just right, as a sweet lead-in to Ella’s soaring and breathtaking final solo. This one gave me goosebumps, too.

Live performance recordings were particularly suited to the PH-10’s naturalistic rendering and imaging prowess. Norah Jones’ “Broken” [Live from Austin TX] really had the PH-10 strutting its stuff. Clean and quiet, its crisply focused details separated Lee Alexander’s guitar and Daru Ota’s bass from Jones’ voice

The PH-10 also plays to its strengths on acoustic jazz, where its tonal character and weight gave vocals and instruments a subtly burnished glow.

and piano, conveying a lifelike conviviality.

At the risk of mixing metaphors, what was really notable for me was that the more complex and challenging the music was, the more the PH-10 came into its own. The PH-10 handled rock, pop, or jazz like a Ferrari 348 burbling around Tuscany on a day in the countryside. The experience was one of easy luxuriant power, grace, and aplomb. But, like driving a Ferrari down a fast and challenging piece of road, give the PH-10 some complex and challenging classical music, particularly symphonic classical music, and it really opens up, comes into its own, and...sings.

Shortcomings

For me, the only shortcoming I noticed of the PH-10 was the top end, which was not as fully refined, extended, and spacious as the best phonostages I’ve heard (e.g., the Zesto Andros, E.A.R. 324). The highs were just a bit closed-in and slightly dark, though never strident or fatiguing; they don’t trail off into space the way they do with the best phonostages. While the PH-10’s precise imaging was a strong point, on most recordings the soundstage was confined between the speakers, rather than extending out past them towards the walls. Bass and lower octave performance had good detail, definition,

and articulation, but lacked a touch of weight and power at the very bottom.

Summary

The Gold Note PH-10 is a really fine phonostage, and one that provides an outstanding value proposition. It’s beautifully designed and executed with high-level fit and finish. Its innovative front display and single-knob control interface makes selecting and setting its comprehensive functions and features a veritable breeze.

Summing up, there are a number of good phonostages in this price class, the Parasound JC Jr. and the venerable E.A.R. 834P, to name a couple. I haven’t heard the Parasound JC Jr, but I owned the 834P for a number of years, and the PH-10 is better. Better-designed, better-built, and with a considerably more innovative and comprehensive feature set. If I had approximately \$1600 to \$2000 to spend on a phonostage, I’d get the PH-10. It’s that good. I’d open up a nice pinot noir, put an LP on the turntable, sit back, and enjoy the music.

Some phonostages pursue “absolute technical objectivity” as their goal. The PH-10 is not that kind of product. It’s *all* about the music. If you’re a “truth-seeker,” there are other phonostages to choose from, but you’re a “pleasure-seeker,” then the PH-10 is for you. Like a fine wine or a fine car, the PH-10 satisfies, both in the moment and as a lasting memory. **tas**

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