

Group test verdict

After a week of dividing his time between DIP switch dominoes and on-the-fly load fettling, **David Vivian** is ready to reveal his thoughts on a bruising battle

A CHARISMATIC GROUP? In the grand scheme of hi-fi components probably not. How about a collection of high-functioning unsung heroes? Absolutely. It's easy to underestimate the role this vital link plays in determining the final sound of your vinyl-driven front end. Anyone who thinks of stinting on its quality to buy a fancier turntable is diving headfirst into a false economy. Buy a fancy turntable, but be in no doubt you'll need a first-class phono preamp to unlock its true potential.

All these comfortably hit that mark and so, to some extent, user choice

will be guided by features as much as ultimate sound quality. Should that be the case, the Leema Agena has a lot going for it as a supremely accomplished, versatile and polished 'exit-level' purchase. Even-handed almost to a fault, its sound lacks a little pace and rhythmic tension. Musical Fidelity's five-input Nu-Vista behemoth is a ceaselessly lovely listen with fabulous soundstage breadth and depth but, again, it needs a little more gunpowder in its arsenal to match the excitement of the best.

Fourth is the remarkable DBL The Wand EQ, which delivers a wide-open

sound with more than a hint of the verve and vitality they lack. It's a terrifically engaging listen and frankly amazing value if you put pure sound quality ahead of features and flexibility.

First podium place goes to the Manley Chinook, which possesses a thoroughly immersive and cohesive sound in that special way only tubes have, brimming with texture and nuance. The brilliant Rega Aura bags the runner-up spot for its sheer muscular musicality, powers of resolution and towering temporal exactitude.



WINNER

There's the sense of weight and proportion, speed and dynamic tension. Warmth, body and dimensionality. It isn't just that there's more going on with the ModWright, but the way it all hangs together so naturally and expresses the musical message quite so eloquently.



Make/model	Design Build Listen The Wand EQ	Leema Acoustics Agena	Manley Chinook	ModWright Instruments PH 9.0	Musical Fidelity Nu-Vista Vinyl	Rega Aura
Price	£1,400	£3,950	£2,700	£2,900	£3,300	£4,000
Sound	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Value	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Build	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Features	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Overall	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
	Only the size of a paperback novel, The Wand EQ's story has a happy ending	Beautifully built and finished, this is a class act that covers all the bases and then some	Want to know what the fuss is about with valves? The Chinook is here to educate you	A simple chunky, nondescript box – who'd have believed the magic within?	Military grade valves but a smoother, sweeter sound you'll struggle to find	If you know Rega, the sound of the Aura will come as no surprise. Sublime
Website	thewandtonearm.com	leema-acoustics.com	manley.com	modwright.com	musicalfidelity.com	rega.co.uk

Key features

MM/MC	1x selectable RCA in	2x selectable RCA ins	1x selectable RCA in	1x selectable RCA in	5x selectable RCA ins	1x selectable RCA in
Gain settings	Variable	Variable	Variable	Variable	Variable	Variable
Load settings	DIP switch	Microprocessor controlled	DIP switch	On-the-fly	On-the-fly	On-the-fly
Balanced output	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes
External PSU	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No

TRY WITH THESE

TURNTABLE: Michell GyroDec SE **£2,090 HFC 345**

Coming up to its 40th anniversary, the GyroDec remains a superlative performer with a flexible upgrade path, exceptional build and those beautiful looks. An undisputed modern classic.



MOVING-MAGNET CARTRIDGE: Ortofon 2M Blue **£184 HFC 385**

Only one rung down from the terrific 2M Bronze, the 2M Blue enjoys features borrowed from Ortofon's more expensive models. It's well-built, easy to install – thanks to its pre-threaded mounts – and, with a healthy output, offers a clear and open presentation with plenty of bite.



STYLUS CLEANER: DS Audio ST-50 **£78 HFC 437**

A clean stylus performs better and will last longer than one that is dragging ingrained groove dirt and other debris with it. The ST-50 is a wonderfully simple idea, brilliantly executed and it makes keeping your stylus clean entirely straightforward.

