ModWright Instruments PH 9.0 £2,900

This two-box combo from the States looks like the quietly spoken type, but underestimate it at your peril

Hi-Fi Choice GROUPTEST WINNER

DETAILS

PRODUCT
ModWright Instruments PH 9.0

ORIGIN
USA

TYPE
MM/MC phono preamp

WEIGHT
5.4kg (main unit)

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
254 x 102 x 254mm

FEATURES
- MM/MC input
- RCA input/output
- Separate PSU

DISTRIBUTOR
Elite Audio

Our second contender from across the pond also favours thermionic valves over transistors and, as an added nod to sonic purity, has housed the main unit and power supply in separate cases. They're both compact and chunky, but even so it might be a bit of a struggle to accommodate both on a single shelf of an equipment rack. I put some distance between the two – probably not a bad idea, anyway. Besides, we're not talking the last word in aesthetic sophistication, here. These boxes mean business and are as well made and finished as they need to be, nothing more.

The good news is that once you've found a suitable parking place, there's no need to disturb the preamp box to fiddle about with fiddly DIP switches.

The guitar solo has a sense of body that nothing else here can get close to

The two large knobs and a couple of switches on its facia have got just about everything covered, with only the mono/stereo switch around the rear.

The left-hand knob allows you to choose between moving-magnet and moving-coil (with a mute on/off nestling in between) while the one on the right deals with load impedance settings. It can be done on the fly, allowing you to tailor the sound to taste as you listen. One of the toggles switches the preamp on, the other sets gain at 0, -6dB or -12dB.

As shipped, the valve complement consists of a pair of 6C45s alongside a brace of 6922s and the supporting components include high-quality Lundahl MC step-up transformers. ModWright Instruments doesn't publish much in the way of specs, but the claimed frequency response of 20Hz to 50kHz (+/- 2dB) is both impressively wide and flat.

Sound quality

Regular readers will know that not all valve amps sound the same and that some don't even sound like valve amps in the stereotypically smooth, warm, caramel-coated sense. The ModWright is a case in point as its sonic signature is absolutely nothing like that of the more mellifluous Manley Chinook, if anything being closer in style to the muscular, all-action, rhythmic rock known as the Rega Aura.

All right, it's not quite as potent and relentlessly resolving, but the PH 9.0 nonetheless still teams much of the Rega's 'on it' enthusiasm and energy with an openness, speed and layered dimensionality reminiscent of a Tom Evans design – and that's a terrific combination by the way.

Fed by the masterly sonic skills of a top turntable like the Acoustic Signature, the combo sounds as pristine as state-of-the-art digital with a 10 percent humanity upgrade and a serious injection of soul.

Stanley Clarke's *Journey To Love* album is a perfect case in point hosting a busload of the world's best jazz fusion musicians including Chick Corea, John McLaughlin, David Sancious, George Duke, Lenny White and Steve Gadd. But it's Jeff Beck's soaring, snarling solo on the title track that really sets the tone for the ModWright's sonic abilities. Beck's strident guitar solo is richly rendered and hangs in space with a sense of body and dimensionality that nothing else in the group can realistically get close to.

Testing different strengths, Lunatraktors distinctive take on Leonard Cohen's *Lover, Lover, Lover* sounds that bit more nuanced and 'finished' which, in turn, bolsters a belief that there's more musically relevant stuff going on. And it all happens in an environment built on quicksilver timing and zero inertia.

The overall balance is noticeably leaner than the Rega's but, whether it's Amy Winehouse giving her pipes a work out on *You Sent Me Flying (Cherry)* or The Oscar Peterson Trio's *Naptown Blues*, I'm treated to fabulous insight and tonal complexity and the result is the feeling of a freer, more finessed performance ●

HI-FI Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★☆
FEATURES ★★★★½

LIKE: Superb best-of-all-worlds sound; friendly design

DISLIKE: A slightly awkward kit rack fit

WE SAY: If you're after the best sonics, look no further

OVERALL ★★★★★