



WHEST AUDIO whesTWO STEREO PHONO STAGE
PRICE: \$1,900

The whestTWO is a solid-state phono stage for either MM or MC cartridges. It is a product of Whest Audio Ltd, a British based company whose main products are phono stages. They also make an “analog processor” and three interconnect cables. The “TWO” is their entry level model. The other two are the PS.30R and their big dog MC REF V. It should be noted that their products are designed, built and assembled in Britain.

The reference turntable, arm and cartridge are the TW ACUSTIC Raven One turntable with Graham Phantom Arm and Soundsmith's THE VOICE cartridge. Reference phono stage is the Roksan Caspian S.E. Reference Phono Preamplifier - DXP SE (\$2,800).

Our special thanks to **Roy Hall and LeLand Laird of Music Hall** who distribute Whest Audio in the US for providing the review sample.



According to designer James Henriot, the whestTWO is based entirely on the PS.20 and utilizes approximately 90% of its electronic design but with a twist, which is about 10% of the big, dual chassis MC REF V. “Yes, during the design stages of the whestTWO we made a mad decision to incorporate some of the MC REF V ideas, namely it’s hybrid active/passive RIAA filter stage. Unlike other units at this price point that use the standard ‘input-Passive RIAA filter-output’ configuration, the whestTWO uses an identical configuration which was borrowed from the MC REF V and this can also be found in the PS.30R. This new RIAA configuration along with the high-current output stage means the whestTWO can resolve much more information compared to any of its rivals”.

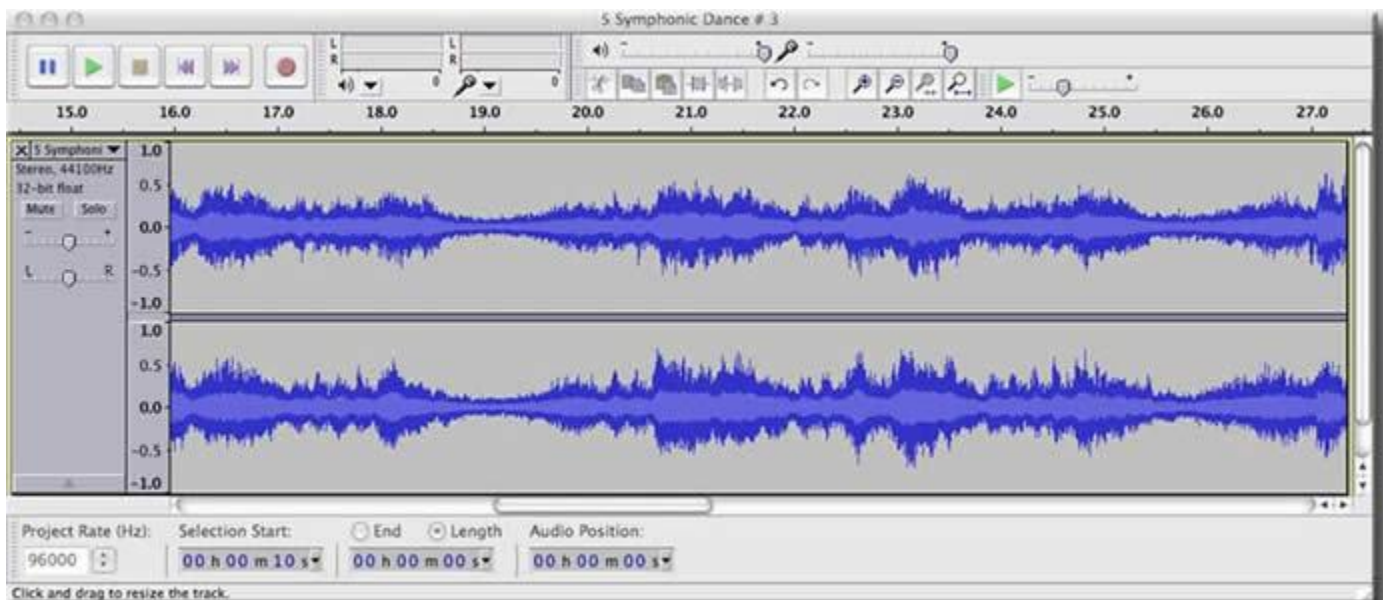
What is this “new RIAA” configuration? Designer Henriot says the RIAA curve (the equalization needed in a phono circuit to make an LP reproduce relatively flat response) was implemented way back when stereo systems did well to reproduce a measly 12Khz on top. Now, of course, the numbers are more like 100Khz for many amps and most cartridges can play back freq’s beyond 60K. “So”, he asks, “Why continue to use a phono stage with a filter curve designed for the 1950’s?” While he won’t say exactly what the new hybrid design entails, it has to do with a different high-frequency filter he says extends the TWO’s top end.



Like the other Whests, this design is a dual mono type with no op amps in the circuit for purity and linearity. There is no power supply in the small case, rather there is a rather large brick in the AC line which attaches to the rear of the unit via multi-pin

cable. Fortunately, there is a standard cable from the brick to the wall so it doesn't block the use of other receptacles like a wall-wart would. The Two claims a working bandwidth of 15Hz-53Khz. There is no balanced circuitry with standard RCA's for in/out. There is a good quality grounding post for your arm cable.

In a rather unusual move, the TWO comes packed with a substantial looking set of IC's as well as another cable that goes from RCA's to 3.5mm plug for connection to your computer. An accompanying CD includes a freeware program (Audacity - see screen shot below) that lets you record from the Whest's analog outs through your sound card at high-rez quality up to 32 bit and 96Khz. You can then play back from your 'puter or laptop in hi-rez or, with additional software, burn to a DVD or even DVD Audio. Or...and this is maybe the coolest feature, save your files as lossless formats or MP3's and dump them to your Ipod. Or (again), burn them to CD's and play 'em in your car. Audacity is available for Mac, Windows and Linux.



One caveat though; if you are thinking “Wowsers, I could archive my whole 1,000 LP collection to hi-rez DVD!”, you won’t. Not that you can’t, just that you won’t. The process is tedious and very time consuming. One can easily spend two hours trying to transfer one LP and you still might not be happy with the results. You have to carefully set levels and stay by your turntable the whole time - it ain’t like burning disks in iTunes where everything is automatic. Sure, you can archive a few if you have the patience, but very few people would have the time or patience to do even a large stack. Some phono stages and even turntables include a USB output for computer connection, but they are lower quality units. There is no direct USB connection on the Whest.

While we’re on the subject of small inconveniences, no doubt due to cost savings, there is no on/off switch on the front. Or the back. Or the sides. None period, which means you have to unplug the bugger or it is always on. I don’t know how much current it uses when not in use, but it does get and stay rather warm. Of course, if you plug the unit into something like the Furutech power strip and current cleaner such as I use, everything can

be turned off with one switch.



Inconvenience #2 is that while there are good choices for loading, the dip switches are inside the case (see our added yellow outlines) which necessitates unplugging everything,

unscrewing the case and sliding the board out. The little DIPs really are tiny, but the excellent manual makes their use clear and easy to see via a chart. If you only have one cartridge, this is not a problem. If you have more than one and change them frequently, pain in the butt.

As in the picture, there are two sets of 6 DIPs that toggle on/off. Load choices are 100 and 500R for MC and the standard 47K for MM. The other three choose between 40, 65 and 70dB gain. You can have more than one “on” at a time for variations. However, and this is a nice feature, if you have an MC that none of the options fit, the factory or dealer can make custom changes for you - but you can’t “DIY”.

whestSOUND

Quiet. I plugged it in and heard...nothing. No hum, no hiss. I played a bunch of LP's to accumulate about 100 hours before serious listening. This is a must. Everything opened up after about 50 hours, especially the high end extension and soundstage. I guess that new RIAA filter needs time as well as the rest of the solid stateness.



The quiet noise floor translates to outstanding dynamics. My current dynamics torture test is "Hope" by Hugh Masekela. Soundsmith's "THE VOICE" cartridge is a dynamics demon and the TWO showed no signs of limiting its dynamic demeanor Dynamite. As I said in my review of "THE VOICE", with "Hope", Masekela brings his heavily South African style to a live crowd in NYC and the results are stunning. Forget the 1812 Overture, this is the LP to spin when one of your "CD has much better dynamic range" friends comes over. If you amps and speakers can handle it (as well as your turntable and cartridge), the percussion and bass as well as Masekela's voice and horn will amaze

you. It sounds as if there was no compression at all used in the recording or mastering of this astonishing recording. More than once I was more than a little startled by some instrument or voice leaping out of the speakers.

Needless to say, this 45 rpm version of the performance is a stringent test for any cartridge. Speed, agility and perfect trackability are a must to reproduce what this LP has to offer. The standout cut for me is "The Coal Train" where Masekela poetically speaks (yes, speaks in the beginning) about the trains that brought, not coal, but slaves from all over Africa to work the horrific gold and diamond mines. There are two events in the song that can make a follicley challenged man's hair stand up; one is a long crescendo that starts out with a muted cowbell softly playing straight 16th notes, joined by a floor tom as it grows louder and louder as you think all hell is about to break loose, to a stunning thunderous climax. The other is when he impersonates the shrieking sound of the train whistle. If there existed a pictorial dictionary of descriptive, audiophile terms, this album cover would be the illustration of the word "visceral".

"Dynamic" is much too tame. But more than that, there is a fervently emotional, human quality that transcends the merely musical.



Turning to soundstage, Ellington's "Blues In Orbit" via

Classic Record's 200 gram Quiex reissue is the benchmark. The large band is spread out way beyond the speakers side to side and has incredible depth and layering as well. Here the TWO scored about an EIGHT I'd say on an absolute scale. Excellent but not superior to the best I have heard. But then, Whest makes two other phono stages that are more expensive, so logic would dictate that they are better by some degree than the least expensive TWO. But, if we grade on a curve for competing products in this price range, the score goes up to a sparkling 10.

As far as instrument timbres, speed and neutrality, it ranks about the same. That is actually pretty impressive because it means it is very balanced and consistent with no serious deficiencies. Tonally, this is a solid state unit, but it doesn't shout "TRANSISTORS!" at you. There's very little if any grain and no glare, but no romantic tube lushness or golden glow, either. To me that's good. It is the vinyl analog sound that should be glowing, not the phono stage. The Whest put no dampers on those flames.

The only thing that I detected that was a bit out of character was its ability to hang onto the last few milliseconds of long, slowly dissipating sounds such as a string bass note, long reverb trails such as pipe organ recordings where there may be as long as 6 seconds of very thick, ambient natural reverb as well as some vocal recordings that have fake reverb. But then, reverb is something to which I am particularly attuned and particularly particular. I am one of those strange people who often listens as much to what the recording engineer is doing as I do the musicians. Some of my most loved recordings (Alan Parsons comes to mind) are kept around mostly because of the studionics (my word) rather than the music. Others may not even notice what I'm blathering on about.

Most importantly, the WhestTWO let me "see" far enough into everything I threw at it to appreciate what all participants were doing. That is one definition of "transparency". More than that, while it was detailed enough to facilitate dissection, it also brought all of those tiny pieces together into a very homogeneous whole. That is one definition of "musical" and **the Whest, more than any other I have auditioned in this price range, is musical.**

On our "Upcoming Reviews" page, we invite our readers who own the listed equipment to write us with their comments - positive or negative. We received such an email from Robert Miller who lives in the U.K. We asked if he was associated with Whest or the audio industry and he said he was not. His comments were:

"I know that whest are doing extremely well in Germany also as I spoke to James at whest and he told me, while on the subject of turntables, the TW Acoustic chaps also use the new PS.30R (they had a PS.20) and say it's one of the very best stages around regardless of price. Going by what I have in the whest2 and what people say about the older PS.20 and DAP.10 analog processor which I also have, I think the PS.30R must be very special. A close friend also uses a whest2 in his AVID/ Origin Live/ Lyra setup and says it easily beat out the competition at twice the price.

I have had this product for about 5 months now, using it with an Michell Gyro SE

/SME309/ Dynavector XX2. This phono stage is excellent to say the very least. I had previously used another well reviewed UK unit but I like the way the whest2 plays music with great detail, soundstage and the images are second to none. I'm about to relegate the whest2 to my second system (Rega P5/ Ortofon Contrapunkt B) and buy the new PS.30R by the whest guys. It is a steal, no an audio bargain".

[Take a look at our "Upcoming Reviews" section.](#) If you see something that you own, please write us with your comments.



The Whest Audio WhestTWO is an excellent product that would be ideal for those who own high-end turntables and cartridges. It excels in the most important aspects of vinyl reproduction; quietness (especially since it lacks balanced circuitry), dynamics, neutrality and the ability to convey music as it was intended to sound. Its small size does not take up a lot of precious rack space.

The whestTWO lacks a couple of conveniences, namely no on/off switch and internal cartridge matching switches that require the case to be opened for changes.

While there are certainly other phono stages that give you a degree of increased refinement, we think you would have to pay considerably more to improve on what Whest has presented here which makes it a good value. Would I recommend the whestTWO to a friend? If his turntable, arm and cartridge added up to, say, \$3,000 to \$10,000 give or take, absolutely. Would I buy the WhestTWO myself? I would and I did.

Because the WhestTWO represents an excellent value and quality sound presentation, we award it our maximum mojo award.



Congratulations to James Henriot and the people at Whest Audio.

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