

# Phasemation EA-350 phono stage

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In an increasingly small world where you can get almost anything in a few days, it's heartening to see and hear that national traits are still strong. Take the top-end of the Japanese audio world, for example. It has always made exemplary products built to the highest standards. It's a culture of reverence toward smooth, refined, and understated sophistication in build, industrial design and performance. It's the opposite of the showy 'bling' sometimes seen in high-end; less 'Hublot Big Bang' and more 'Grand Seiko Spring Drive'.

Phasemation is a perfect example of this Japanese devotion to performance. It's a small but dynamic audio manufacturer passionate about vinyl replay. Alongside a solid-state preamplifier and three monophonic tube power amplifiers, Phasemation also makes five stereo and one monophonic moving coil cartridges, four step-up transformers (two of which are dual mono designs), two headshells, four dedicated phono cables and a degausser. But it's the phono stages that first caught our attention. At a time where any company making two phono stages might be considered 'hardcore', Phasemation makes six! Three of

these are multi-box, dual mono designs (the top EA-2000 comprises six boxes in total), but we focused on one of the trio of single-chassis designs.

## Ambitious

That's no compromise. The EA-350 is Phasemation's most ambitious one-box phono amplifier, priced shy of £4,500. The circuit is feedback-free, a technique much prized in tube electronics. Phasemation's aforementioned EA-2000 phono stage and its power amps are tube-based, and the company claims that the absence of feedback results in lower distortion.

The EA-350 is a beautifully executed, externally understated MM/MC phono stage. It's balanced throughout with single-ended and balanced inputs and a set of single-ended outputs to an amplifier. A balanced design with single-ended output is not as odd as it first sounds. The cartridge is inherently balanced; many companies (Origin Live, for example) recommend using balanced connections where possible. Phasemation also makes two cables specifically for the task. >>





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» Japanese record collectors are often keen owners of mono pressings, and they get two mono EQ curve settings alongside the standard RIAA option. Mono 1 for Decca pressings and similar and Mono 2 for Columbia labels. A separate stereo/mono switch is provided to deliver better results when a mono LP is played with a stereo cartridge. Another unusual feature is a degauss setting. This is used to de-magnetise the metal core in a moving coil cartridge. The process takes 30 seconds and is used to bring back clarity lost over time through magnetic saturation.

### Variable gain... who needs it?

The EA-350 doesn't offer variable gain or any adjustment to either capacitance or input impedance. However, the specifications indicate that the load impedance is preset at 117.5Ω, and the gain fixed at 64dB for MC cartridges. The MM anticipates a traditional 47kΩ output impedance. The MC input covers a broad range of output impedances between 1.5Ω and 40Ω. That range suits most MC designs and is ideal for Phasemation's cartridges. You could argue that it's also the same output impedance range suggested for the brand's T-320, T-550 and T-1000 MC Step-Up Transformers, should you decide to upgrade. We tested the EA-350 alongside Phasemation's PP-2000 cartridge, which is the subject of a review in the next issue.

There is a school of thought that suggests the greater the amount of adjustment, the better the result. However, the counter to that argument holds that more adjustment just means more opportunities to mess things up. Phasemation seems more in the latter camp, with what adjustments open to the end user concentrating EQ curves than cartridge loading. If you are a 'never sit still' type who is always adjusting something or dialling in a thing for the umpteenth time, the Phasemation EA-350 is probably a little

too 'fit and forget' for your sensitivities. The rest of us can get on with listening to music free from *audiophilia nervosa*.

Listening commenced without the PP-2000 but rather a Rega Aphelion 2 cartridge onboard my Rega Planar 10 turntable. For the record, that MC anticipates a 100Ω input load impedance and delivers an output impedance of 10Ω... and the sound these two produced was not short on appeal.

This is a delightfully relaxed phono stage, sounding smooth and easy and devoid of many of the typical distortions found in even quite exalted rivals. In particular, it delivered a degree of refinement that is rarely heard. The Gary Burton album *New Quartet* has been on heavy rotation in my system and with the EA-350 the notes of his vibraphone peel away like cherry blossom in a spring breeze. Every nuance of the instruments' reverb tails were rendered in effortless fashion. The mids and highs are particularly radiant with this phono stage, too. It appears to find more time for every note to unfold, delivering the energy from the groove in such an effortless fashion that it's difficult to imagine it sounding ruffled.

### Pristine polish

The Phasemation EA-350's performance is arguably better suited to legato notes than aggressive, attacking ones. However, rather than flagging this as a lack of dynamics or immediacy, it just means that an awful lot of acoustic music in particular sounds extremely natural in its hands. Having a very low noise floor helps this Phasemation to unearth oodles of detail in an unforced fashion and if there's a hint of polish on a recording you know all about it. Likewise instruments that can sound hard such as brass are easier to enjoy, which is another way of saying that they are beautifully relaxed.



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Phasemation EA-350



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» The timing side of this preamplifier is perfect for many types of music, and the midrange means that voices are superb, female ones in particular. The tone and image it delivers with all manner of voices is very strong, three dimensional in fact, which makes contrasts between recordings more clear without emphasising shortcomings. Adding the PP-2000 to the mix takes the sense of ease up to the next level, Ry Cooder's *Paris, Texas* sounded glorious with huge scale and an acoustic guitar that was almost real. There is more emphasis on nuance and fine detail with this MC in the system, the low noise design helps to extract all the quiet parts of any piece and these help to form a more complete picture of the recording.

It's articulate too, if a little dynamically understated. Chasing the Dragon's *Mendelsohn Octets* made a very good case for this presentation however, this piece sounded very close to the original performance and the string tone was phenomenally natural. All too often solid-state electronics add a fine edge to the music that they reproduce, this can sound good with a lot of music but with orchestral pieces it's very hard to get the degree of softness that you hear in the concert hall. The Phasemation pairing gets a lot closer than most in this respect and the scale it delivers fills the room.

Likewise, the Rain Tree Crow album by former members of Japan delivers fabulous atmosphere and wide dynamic range via this combination of transducer and amplifier. I love the way that nothing is exaggerated for effect and that the bass isn't overblown, this means that when the really low notes come along, they have all the more impact.

The Phasemation EA-350's presentation is distinctively Japanese and at first hearing may seem too restrained

and relaxed for western ears. But the more you listen, the more it draws you in and makes a very good case for itself. Perhaps most importantly, it is extremely good at getting out of the way and letting the music deliver the message. Those looking for the sublime in their record collection will find an awful lot to like in these components. +

### Technical specifications

**Type** Solid-state, MM/MC phono stage with balanced inputs.

**Phono inputs** Two pairs single-ended/balanced (via RCA jacks/ XLR connectors), one pair single-ended (via RCA jacks)

**Analogue outputs** One pair single-ended (via RCA jacks)

**Input Sensitivity** MM 2.5mV, MC 0.13mV

**Input impedance** MC 1.5–40 Ohm, MM 47kOhm

**Input capacitance** not specified

**Output impedance** 47 Ohms

**Output level** 200 mV (1kHz)

**RIAA linearity** +/- 0.5dB, 20Hz–20kHz

**Distortion** Not specified

**Signal to Noise Ratio** Input equivalent MM -1120dBV, MC -140dBV

**Dimensions (H×W×D)** 93 × 430 × 362mm

**Weight** 8.8kg

**Price** £4,495, \$7,100

**Manufacturer** Phasemation

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