

iFi Audio micro iPhono2

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HARRY TRIES OUT THE iPHONO2 FROM iFi, WHICH COMBINES LOADS OF FEATURES WITH A LOW PRICE

A spin-off from Abbingdon Music Research, iFi Audio has a range of diminutive components, including this versatile phono stage, at relatively inexpensive prices. It might be the least costly phono stage in this group, but the *iPhono2* has the longest list of features. Build quality of the pocket-sized extruded aluminium box is superb, with printed legends to help understand the comprehensive options. To assist miniaturisation, the circuitry uses op-amps and surface-mount devices.

Underneath, three eight-way DIP switches set cartridge load, gain, and one of four minor variations on the standard RIAA curve – standard RIAA, IEC (additional LF warp filter); then the same two curves modified to raise ultrasonic HF response ('eRIAA'), to compensate for the so-called Neumann fourth-pole filter. The idea of adding ultrasonic lift is contentious, as experts contend that cutting lathes did not include the filter for which this tries to compensate.

The *iPhono2* accommodates both moving-magnet and moving-coil types, with a range of gain settings: 36dB or 48dB for MM; 60dB or 72dB for MC. Load impedance may be switched between 22, 33, 75, 100, 250, 1000ohms and 47kohm. The third switch adjusts capacitance: 100, 200, 300, 400 or 500pF. Two separate pairs of phono inputs are at one end. The other end has a single pair of phono outputs, an inlet for 15V DC power, and a three-way toggle that selects between RIAA, 'Columbia' and 'Decca' equalisations.

While most mono LP would have been cut with one of these three common curves, iFi Audio also suspects that large record companies continued to press their LPs with non-RIAA curves until well after standardisation to RIAA in the mid-1950s. The actual time constants used for the labeled 'Columbia' and 'Decca' settings are unknown, as iFi Audio was not willing to disclose the technical characteristics.

The *iPhono2* comes neatly packaged, and includes a separate power plug, a pair of simple phono leads, stick-on feet, setup instructions, plus a baby screwdriver for the DIP switches. The supplied *iPower* adapter is an 18W switch-mode plug-top supply, custom-made for iFi and claiming better performance than both regular SMPS and audiophile linear types. While the *iPhono2* worked quietly enough when using its own *iPower* supply, some PSU interference (a low-level but high-pitched buzz) was

sometimes audible through other phono stages, so *iPhono2/iPower* was disconnected from the mains when listening with other amplifiers.

Sound Quality

The iFi *iPhono2* was set up for moving-coil use, using 60dB gain and usually the standard RIAA equalisation. Background noise was subjectively low, although very faint mains hum breakthrough proved impossible to remove.

The presentation was colourful (in contrast to the grey or somewhat flat sound of lesser models), and worked well with classical material in particular. Fast and dynamic orchestral pieces would zip by with ease, such as a lively version of the Shostakovich *Piano Concerto 2* with John Ogdon assaulting the keyboard. However, crescendos could reveal some dynamic constriction.

Pop and rock let the iFi show its tight control, as it was good at marshalling strands of a song into a coherent whole. However, a tendency to meld disparate sounds together was apparent too, so that denser mixes gave a thicker 'sound wall'.

Tonal balance was reasonably neutral, albeit a bit light in the bass and thickened in the midband. However, there was still deep extension into extreme low frequencies, as witnessed on some classical recordings with their traffic and train rumblings, but the shape of bass instruments was somewhat 2D, rather than fleshed-out.

Soundstaging was also where this low cost unit lost out. The stage was wide enough within the speaker boundaries, but there was little outside, and depth was conspicuously foreshortened. That delicate element of height was another clue that a relatively modest phono stage was in place, with the *iPhono2* revealing a somewhat letterbox-like stereo effect – wide but quite limited in stature.

Surface noise was dealt with fairly kindly. Impulsive pops do sound rather loud, but disappear in short order. Continuous groove wear, however, had a tendency to meld into the music waveform, rather than stand apart where it can be better ignored by the ear.

Conclusions

The iFi describes music well for its budget, losing out on low-level details rather than adding unwanted coloration. While the key outlines of instruments are in place, subtle flourishes that distinguish between musicians, for example, are not so apparent. Small it may be, but the *iPhono2* can make such a big and surprisingly faithful sound that it earns a place among the heavyweights gathered here.

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Manufacturer's Specification

Gain	36-72dB
Output impedance	<100ohms
Power consumption	<5W
Size (WxDxH)	5.8x15.7x2.8cms
Weight	0.2kg
Price	£495

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