



iFi Audio Zen Phono

CHRIS KELLY FINDS HIMSELF DELIGHTED WITH THIS LITTLE PHONO STAGE – AND AMAZED AT WHAT IT CAN DO FOR THE GIVEAWAY PRICE OF JUST £149

Sometimes we can get carried away by the irresistible allure of ‘high end’ equipment, just as a motoring journalist would probably rather review a Ferrari than a Ford. Given that only a few can actually afford these objects of desire, all we are doing is offering a chance to dream. Meanwhile, back here in the real world, there are lots of wonderful pieces of equipment which might get overlooked as we scramble for those Ferrari keys. I have recently been lucky enough to play host to just such a design

The diminutive package made a refreshing change from the back-wrenching boxes which usually show up. Unpacking the £149 iFi Audio Zen Phono, I was immediately struck by the build quality of the lozenge shaped enclosure, the logo picked out in bark blue on top of the one-piece steel grey casing.

The brushed aluminium front panel is slightly recessed, with a power button on the left and the infrasonic filter button on the right, while in the middle are four LEDs, for MM, MC High, MC Low and MC Very Low. The back panel, which sits flush with the edge of the housing, is also brushed aluminium and houses six sockets, an earthing post and gain

switch, with four positions corresponding to the different cartridge sensitivities available. From the left the sockets are a 4.4mm Balanced output, right and left gold-plated RCA output sockets, and to the right of the earthing post, a similar pair of RCA input sockets for connection of the turntable. The last is for inserting the supplied wall-wart 5V DC power supply.

Installation was quick and easy. I plugged in my Linn T-cable and the earthing lead on the right, and a pair of Tellurium Q Black Diamond RCA cables were run from the Phono to my amplifier. Yes, I know – rather exotic cables for such an inexpensive box, but I thought to myself, ‘why not?’

My Linn Sondek LP12 currently has a Goldring 1042 MM cartridge installed, which seems like a good exemplar of the level of cartridge which a typical Zen Phono buyer might be using. I left the Gain switch in position one, for MM, and with my ear close to the grille on my Harbeth C7ES XD loudspeaker, I was met with absolute silence – always a good start with a phono stage.

I'd prepared a stack of albums to play through the iFi, with a selection of classic rock, jazz, classical and more modern pop recordings. I started with one of my usual suspects, the MFSL pressing of Bob Dylan's *Blood On The Tracks*, as I use the first track on side one, 'Tangled Up In Blue', as one of my standard test pieces. I lowered the tonearm and retreated to my listening chair. Straightaway, the sound was crisp, detailed and punchy, with very good delineation between the acoustic guitars, and Dylan's voice projected forward in the expansive soundstage.

Bass was fast and tuneful, and small details with in the percussion were very well presented. The track can sound a little thin, but through the iFi there was weight and just the right degree of pace rhythm and timing to keep me absolutely engrossed, to the extent that rather than one track I played both sides of the album, and was totally engrossed in the music.

Right on the money

Switching to another perennial Kelly favourite, I cued up a 1970s pressing of Pink Floyd's *Meddle* – once again the iFi seemed to be right on the money. The opening of 'One Of These Days' saw it giving weight and bite to Roger Waters' excellent bass riff, and the rather sinister vocal line 'One of these days I am going to cut you into tiny pieces' was very clear, for better or for worse! Over the following days, I ran through quite a playlist, and in every case the music seemed to flow effortlessly.

Unusually on a product at this level, the Zen Phono has an infrasonic filter, the user guide telling us that it 'will intelligently detect whether a subsonic frequency is a warp or a bass note. It will eliminate the warps and let the bass and mid-range frequencies pass through untouched. Therefore it will not affect sound quality.' All of which, it transpired, was true: the bass was rich and plentiful on every record that I played.

Switching out the Goldring and installing my GoldNote Machiavelli Red moving coil cartridge, I put the Zen Phono into MC High mode. Choosing records somewhat randomly from my collection, it did a fine job with everything I played, from an original UK pressing of Bruce Springsteen's *The River* on CBS, via the wonderful Anne-Sophie Mutter playing the Bruch and Mendelssohn violin concertos with the Berliner Philharmoniker under Herbert von Karajan, to Iron Maiden's *Book of Souls*.

There were finesse and power when required, and every record I played sounded more than good enough at least to my ears. True, playing the same records through my own phono stage, at about eight times the asking price of the Zen Phono, delivered a fuller sound, a little better at the frequency extremes, but eight times better? I think not.

The iFi Zen Phono sits at the budget end of the spectrum – think Skoda rather than Porsche – but goes about its work quietly and without fuss, and will make a fine purchase for the music-lover looking to dip a toe into vinyl replay. It's at least as good as the moving magnet stage built into my £5000 integrated amp, but can also do justice to one of the many mid-priced moving coil cartridges on the market today. True you cannot fine tune the settings, but the Zen Phono's designer has chosen well on the listener's behalf. This is indeed a fine little device, and its current UK selling price represents something rare these days, a bona fide bargain.



Specification

iFi Audio Zen Phono	
Price	£149
Inputs	MM/MC (with adjustable loading and gain)
Gain	36dB (MM); 48/60/72dB (MC)
Input Loading	47Kohm (MM); 110 ohm, Kohm, 47Kohm (MC)
Outputs	Unbalanced RCA's. balanced (4.4mm Pentaconn)
Dimensions (WxHxD)	16x3.55x11.3cm

ifi-audio.com

