

Time machine

It's not every day that a serious sounding new phono stage is launched, but Timestep's new T-01 MC is just this reckons **David Price**

An unashamedly hobbyist company, Timestep is run by the affable Dave Cawley, who designed his first phono stage in 1981, and more recently has been involved in the manufacture and distribution of the ANT Audio Kora phono stage. This prompted him to produce the T-01 MC, and it's fair to say the two aren't philosophically that different.

It's an unashamedly minimalist, discrete-transistor affair using just a sprinkling of FETs (field effect transistors) in a fully discrete dual-mono zero negative feedback design. Great attention to detail has been shown in the design and its execution, and the T-01 MC features high-quality gold-plated, PTFE insulated input sockets, Dale input loading resistor and WIMA polypropylene RIAA capacitors. There's a ground lift switch that allows the audio circuitry to be connected or disconnected from the mains earth while still ensuring the chassis is completely earthed.

Unlike some rivals, the T-01 MC has fixed gain and input loading settings, but bespoke input loading can be specified and altered by Timestep any time subsequently. Although some might think this a pain, it does make for short signal paths – any switching will ultimately degrade sound, and more so over time. Specified input sensitivity is 0.35mV (for 0dBV output), making it fine for most modern moving coils such as the Lyra Delos I used. Though it's not particularly stylish, overall build quality is very good.

Sound quality

In a nutshell, the T-01 MC has a simple, direct, honest sound that doesn't gild the lily like some tube designs (the Icon Audio PS2 springs to mind), nor does it make things sound more mechanical and regimented than they should – such as the Trichord Dino NC. Rather, the Timestep treads a careful balance between neutrality and euphony, never quite getting to the latter, but somehow always giving just a little bit more than the former.

For example, The Cure's *A Forest* comes over with disarming clarity, almost as though we are plugged directly into the output of the mixing desk. Bass has real power and grip, yet is possessed of an urgency that propels the song along with gusto. Further up the scale, the midband is wide and tightly defined, with an excellent front to back soundstage. It's not quite as wide as the PS2, but it is certainly more precise in the location of instruments in the mix. Up top, treble is crisp and clear, with a good deal of atmosphere. The clever thing is the way the Timestep weaves all this together on-the-fly, providing a wonderfully rhythmic and 'direct' feel to the music.

The same goes for Scritti Politti's *Boom! There She Was* – an altogether busier and more fastidious recording. The T-01 MC proves itself to be a wonderfully fast and fluid performer following the powerful synthesiser bass runs with alacrity, and ramming home the track's dynamics to full effect. It proves very neutral in tonal terms, capturing the excellence of



DETAILS

PRODUCT: Timestep T-01 MC

ORIGIN: UK

TYPE: Moving coil phono stage

WEIGHT: 2.2kg

DIMENSIONS: (WxHxD) 445 x 48 x 310mm

FEATURES:

- Moving coil input

- Switchable ground lift

- Quoted input sensitivity: 0.35mV (for 0dBV output)

- Quoted input impedance: 100ohm, 1nF (customer-specifiable)

DISTRIBUTOR: Timestep

TELEPHONE: 01803 833366

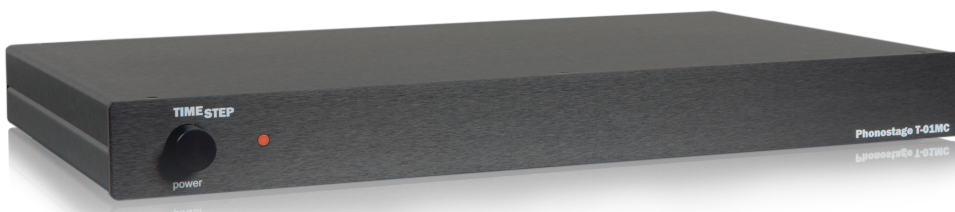
WEBSITE: time-step.com

this analogue recording to best effect, letting those digital synth parts chime like bells. However, there is a slight lack of sweetness in the upper mid and treble; it's only very subtle but compared with the Icon Audio, for example, you can hear the hi-hats sound just a little too crisp, and there's a fraction less space around the elements in the mix. This is more proof that – at this price – you can't have it all!

The shuffling soul of Donald Byrd's *Streelady* shows the Timestep to best effect – it's a very warm seventies analogue recording and the T-01 MC digs very deep inside, pulling out masses of detail and presenting it in an unrelentingly rhythmic and dynamic way. This phono stage has a good deal of smoothness and grace, yet it's as punk rock as they come when tasked to get the joint jumping. Once again, its super-taut, tuneful bass drives the song along, laying the foundations for the wide and deep soundstage to work its magic. Dynamically excellent, this is one of the most expressive phono stages you'll see before you start spending silly money.

Conclusion

An excellent product, this is one of the very best designs at or near its price and will make most people wonder if they could possibly want more. Its powerful, gripping yet melodious and musical sound is a joy across a vast range of programme material, and the unit soon 'dissolves' into your system, letting you concentrate on (and enjoy) the records you're playing. Its closest competition is ANT Audio's Kora 3T Ltd, with which it shares many sonic traits; ultimately the latter is just a touch sweeter and more silky, if a little less punchy. As such, the new Timestep T-01 MC is a very strong contender indeed, and deserves to be at the top of your audition list ●



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

LIKE: Wide, deep soundstage; taut, deep bass; fine build and finish

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

DISLIKE: Lacks the romance and space of some rival tube designs

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

WE SAY: Wonderfully powerful, grippy, detailed, musical sound; impressive build quality and finish

FEATURES

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★