

Timestep T-01MC phono stage

by Alan Sircom



Although it's easy to follow the alternate line of reasoning, high-end audio is supposed to be all about the sound quality. Inch-thick front panels and glitzy finishes are fine, but the end result is supposed to be "what it sounds like", and not "what it looks like". The Timestep T-01MC follows a well-trodden British tradition of questioning the need for bling.

Timestep is a British brand best known for its aftermarket power supplies for direct drive Technics turntables, and has engendered something of a cult following among the online SL-1200 fan club as a result. This is Timestep's first phonostage – although Dave Cawley has been building phono stages for friends for decades, apparently. The T-01MC is an all-discrete, FET-only, no-overall-feedback, dual-mono in a single box moving coil phono stage.

Timestep has a love of fine components, on the inside at least. The input matching resistors are high-grade Dale models, the caps in the RIAA equalisation stage are from WIMA and the FETs themselves are hand selected before being placed in one of two blocks of eight. Inside the case, there's a shielded custom toroidal transformer at one side of the full-sized case while the main (only) PCB takes up the back third of the box. Those who get all huffy about such things will undoubtedly get all huffy about this being a box of mostly air, conveniently forgetting that this is a perfect layout to help keep any vibration and/or hum fields from the transformer away from those sensitive traces on the PCB. Shared Power aside, this is a true dual mono layout – you could almost

break apart the PCB into its three separate stages (well, you could... but you'd void the warranty fairly comprehensively). It takes a while to come on song, and it's best to give it a 20 minute wake-up call before a serious listening session.

By the infinitely adjustable standards found on many phono stages, this is almost pathologically minimalist. It's possible to have the T-01MC set for something other than the 0.35mV sensitivity, 100ohm impedance standard 'MC' specification, but as a factory fit. In fairness, most modern carts perform well to this broad spec. Granted, my again Ortofon MC7500 might require more flexibility than the T-01MC has on offer, but with less brutal loads (like the Benz-Micro Gullwing SLR, mounted in an SME 10) the Timestep performed perfectly. Otherwise, there's a button on the front. A little LED glows when it's powered up. There's a ground-lift switch on the rear if you have a problem with hum and might benefit from a floating earth (while the case remains fully earthed for safety purposes). There's two good phono sockets for left input and output, and another pair for right input and output with an earth tag in the middle. That's it. ▶

▶ The pithy way of describing the T-01MC is, “if beauty is only skin deep, this is built inside out”. This is not a show-off’s audio device. Not only in the plain, none-more-black exterior, but in a sound that is the opposite of the bright and flashy sound that tends to attract immediately, but ultimately repels over time. Anyone who criticises vinyl for having a high-level of hiss simply hasn’t heard just how little extraneous sound comes off the T-01MC. It’s almost completely silent in use, even when used with what could be considered a torture chamber for hiss – a passive preamp. It’s not noiseless, but you will need to crank the volume to the max to hear much in the way of hiss at all.

The mark of a truly great phono stage is how it deals with the bumps in the road: the pops and crackles that can plague some well-worn (or in eBay language... ‘mint condition’) albums. There seem to be three possible outcomes; a loud ‘thwump’ like someone dropped a sack of potatoes between the speakers, a slow ‘pop’ that is seemingly not as loud but more musically intrusive because it seems to sit in with the recording, and then a rapid ‘tick’ that arrives and decays so fast, it barely intrudes. The T-01MC takes the latter option where possible.

More than this though, it sounds good too. It’s got a distinctly rich and full sound, but not to the point of being too rich and full; it’s a vinyl gourmand – not a glutton. These qualities made the Timestep very easy to live with irrespective of the music used; too many turntable reviews fall to the jazzier end of the spectrum, and in fairness it makes a fine fist of something like Miles Davis’ *Birth of the Cool*. But this is giving the phono stage a soft landing – throw *Surfer Rosa* by the Pixies at the phono stage and it’s a different matter. Fortunately, the T-01MC has the dynamic reserves to cope, taking the loud/soft performance in its stride.

I have two current ‘fave’ phono stages, which I like for entirely different reasons; the relevant one here is the Pass Labs XP-25 (the other being the RCM THERIAA). Despite the fairly vast price differential between the Pass and the

Timestep and the fact one is an adjustable two-box phono preamp and the other one isn’t, I found these two had more in common than you might expect. They both have intrinsic warmth of midrange and breadth of soundstage that is extremely alluring, and both have that absence of noise floor that makes you wonder if you are listening to vinyl. The Pass Labs has better bass, a touch more ‘romance’ to the sound and ultimately makes that soundstage bigger, but the comparison highlights just how fine the T-01MC really is.

One of the joys of high-end is finding diamonds in the rough – those products that deliver high-end performance without an asking price that does a lot of asking. The Timestep T-01MC is just such a diamond in the rough. I hope its bluff exterior and lack of adjustment doesn’t preclude its use in the kind of systems it deserves to be used with, and as such comes highly recommended. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Dual mono MC only solid-state phono stage

Inputs/outputs: gold phono sockets, earth tag

Switchable fixed and floating ground

Gain: 67dB

Input range: 0.15-0.6mV

Input sensitivity for 0dBV output: 0.35mV

Input impedance: 100 ohm

Output impedance: 600 ohm

Dimensions (WxHxD): 44.5x5x28.5cm

Weight: 2.2kg

Price: £995

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