

Black magic

If you seek a serious sounding entry-level phono stage, look no further than Edwards Audio's Apprentice MM says **David Price**

Over the past five years or so, we've seen more phono stages launched than there are actual LP records in existence. Okay, I'm exaggerating for effect here, but you get my drift – there's been a procession of the things, one which seems to get longer by the day. To that, we can now add this – the Apprentice MM from Talk Electronics sub-brand Edwards Audio.

This little unit is, however, a touch more interesting than many, because most phono stages seem to be pitched around or beyond the £1,000 mark. The Apprentice however sells for the princely sum of £89.95, which means it's almost in a gang of one at this price – there are no others around aside from the NAD PP2i (£95) and the Cambridge Audio 651P (£120).

The Edwards Audio is an essay in minimalism. First, it is very small – measuring just 114.5mm long it's one-quarter the width of your average amplifier. For me, this is a good thing – phono stages should be heard and not seen, and if they are pretty enough to give pride of place in your equipment rack the manufacturer has obviously spent far too much time on styling and not enough on the all-important component quality.

Its circuitry fills up its casing's interior space like five people in a Mini – which means the power supply has to sit elsewhere. That's why it's a separate, and quite large, DC regulated, single-rail, switched-mode

design built into a plug. The electronics in the Apprentice are closely derived from the Edwards Audio MM1, using similar circuit topology with passive treble and active bass equalisation. A second stage amplifier buffers the equalisation network and ensure a low output impedance.

The 1kg casing itself is obviously built down to a price, but is well built down to that price. Instead of an extrusion, a bent steel 'U' provides a safe place for the circuitry to sit, and this is topped off with a 3mm black acrylic front panel complete with red power LED inset. Round the back, as well as DC in and ground terminals, you get one pair of RCA phono inputs, and one pair of line-level outputs. The sockets are gold-plated and the whole unit is done to a surprisingly high standard considering the lowly price.

Sound quality

The press release claims "a near silent noise floor" and says it provides "40dB of gain"; my ears told me that both assertions are broadly correct. I'd prepared myself for the decidedly unpleasant and onerous task of reviewing a cheap phono stage but from the first bars of Cafe Jacques' cover of *There Ain't No Love In The Heart of the City*, I'm really rather taken aback. The Apprentice MM certainly doesn't seem a newcomer, either to the art of amplifying small signals or manifesting them in a

musical way. Indeed, the wee thing proves very crisp, clean and open – with absolutely none of the nasties I'd feared I'd hear!

Tonally, it's textbook solid-state, but in a good way – which is to say that it is even and doesn't accentuate the bass, midband or treble. The upper mid and treble is decently lit, but it isn't harsh in the way some rival designs can be. Paired to a Goldring G1042 moving magnet cartridge on an Audio Technica AT-LP1240USB turntable, the Edwards Audio phono box reaches into the recording and brings it to life. The old Cafe Jacques song can sound quite dirge-like, but this phono stage excavates deep into the mix and mines loads of detail – all the instruments sit tidily in the recorded acoustic, projecting out of the speakers boldly. Vocals are delicate and expressive, yet never grate on the ear.

Next I feed this phono stage with some classic jazz funk from Freeez, and *Southern Freeez* comes across as another unexpected delight. Rhythmically it is more subtle than many, and while it manages to capture the funky bass guitar playing and powerful, machine-gun hi-hat and snare work, it also signposts those all-important spaces between with great alacrity. This brings out the lovely floaty rhythm of the song, something that some phono preamps that have an extra zero on the end of their price tag struggle to even come close to matching.

Fast but certainly not furious, sharp but not grating, punchy yet not bruising – this is a great budget phono stage, that gives you a real window into the recording that's totally unexpected at this price. Built as well as it needs to be, it is very quiet in use and lets all that music in your record grooves flow forth with tremendous elan. A big surprise from such a small box then, and highly recommended accordingly ●



DETAILS

PRODUCT
Edwards Audio Apprentice MM

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
Phono stage

WEIGHT
1kg

DIMENSIONS (WxHxD)
114.5 x 47.5 x 160mm

FEATURES

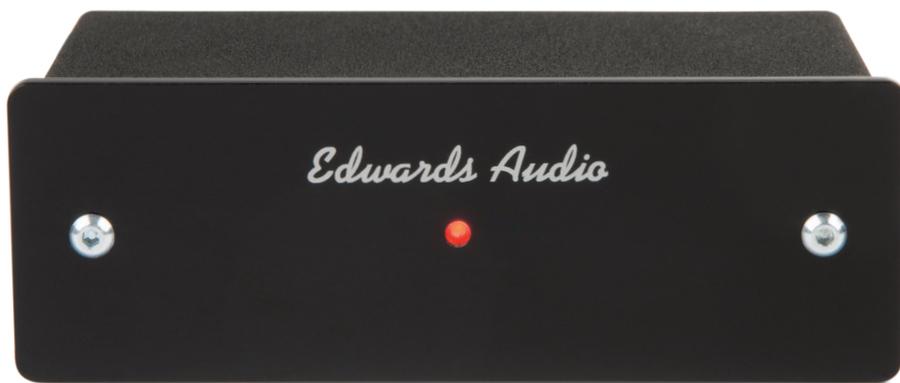
- Short signal paths
- Switched mode power supply
- Quoted input loading MM: 47K with 150pF
- Quoted S/N ratio (MM, 5mV, A Wtd): -83dB

DISTRIBUTOR
Talk Electronics

TELEPHONE
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WEBSITE
talkelectronics.com

Forget about how it looks, stick it out of sight and be amazed by how good it sounds



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★ **LIKE:** Super clean and musical sound – and refined too; fine build

VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Nothing that we can think of at the price

BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★ **WESAY:** A superb entry-level phono stage that's well worth auditioning

FACILITIES
★★★★★

OVERALL

