



Staging a comeback

Hegel's change of stance when it comes to phono stages has to be seen as vinylistas' gain. The only disappointment in the case of the V10, is that it didn't come to the decision earlier

It's 1964, and offstage at a folk festival in Newport, a tense Robert Allen Zimmerman makes the final adjustments to his guitar as The Weavers' Ronnie Gilbert announces to an excitable crowd: "And here he is... take him, you know him, he's yours". As changes of direction go, Dylan's decision to ditch his acoustic guitar in favour of an electric one wouldn't on the face of it appear to be particularly risky, but history suggests otherwise. All of which brings us rather clumsily to Hegel and its recent about face concerning phono stages. While its assertion that it had no intention of ever producing the components and then going ahead and doing so never really caused the same howls of derision or dissenting boos as those first few chords of *Like A Rolling Stone* might have done, the company risked a very public humiliation.

The change of heart was based on a combination of market forces and pragmatism – namely, its analogue engineers were left twiddling their thumbs due to the company's focus on digital fare, while the continued robustness of the vinyl revival meant it would be churlish not to reconsider the decision. Dylan proved that an about face can work (in the end), but will Hegel enjoy the same success? Fortunately, company founder Bent Holter had designed a phono amp for personal use around 15 years earlier and it's from this that the V10 takes its cue. Able to cater for both moving-magnet and moving-coil cartridges, it offers unbalanced inputs alongside unbalanced RCA and balanced XLR outputs. Power comes courtesy of an external PSU that's been custom designed for the preamp. Slightly bulkier than your average wall-wart variant, it sports

▶ DETAILS
PRODUCT
 Hegel V10
ORIGIN
 Norway
TYPE
 MM/MC phono preamplifier
WEIGHT
 2.2kg
DIMENSIONS
 (WxHxD)
 210 x 60 x 280mm
FEATURES
 • MM/MC input
 • Adjustable DIP switches
 • Inputs: unbalanced RCA; balanced XLR
DISTRIBUTOR
 Hegel Music Systems AS
TELEPHONE
 07917 685759
WEBSITE
 hegel.com

two separate 18V feeds and comes with a Y-shaped lead with dual plugs that neatly fit into a pair of recessed sockets in a void underneath the chassis. The void cunningly provides a physical barrier between the PSU regulation in the front of the amp and the audio/RIAA circuitry towards the rear in an effort to keep unwelcome interference to a minimum. As is so often the case when it comes to phono stages, concentrating on getting the settings right pays dividends when it comes to performance, and some adjustments are better left to your hi-fi dealer – but more on this in a moment. There are two rows of DIP switches – ten per channel no less – for matching the gain and loading requirements of your cartridge of choice. Typically these are small and rather fiddly, meaning that those with chubbier, clumsy fingers might want to employ

the assistance of someone with more nimble and dexterous digits. The first two activate a subsonic filter operating below 20Hz, while the third and fourth provide an added boost of +5, +10 or +12dB to the standard MM and MC gains. The latter are specified as 34dB and 54dB, respectively, when using the unbalanced outputs or 40dB and 60dB via the balanced outs. The fifth, sixth and seventh switches are used for selecting load capacitances of 100, 147, 200, 220, 247, 320, 420 or 467pF for the MM input. The eight and ninth switches select 100 or 300ohm input for the impedance of the MC stage. Last, but by no means least, the final switch

The V10 impressively manages to separate all the disparate layers of noise

toggles between MM and MC phono inputs according to your preferred cartridge of choice. These settings are then further supplemented by a series of internal controls and links that can be used to add an additional 6dB gain boost to both MM and MC sections as well as extending MC loading options from 50 to 500ohm. This is the point where the expertise of your hi-fi dealer is probably best utilised unless you really know what you're doing. The complexity of all the different switch combinations (illustrated in an at times bewildering table on the underside of the V10) combined with the fiddly nature of the DIPs makes it all too easy to inadvertently flick the



The tiny DIP switches include settings for gain, loading and subsonic filtering

switch adjacent to the one you actually require. For example, while there are separate MM and MC inputs and corresponding switches to activate them, the MC headamp connects directly into the MM section – meaning it's not possible to have connections to both sockets simultaneously. As previously highlighted, your best option to avoid bewilderment, stress and frustration is to employ the help of a seasoned professional before use.

Sound quality

Happily, any anxiety brought on by the potential befuddlement of setup quickly falls away once the V10 is up and running. With our Clearaudio MC Essence cartridge called into action, it becomes clear that Hegel's hot streak (last experienced with its stunning H95 network attached integrated amplifier in *HFC 468*) is set to continue here. The V10 is impressively quiet with background

noise and hum notable only by their absence, and vinyl roar and surface noise are subtly suppressed leaving fine detail to blossom. Even though the overall balance is on the smooth side, the V10 is certainly not short of transparency. This means that while cymbals and percussion steer well clear of any sense of hardness or sibilance – actually sounding slightly softer than expected – they still come across as clean and distinct. It's difficult to think of any rival offerings at this price able to so deftly juggle smooth presentation with such precise insight. Equally impressive is the sense of space and ambience that's so gracefully revealed from familiar recordings. Front-to-back depth is very good and regardless of whether performances are live or studio based, each instrument, performer and backing vocalist is clearly pinpointed within the soundstage while remaining easy to focus on.

IN SIGHT

- 1 Balanced XLR output (right channel)
- 2 Unbalanced RCA output (right channel)
- 3 Unbalanced MM input (right channel)
- 4 Grounding post
- 5 DIP switches adjust input loading and overall gain
- 6 Unbalanced MC input (left channel)

The only real downside in this respect is that there could be a little more solidity centre stage as some more potent vocalists tend to sound edgy and come across as a little bit more diffuse. Malia and Boris Blank's *Raising Venus* being a case in point as Malia is pushed a little further back into the soundstage than we're used to – forcing us to adjust our listening position to restore her immediacy.

Each instrument and performer is clearly pinpointed within the soundstage

The bass guitar on Tal Wilkenfeld's *Haunted Love* displays an appealing ease and fluidity to masterfully underpin the vocals. This can sound too stark and uninvolved elsewhere, but the V10 appears to knit the two together to make for a more captivating listen. Moving to the lower frequencies shows it is more than capable of going deep while remaining tuneful. The backing synth bass of Ava Max's *Who's*



If you are looking for the great flexibility on offer with the V10 but are on a tighter budget then there's little to beat Pro-Ject's £625 Tube Box DS2 Phono. It handles two decks, has two outputs and all its gain and loading options can be dialed-up from the front fascia. Above all, the sublime valve-y sound is an absolute knock-out. If you've more cash burning a hole then Parasound's superb JC3 Halo Jr (HFC 452) sets the standard – and more – at £2,000. This is as clean and true as you'll hear below £3,000!



Laughing Now bounds along with joyous pace and impact, with each note clearly delineated from the next. Despite being a relatively simple track, it's one that has tripped up many rival stages in the past.

Moving on to something altogether more raucous and challenging, Corey Taylor's *CMFT Must Be Stopped* is a riotous explosion of guitars and at times seemingly primal shouting. The V10 impressively manages to separate all the disparate layers of noise here, but somehow remains a touch over polite in doing so. Similarly, noisy material continues the theme, with

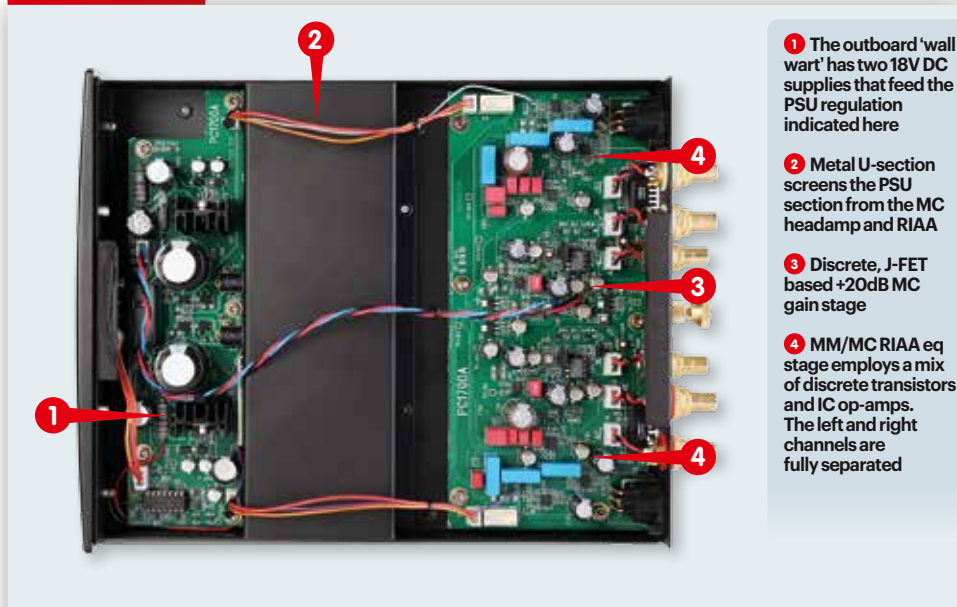
the Hegel rarely being caught out and revealing mastery of separation and detail retrieval, but a reluctance to let its hair down and really have fun.

This see-through smoothness is broadly continued across both MM and MC inputs – something that isn't always a given on rival offerings – meaning that whether highlighting the top-end clarity of Ortofon's 2M Black (HFC 434) or the extra depth and imaging ability of Clearaudio's MC Essence, it's a very impressive performer across the board.

Conclusion

It might have been a long time coming, but on the evidence of the V10's performance Hegel's about face when it comes to phono preamplifiers was the right decision. Yes, it's fiddly to setup and ensuring that you select the right combination of DIP switches for your cartridge isn't the most intuitive of procedures, but that's perhaps more to do with the generosity of adjustments and features on offer than anything else. The real headline here is that with a wide range of different cartridges – both moving-coils and magnets – the results are consistently impressive. Effortlessly smooth, gloriously insightful and impeccably voiced for a crystal-clear performance, the V10 is an absolute triumph. Clearly there's much to be said for changing your mind now and again ●

IN SIGHT



- 1 The outboard 'wall wart' has two 18V DC supplies that feed the PSU regulation indicated here
- 2 Metal U-section screens the PSU section from the MC headamp and RIAA
- 3 Discrete, J-FET based +20dB MC gain stage
- 4 MM/MC/RIAA eq stage employs a mix of discrete transistors and IC op-amps. The left and right channels are fully separated

MIXING THE OLD WITH THE NEW

Hegel describes the V10 as a brand-new take on an old technology and sites its 30 years of experience designing discrete transistor circuits as being key to its success. Ultra-low-noise discrete J-FET transistors have been employed for the moving-coil headamp, which offers a 20dB (x10) boost prior to the shared MM/MC RIAA equalisation stage. The latter is based around a mix of discrete transistors and selected IC op-amps with 'audiophile grade' capacitors – all part and parcel of the V10's 'sound tuning'. The linear power supply, meanwhile, incorporates a large, custom-designed E-core transformer placed in its own housing to diminish the possibility of interference, and connected by two flying leads to the underside of the V10.

When using an MM cart, the capacitance can be increased between 100 and 467pF, while for MC pick-ups the impedance can be adjusted to between 33ohm and 550ohm or fixed at 47kohm. With both MM and MC, the overall gain can be increased by +5dB, +10dB or +12dB, matching the output of your other sources. Rather neatly, should you forget to turn it off at the end of your listening session, auto standby steps in and does the job for you.

The higher the phono stage's gain setting, the lower the input headroom – here the V10's maximum +73dB MC gain represents a boost of x4,467, so even with its massive 24V (balanced) output, it only requires an input of 5.4mV to clip the output stage. All of which underlines the importance of selecting the optimum gain for your cart.

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



LIKE: Smooth, transparent precision

VALUE FOR MONEY



DISLIKE: It can be a touch reserved

BUILD QUALITY



WESAY: Looking for a phono preamp that will reveal previously undiscovered details from your vinyl? Look no further

FEATURES



OVERALL

