

Audio Hungary Qualiton Phono Preamp Review; Transcend the Electronic Listening Experience

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Last year at Rocky Mountain Audio Fest was the first time that I got to listen to the **Qualiton** amps from **Audio Hungary**, although I did have their entry-level **A20i integrated amp** in for a review just prior to leaving for the show. Then, at AXPONA, Becky and I had the privilege of interviewing Laszlo Fabian and his son, Andras, the owners of Audio Hungary, and they told us the story of their company, which you can [read here](#).

In the interview, Lázló Fabian said that analog nearly died, at least in Europe, in the 1990's, but they saw an opportunity in 2014 to help bring it back by purchasing a nearly bankrupt manufacturing company. "We noticed that people would like to go back to the past, and analog is much better than digital." Andras Fabian added, "There is a procedure to playing an LP, and holding it to put it on feels good."

In very short time, Audio Hungary has managed to create quite a presence in the high-end audio market in Europe, and now with **Well Pleased AV** as their importer, they are growing here in North America. One of the reasons for their growth is the uncompromising quality they put into their products. In fact, this [recent video](#) filmed at their company's facilities shows something of the quality they put into their products.

So, I was happy when I was asked to review their phono preamp. I already knew from my experience with the Qualiton A20i integrated amp, that the phono preamp should sound good. In fact, I found that the A20i not only sounded great for the money, it also offered an engaging, emotional and musical experience not often found even in much more expensive amplifiers. And I expected similar quality with their phono preamp.

Description

In the product description on their website, they describe the Qualiton Phono as *"A premium category vacuum tube phono stage with extremely low noise and distortion level, made for complementing the series Qualiton. On its input, the appliance can receive low-level signals coming from moving magnet cartridges. Optionally at extra charge, with the help of the changeable card at the rear panel, the circuit can be re-configured in this way, the appliance will be able to process signals coming from moving coil cartridges. In the signal transmitting circuit, signal processing is done by NOS Tungstram ECC83 as well as Tesla E88CC double triodes. The standard RIAA correction is realized by a classic passive network between the amplifying stages. In this case, we did not use any negative feedback. The nominal input sensitivity of the appliance is 5 mV. In response to an input signal with an effective value like this, at the output ports, an effective output signal value of the nominal 500 mV can be measured. In order to achieve the lowest possible noise level, they designed an external, stabilized power supply unit that uses high capacity filter capacitors and high-quality connectors."*

As with all Qualiton A series components, the housing for the Qualiton Phono is made from mirror-polished stainless steel. This gives both the phono preamp and the power supply units a distinguished, high-end appearance. When the tubes start to glow gently through the vented ports on the top cover, the unit looks even more 'come hither.' It comes standard with a moving magnet card installed. If you need the moving coil card, it costs extra. There is a slot on the back of the main unit's chassis that offers an easy exchange of the moving magnet and moving coil cards. The cards can easily be swapped by unscrewing four screws, removing the module and inserting the other card into the connector inside of the Phono. When the card is locked, you just tighten it with the screws.

The interior of the Phono has a unique thermal design for optimal cooling and the shortest signal path. It uses a dual mono structure for the left and right channel operation. Both the power transformer and the step up transformers for moving coil cartridges are made in Audio Hungary's own factory. The step-up transformer uses the 30-year old lacquered copper wire we talked about in our interview. It was left in the factory by Audio Hungary's former company. I could not believe the bobbins in the step-up transformers are made from bakelite. I have no idea if this makes a sonic difference, but I think it's way cool. They only use tubes in the signal path, and Audio Hungary has chosen to provide the Phono with premium NOS Tungstram ECC83 and Tungstram tubes from their huge stock of NOS tubes.

System Used for this Review

I removed the DS Audio Master1 optical cartridge system from my reference system and replaced it with the Qualiton Phono. I used both the Hana Mono Cartridge for the review, both were with an Allnic SUT. The amp was the First Watt SIT 3 driving my Teresonic XRs. All of the cables were from Audience.

Listening

Just like the Qualiton A20i amp, the first thing that just jumped out at me was how right and musical this Phono sounds. Another thing the two have in common is how recorded plucked strings sound so real that they take on a lifelike quality. Guitars, harps, basses, cellos, harpsichords and even to some extent pianos, all sounded more real than I had ever heard them sound in my room.

One of the hallmarks of a great tube phono preamplifiers is its capability to produce a believable three-dimensional and holographic soundstage. The Qualiton Phono portrays these qualities in a way I have come to expect from much more expensive and much larger phono stages. The Phono also plays music with a nice organic quality, that combined with the three-dimensional soundstage, produced a more believable reproduction of live music. The Qualiton Phono also delivered wonder flow of the music I was listening to. In my reference system, it allowed me to enjoy the textures and harmonics of music along with the natural decay of instruments.

Conclusion

I think the best thing I can say about the Qualiton Phono is that It's all about experiencing the sounds and emotions of music. It has a way of playing vinyl that allowed me to transcend the electronic listening experience. The Qualiton Phono is an easy recommendation to those looking for a great phono preamp.

Price: \$4,600

Specifications

Nominal output level 500 mV
Input sensitivity – with MM card 5 mV, to nominal output level
Input sensitivity – with MC card 0.4 mV, to nominal output level
Number of input ports 1 MM-level input per channel, or optionally 1 MC-level input per channel
Number of output ports 1 line level output per channel, with 500 mV nominal output level
Max. input signal – with MM card 100 mV
Max. input signal – with MC card 2 mV
Gain – with MM card +40 dB, (f = 1 kHz)
Gain – with MC card +62 dB, (f = 1 kHz)
Total harmonic distortion – with MM card < 0.07%, (f = 1 kHz, input level: 5 mV)
Total harmonic distortion – with MC card < 0.2%, (f = 1 kHz, input level: 0.4 mV)
Frequency response 20 Hz – 20 kHz, (-0.3 dB)
Input impedance – with MM card 47 kOhm
Input impedance – with MC card 145 Ohm
Signal-to-noise ratio – with MM card > 70 dB
Signal-to-noise ratio – with MC card > 65 dB
Tubes required 4 x Tungstram ECC83; 2 x Tesla E88CC
Weight 5.4 kg
Dimensions 35 x 8 x 30 cm
Warranty: 2 years

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