



ICON AUDIO PS1.2 SIGNATURE £999

This is an upgraded version of the well received PS 1.2 phono stage, baby brother to the PS 3 which I looked at a year ago. The standard PS 1.2 retails at £750 for the MM/MC version (MM only costing £549). This Signature version features Jensen Caps, costing an additional £200 and gold pin valves (another £50). The casework is the standard Icon Audio unit measuring 88x310x134mm, with the slightly heavier power supply (4kg for the latter, 3kg for the former) measuring 82x165x80mm. On board are two ECC 83 valves and an ECC81. All components are hardwired with silver Teflon cable in the usual Icon manner and mounted on a polished stainless steel chassis. The RIAA equalisation is passive. The front features a volume control, allowing the unit to drive power amps directly, alongside a mono/stereo switch and a selector for MM or MC input. At the back is the umbilical lead the connects to the power supply, the usual two pairs of phono sockets for the signal in and out, the earthing post and a switch to lift the earth if an earth loop causes any hum problems.

SOUND QUALITY

As the only valve powered unit in this collection I was expecting certain things from the PS 1.2. I'd hoped for a full bodied and tuneful bass, good imaging and a seemingly endless liquid musicality; and I was not disappointed. Starting with the Coward LP I found myself appreciating the subtext of the piano accompaniment to 'The Bar On The Piccolo Marina'. This tale of a recently widowed, rather stuffy English matron who discovers life is for living seemed to have a little more depth to the instrumentation

than with any other unit looked at here. My focus altered a bit from the lyrics, to include more of what the orchestra were doing. Added to this was a perception that the audience's response was marginally more obvious and I found myself slightly more immersed in the performance than I had been before.

The Bruch was treated equally well from a musical point of view, although the damage to this record was more noticeable through the PS 1.2 Signature than it had been through either the Luxman or the A.N.T. Anyone who thinks valves gloss over issues should have a listen to this device! There were a couple of occasions where I almost wished for a slightly more rose-tinted view

of the condition of this record. It wasn't unlistenable but there was certainly more honesty regarding the condition of the groove walls than I would necessarily have liked. Swapping to the Audio Technica from the Kontrapunkt a seemed to emphasise this, so I did not regard this as a good combination. Moving over to the MusicMaker III restored a little more decorum to proceedings and listening continued apace...

Fed with modern records the Icon revelled in displaying colours and textures to sounds that some of the other phono stages had only hinted at. The depth and solidity of the bass was matched by an energetic pace to the timing of 'Drippy' that made it romp along in an uninhibited and pleasurable way. Taking advantage of the onboard volume control, I removed the Tap-X from the system and fed the Icon directly into the Quads. The result was sheer magic, moving me several layers closer to the music, and adding another layer of detail to an already complex picture. In comparison with this version I felt that he standard PS1.2 was a little euphonic in certain places. This one was a little more honest, but at times could be a little too much so. Match with a top quality front end and vinyl though, and it is dynamite.



MEASURED PERFORMANCE

Frequency response via MC was flat, with no treble lift, but 0.5dB plateau lift at low frequencies, giving what will be perceived as a fuller, or warmer tonal balance. However, with MM there is a steep treble roll down above 10kHz, so this will be even warmer sounding. However, as modern, good quality MCs measure flat, but modern MMs often have excessive mid and treble, this actually makes sense. It does not suit older 'warm' sounding MMs though. The volume control impedance matching problem has been cured, so now frequency response changes little with level.

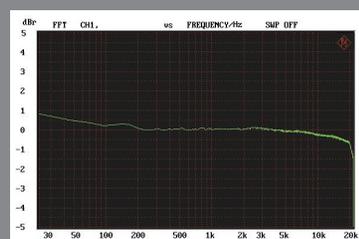
The input transformer has more windings than that of the Lux so has more thermal noise, input noise measuring a low 0.15uV. However, this was low frequency noise (a trace of hum) rather than hiss, the analyser showed, even though A weighting was used. The Lux, not using valves, avoids this. The Icon offers a higher input load though, 18 Ohms DCR, and huge gain of x4000 (72dB), enough for any situation. The volume control allows this to be trimmed down, and also allows the PS1.2 to feed a power amp direct. Overload levels were very high, in spite of the gain, a strength of valves.

The Icon Audio PS1.2 offers great all round performance, masses of gain for any situation and the convenience of a volume control. NK

Disc MC	
Frequency response	4Hz-20kHz
Separation	80dB
Noise (input noise, A wtd)	0.15uV
Distortion	0.001%
Gain	x4000/ 72dB
Overload	7mV in / 27V out

Disc MM	
Frequency response	4Hz-10kHz
Separation	80dB
Noise (input noise, A wtd)	0.6uV
Distortion	0.001%
Gain	x421 / 52dB
Overload	66mV in / 27V out

FREQUENCY RESPONSE



VERDICT

Exceptionally enjoyable valve sound with great flexibility.

ICON AUDIO PS1.2 SIGNATURE £999

Icon Audio
+44(0)116 244 0593
www.iconaudio.co.uk

FOR

- lavish all triode sound
- onboard volume control
- mono switch

AGAINST

- nothing at the price

Group tests are always interesting to do, because they spotlight the respective differences between a range of products which you don't normally get to sample. Although I'd heard several of these in isolation beforehand, or their precursors, there's nothing like putting them back to back to see how the land lies...

The first thing to say is that there is *not* a bad one here; as their high globe ratings show, each one reviewed has very real merits. Yet that doesn't mean they're the same; they come in different flavours and are purposed for different things. We also need to remember that each listener has different priorities, systems and musical tastes, so what's good for the goose won't be good for the gander. All of which makes ranking them a tricky process, but to my ears there was still a clear order of merit...

Firstly, the Astin Trew AT8000, which I found a touch too soft and inoffensive to my ears in both my systems. It's true to say that both of these err to the richer side of things, and I found the AT8000 didn't really get going with either. It's a consummate smoothie, with a very tidy, delicate presentation, and needs 'bringing out of itself' to really fly. It's most interesting to note that editor DP found it a superb performer in his system, which having heard on numerous occasions I find rather too vivid and seat-of-the-pants. As such, the new Astin Trew is obviously to be prescribed for unrelentingly explicit systems, but owners of smoother sounding sources, amplifiers and loudspeakers should look to the following, instead...

The Tom Evans Microgroove Plus was almost an inverse Astin Trew, with a very searching midband, a slight (but quite audible) treble rise and an extremely propulsive nature. You could put your least liked music on your turntable, cue up the stylus and suddenly the Microgroove would make you realise why people had taken the trouble to record it. It goes into the groove (if you pardon the pun), like a crack Special Forces team, tasked to extract the hostages (i.e. the music)! It's a truly compelling listen already, but don't match it to bass-light systems. In my own slightly warm and fulsome systems it worked very well but still didn't sound *quite* as sturdy down below as it should. I'm sure more running in will help in this respect, but it's never going to be a Roksan in this respect. Which brings me to the Caspian DX2.

Blood and guts, heart and soul

- the Roksan wears its big heart well on an unusually large label, and boy don't you know it! If the Astin Trew is all soft subtlety, and the Tom Evans super fast, fleet footed musicality, the Caspian is thunder in the mountains. Whatever music you play for it, it's as if the Roksan has injected it with body-building steroids and taken it for a work out. It's a compelling, captivating listen - and one that will not only perk up some more somnambulant systems but make music an unremitting roller coaster ride. Many will adore its presentation; I certainly loved it. But it's important to point out that it shouldn't go into hard, punchy systems as it might just overwhelm. Conversely, I can imagine it working brilliantly in a Roksan system, which sports a very finely judged mix of solid-state 'get up and go' with just a touch more finesse that you'd normally expect from transistors. It's an interesting one this, and well worth considering.

Tied in terms of rankings is the Luxman E200, which is a truly esoteric device. Whilst the three previous products have all been obviously built and finished to a price, shall we say, displaying decent if prosaic production values (although the Roksan is better than the AT or Tom Evans, it must be said), living with the Luxman is like winning the lottery. All lavish brushed aluminium and lovingly finished casework in the best Japanese tradition. It sounded a bit like it looked, in a way. It's swish and svelte, but it does have a very lucid midband which is just plain enjoyable. You don't get the bright light of the Tom Evans, or the

"the Icon Audio PS1.2 Signature has a lavish, expansive character that you can't fail to like..."

blustery delivery of the Roksan, but instead a very easy and engaging midband with a pretty neutral tonality. Not so big in the bass though, which brings us to this...

In second place comes the ANT Audio Kora 3T Ltd. In its latest guise (there have been minor changes) it remains a peach, with an extremely smooth and sumptuous (for a solid-state stage) sound. Indeed it's true to say that it's 'valve-like'; if you've never heard a tube phono stage then this would be most people's idea

of what it would sound like. Warm, full, expansive, musically lyrical and beautifully silky in the treble, there's nothing to criticise here and so much to celebrate, except to say that again, as per the Astin Trew, it won't help already over smooth systems or sources. In my main system it worked very well, because my Ortofon cartridge is very much a neutral performer, tonally speaking. But I can see it becoming too smooth with the wrong combination of ancillaries; conversely it's superb in a bright, dramatic system such as editor DP's.

For me, it was the Icon Audio PS1.2 Signature that did more than any other phono stage to make my music magic. In its special 'tweaked' guise it is a truly special performer, possessed of a big heart like the Roksan, the smoothness of the ANT Audio and Astin Trew, and the lucid musicality of the Luxman and Tom Evans. But it's not a simple amalgam of the aforementioned; it's very much its own phono stage, with a lavish, expansive character that you can't fail



Icon Audio PS 1.2 Signature - puts a tiger in your system's tank!