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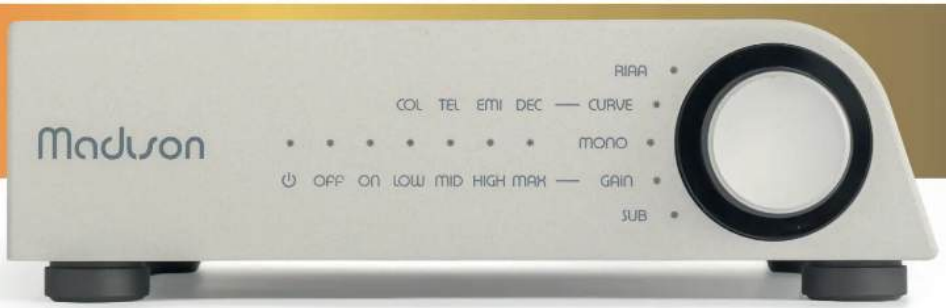
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Wattson Audio's Madison Phono – small but perfectly formed?



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Wattson Audio Madison Phono phono stage

Steve Dickinson

Diehard analogue purists are going to hate the Madison Phono stage. However, many vinyl fans might love it. Unless the word 'digital' gives you hives, please read on, because Wattson Audio has done something very interesting (several things, actually) with its new Madison Phono stage.

Wattson Audio is perhaps best known for its digital products; the dinky Emerson network bridge and the Madison streamer brought Swiss engineering and build quality to products at somewhat un-Swiss prices. Wattson was acquired by the ultra-high-end Swiss manufacturer CH Precision a couple of years ago, recognising the synergy between the two companies. The Madison Phono is the first entirely new product to emerge from that arrangement. »



> The advantages of this approach are that filtering and EQ can be handled digitally to a much higher standard of precision and consistency.

Nothing 'budget' here

It's tempting to think of Wattson Audio as CH Precision's 'entry-level' brand, though there's nothing 'budget' about any of this. The £4,700 Wattson Phono is not competing in the same market as CH's P1 or P10 phono stages (it also demands significantly less rack space), but Wattson readily acknowledges the CH Precision expertise and influence that infuses its products. Essentially, the Madison Phono uses technology derived from the phono stage in the CH Precision I1 integrated amplifier, but takes it further. This is not so much 'CH Precision on the cheap' but a brand and product range that stands entirely on its own merits.

Housed in compact, milled-from-solid aluminium casework finished in a smart, durable textured paint in light or dark grey, the Madison Phono is supplied with a switch-mode PSU with an IEC socket for mains power input. It connects to the Phono via a captive lead with a latching LEMO connector, which is more positive and secure than the usual barrel connectors. There is an upgrade option to the Power S, a much more substantial PSU described by Wattson as a hybrid of switch-mode and linear technology, which again draws on CH Precision's considerable expertise in power supply design.

Digital analogue

At the most elementary level, the Wattson Audio Madison Phono is still an analogue product – the amplification is analogue and linear. The signal is then digitised at 32-bit/384kHz, the DXD mastering studio standard, for EQ and filtering. This also means the signal can be output either as analogue (back-converted from the digital) or as digital (192kHz SPDIF, coaxial or TOSLINK optical) to a user's own choice of DAC. So you can use the Madison Phono as you would any conventional standalone phono stage, or connect it directly into a digital system.

The advantages of this approach are that filtering and EQ can be handled digitally to a much higher standard of precision and consistency, and it's also easier to offer a range of EQ curves. The Madison Phono defaults to the usual RIAA standard curve but can be switched to four other curves – Columbia, Teldec, EMI and Decca. So there are lots of other avenues to explore here. It also offers switchable gain to cater for varying cartridge output levels, and both the gain and the EQ can be switched on the fly via the front panel multifunction control knob.

Optical options

But if all the above wasn't interesting enough, the Madison Phono's versatility goes further. It's not merely a MM/MC phono stage; it can also support DS Audio optical cartridges. Wattson offers the unit with a choice of three input boards:

- voltage input for moving magnet, moving iron and high- or low-output moving coil cartridges, which also provides automatic loading and adjustable gain;
- current input, transimpedance board for low-output moving coil; or
- current input, transimpedance board for optical cartridges.



> There aren't many phono stages around that support DS Audio optical cartridges, which require not only a suitable amplifier but also an energiser for the optical transducers.



» The advantage of the current-sensing approach is that it greatly reduces dependence on getting the cartridge loading right, which can be critical for getting the best from expensive MC cartridges. I've been using a 'boutique' (man-in-a-shed) transimpedance phono stage for a few years now, and there's something very appealing about the transimpedance approach, which lets the cartridge's own character speak for itself.

Only one board can be used at a time, so you purchase the configuration you need. The boards are intended to be dealer-switchable, doubtless for warranty reasons, so it's straightforward to switch from MM/MC to low-output MC or optical by purchasing the relevant board and installing it.

There aren't many phono stages around that support DS Audio optical cartridges, which require not only a suitable amplifier but also an energiser for the optical transducers. However, Wattson have again done something different with their implementation, developing a current-sensing transimpedance stage for the optical cartridges, whereas every other optical cartridge stage (including DS Audio's own) is a voltage-sensing design, like the great majority of MC and all MM stages. Again, Wattson argue that the transimpedance approach pays dividends in terms of dynamic performance – frequency and transient response in particular.

Versatile

Taken as a whole, this makes the Wattson Audio Madison Phono stage one of the most versatile and flexible stages I've yet encountered: conventional MM/MI/MC, transimpedance MC-only, or optical cartridge capability; easily adjustable gain for varying levels of cartridge output, and a selection of five different EQ curves. So if, like me, you have a fair few older classical or jazz recordings, you now have options to hear them using the curve they were likely pressed with.

It might not just be vintage or obscure pressings. Arguably, RIAA didn't become the true standard until well into the 1970s, so it applies to a significant number of the DG, Decca and EMI/HMV recordings I bought in my younger days, dating from the '60s or early '70s, and to much of the jazz and classical I've picked up at record fairs more recently. And don't forget the Madison Phono's ability to output a high-res digital signal to a DAC of your choice.

Sound

Connected to my modified LP12 with a Supatrac Nighthawk tonearm and Ortofon SPU Royal N cartridge, the Madison Phono certainly hits the ground running. Straight out of the box, it has the gutsiness I associate with transimpedance stages. Dynamics are generous, timing is crisp and neat, and timbres are well fleshed out. 'Close to the Edit' from *Who's Afraid of The Art of Noise* [ZTT] is punchy, bouncy, and pacey. If it lacks the fluidity of the best MC stages it's competing against, such as Tom Evans' The Groove+, it compensates with an energy and boldness that are very engaging.

Add in the Power S external PSU, however, and everything raises its game. The bass in 'Close to the Edit' is bouncier still, and musical lines are finished off more fully – any sense of abruptness has receded, and the whole track has better phrasing and flow. You can feel the connection in Abdullah Ibrahim's 'Pule' from *Mindif* [Enja]. There's greater fluidity to the playing, timbres are richer, and it's more relaxed – there's a sense of ease and a lilt to the performance, with the performers more clearly playing off each other. »

Sound quality is among the very best in its price range, though you really need the Power S PSU to realise its potential.





» My 1968 recording of Sibelius' 'Valse Triste' by the Berlin Philharmonic under Karajan, played via the Madison Phono's RIAA curve, gave me what I expected: a beautiful, sensitive performance, if perhaps a trifle academic in its interpretation. Switching to the Teldec curve, however, is a different matter. It feels more fluid, less rigid; the music breathes, and there's definitely more triste about this valse. A brass band transcription of Binge's 'Elizabethan Serenade' on Decca sounded more lilted, swayed and swung using the Decca curve than the RIAA. And in each case, the Power S PSU brought out more of these musical differences.

Thoughts

The Madison Phono is a remarkably versatile phono stage. Sound quality is among the very best in its price range, though you really need the Power S PSU to realise its potential, and the supplied SMPS box is probably best thought of as a 'get you started' unit. Its ability to cope with optical cartridges, together with the different EQ options, makes this a pretty unique proposition. The current-sensing principle removes cartridge-matching worries and brings musical benefits of its own, delivering a gutsy, vivid performance. All you could ever need? Quite possibly. +

Technical specifications

Type: Solid-state, analogue MC/MM/optical phono cartridge preamplifier with variable gain, digital filtering and EQ

Input options (via replaceable input boards)

- MM/MC voltage sensing, gain +34dB (MM) to +60dB (MC), switchable in 6dB steps
- MC only, current sensing transimpedance, gain +48dB to +66dB, switchable in 6dB steps
- Optical, current-sensing transimpedance, gain +58 to +76 dB, switchable in 6dB steps

A/D conversion: DXD 32 bit/384kHz

EQ curves: RIAA; Columbia; Teldec; EMI; Decca, accuracy +/- 0.1dB

Subsonic filter: 1st order at 15Hz

Analogue Outputs: 1 x single-ended RCA

Digital outputs: 192kHz; 1x RCA coaxial S/PDIF; 1x TOSLINK optical S/PDIF

Distortion: (THD+N) 0.001%

Input Noise: MM/MC: -134dB; MC: -139dB; Optical: -128dB

Power consumption: nominal 4W; standby <0.5W

Dimensions (WxHxD): 17.5 x 5.2 x 18.5cm

Weight: 1.7kg

Price: Madison Phono including user's choice of input board and standard PSU: £4,700; €5240; $5495
Madison Power S PSU: £2350; €2620; $2745
Additional input boards (each): £450; €500; $500

Manufacturer Wattson Audio wattson.audio