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## Whest Audio PS.30RDT Phono Preampfier

Go Whest Young Man, Go Whest!

July 2009



### Associated Equipment:

#### Analog Front End

Michell Orbe SE II turntable  
Wilson Benesch Act 0.5 tone arm  
Benz-Micro Ebony L

#### Amplification

Parasound P/LD-2000 Line Stage  
Musical Surroundings Nova Phomena  
PrimaLuna Dialogue Two integrated tube amp  
Quicksilver GLA tube amplifier with EH KT88's

#### Loudspeakers

Magnepan MG 1.6QR  
TAD 12-inch powered subwoofer

#### Cabling

SignalCable Silver Resolution and Analog Two interconnects  
SignalCable Silver Resolution speaker cables

#### AC Conditioners

Monarchy AC-regenerator  
PS Audio Duet

#### Accessories

Plateau equipment rack  
Black Diamond Racing Source Shelf  
Andy Bartha Audio  
Whatchamacallits  
Black Diamond Racing #4 cones  
VanEvers wood-block kit  
Shakti Stones  
Blue Circle Cable Pillows  
Helmholtz resonators (homemade)  
Michael Green Room Tune  
Sonex panels



Lately, for whatever reason, I've been waxing nostalgic over my vinyl collection and vinyl playback gear. Not long ago I reviewed the Musical Surroundings battery-powered Nova Phomena phono stage and liked it enough to buy the review sample and use it as my reference phono preampfier.

In my pre-review correspondence with Mr. James Henriot of Whest Audio, I intimated that I was searching for a phono preamp that could provide a more explosive sense of dynamic range than the Nova Phomena. Henriot was sure that his line of phono preampifiers were up to the task, and then some. I told Mr. Henriot that I would be using my modified Michell Orbe SE turntable with the Wilson Benesch ACT 0.2 tonearm and Benz-



Micro Ebony L low-output moving coil cartridge. I explained that low-noise was also a must because the output of the Ebony L is only 0.26mV. The Nova Phenomena has a low enough noise floor that it can easily accommodate the Ebony L, but a PS Audio GCPH had proved too noisy, at least through its RCA outputs.

Mr. Henriot decided to send me the PS.30RDT, which is a precision dual-mono unit that uses premium quality and tolerance parts, with special attention to creating a very low noise environment within the unit's chassis. The PS.30RDT is one rung down from Whest's top-of-the-line MC REF V and borrows trickle-down technology from its more expensive sibling. The MC REF V has a list price of a whopping \$12.5K USD, while the PS.30RDT is much more affordable at \$3,995. The British company also offers a less expensive version of the PS.30RDT in the PS.30R priced at \$2,695 USD, which uses lower tolerance parts and utilizes a common power transformer for both channels. The PS.30RDT also uses heavier copper traces on its PC board.

James Henriot had this to say about the chassis of Whest's top 3 phono preamplifiers:

"The chassis is 100% CNC machined and then hand welded and finished. The welded seams help in structural rigidity - which the U-tray does not exhibit at all, and because it is a one-piece design there are no problems with potential differences between panels. It may seem like IT'S JUST A CHASSIS but the PS.30R/RDT/MC REF chassis contributes to the PCBs ability to resolve the sheer amounts of information that they do."

Now the published specs for the PS.30RDT are extremely impressive, amongst the best I've ever seen for a phono stage. The unit has RIAA accuracy from 17Hz to 20.5kHz +/- 0.2dB and a power bandwidth from 15Hz to 60kHz. This is yet another reason why I wanted to review a Whest product.

### Description

The basic look of the Whest PS.30RDT begins with an elegant CNC-machined faceplate with large Whest logo in understated shades of gray. The top panel is made of aluminum which is grained and anodized. I like it because it blends in without calling too much attention to itself. There is a small red LED in the lower right hand corner of the front panel to indicate when the power is on. The rear panel contains the Power On/Off toggle, a female IEC connector for the power cord, and high quality gold-plated RCA input and output jacks. There is also a Ground lug near the RCA inputs, and a pair of XLR balanced outputs for those who can take advantage of this extra low noise input to their line stage preamp.



The Whest PS.30RDT has all of its Gain and Loading options inside on the PC board, controlled via two sets of 6-position DIP switches. One must remove nine Allen-head screws from the cover to access these adjustments. The proper Allen wrench is supplied by Whest.



The Gain can be set from 40dB for a typical moving magnet cartridge to 72dB, which should provide plenty o' gain for even the lowest output moving coil cartridge. In my system with my 0.26mV output Ebony L, and relatively inefficient Magnepan speakers, the 65dB gain setting worked well.

The Load settings are 100, 220, 470, 1k, 15k, and 47k ohms. Although it doesn't tell you this in the manual, intermediate values may be obtained by paralleling two or three of the resistors together, as is also the case with the Musical Surroundings Phonomena phono preamplifiers.

With the Whest phono stage I found that each time I went from a higher value load resistor to one of lower value, the high frequencies rolled off in predictable steps. I found that setting my cartridge for 220 ohms was just a touch too bright and that setting it for 100 ohms was just a bit too dull. Going to the online Parallel Resistor Computer, I was able to calculate that switching on the 220 ohm resistor and the 470 ohm resistor would yield a load of 149.86 ohms, which was close enough to the 150 ohms I was shooting for. I confirmed this result by actual measurement with a digital multi-meter, and both channels measured identically.

So as it happened, a gain setting of 65dB combined with a load of circa 150 ohms turned out to be the best balanced setting for my system and taste. And, if you can't get the exact value you want even with this many options, there is a "User" resistor position on the circuit board where you can insert your own specific choice of load resistor. Also, if you want to use a specific brand and model of resistor (like a nude Vishay, for example) you can utilize the "User" loading option.

### The sound

I will preface my listening evaluation by saying that in my view, a phono stage that costs nearly \$4k US had better perform in a superior manner across many sonic parameters to justify its price. This is the attitude I adopted for this evaluation and I will let you know exactly what facets of the Whest's sonic performance may justify its cost.

Right off the bat I knew that the Whest PS.30RDT had superior image layering skills. There seemed to be layer upon layer of information that was easily unraveled and displayed throughout the spacious soundstage. It became apparent that the PS.30RDT had more image depth than my reference phono pre and it also seemed that the PS.30RDT exhibited a larger scale of dynamic gradations than my reference unit and, for that matter, more than my redbook CD source as well. Certainly these preliminary findings were encouraging.

Part way through this review I was playing some very familiar material with vocals and acoustic instruments, and while they sounded very respectable I couldn't help think that something was just a little askew with the naturalness of the voices and the timbre of the instruments.

Prior to the review I had installed the Magnepan 1.6QR speakers as my new reference speakers and had been using them with the tweeters on the insides because some folks on the Internet forums



had recommended that tweeter orientation for small rooms.

On a whim I reversed the speakers so that the tweeters were now on the outsides as Magnepan recommends. When I played those same cuts again, one of them being "Down There By The Train" (American 9 45520-1) from Johnny's CASH LP, it became very clear from the naturalness of Cash's voice and the strumming on his six-string that Magnepan's outboard tweeter recommendation is unquestionably correct. When you have a source component as revealing as the Whest PS.30RDT, it is easy to discern which presentation sounds more natural.



During the evaluation period, I played my favorite vocal records by such artists as Johnny Cash, Otis Redding, Karla Bonoff, and Tracy Chapman. I doubt that I've ever heard any of them sound more real or present in my listening room.

My characterization of the Whest's reproduction of the bass, midrange, and treble spectrums is as follows: The bass is deep, taut, and very articulate. I don't think I've ever heard more grit and grunt from the bass guitar than I hear through the Whest. And certainly all manner of drums and percussion are extra convincingly rendered.



The midrange is smooth, musical, and natural. It is not forward, nor is it recessed. I believe it is exactly where it should be.

The PS.30RDT's high-frequency reproduction is truly exemplary. The treble is airy, and utterly grit and grain free, unless it's on the recording. The highs are critically important in any music reproduction system and here the Whest shines. The highs are responsible for perceived transient speed, for giving definition to bass sounds, and for bestowing a sense of immediacy and detail in the midrange. This phono preamplifier accomplishes all these things in spades. You'll not be disappointed.

The one thing that let me know exactly how valuable an instrument the Whest can be is its reproduction of classical music. I've never experienced a more harmonically cohesive, layered, and detailed aural movie as that of any classical composition played



through the Whest with a very good phono cartridge. Listening to one of my favorite black vinyl discs, *Stravinsky Conducts*, 1961



(Columbia MS 6272), I was riveted to my listening seat while L'Histoire du Soldat began and unfolded.

As expected, the Tympani, bass, and snare drums were cutting-edge excellent, and gripping in their effect. But just the simple melody and interplay of the violins and woodwinds was captivating. And perhaps the most impressive feat was the Whest's rendering of brass instruments, which displayed the natural timbres of the trumpets and trombones like no other. The deep throaty groan of the T-bone became an integral collage with the ringing and blatt of its bell. This is a very difficult thing for any system to get right and the Whest PS.30RDT pulled it off without breaking a sweat. On lesser systems the brass's deeper fundamental and higher-frequency harmonics are often in incorrect proportions, or one seems disconnected from the other.

#### Caveats

My only real gripe with the Whest PS.30RDT has to do not with its sonic performance, but with the fact that any time you want to change the gain or cartridge loading, you need to remove those 9 Allen-head screws to remove the top lid. Fortunately this process only needs to be performed once for a given cartridge. To try different load settings you could leave the lid off until you decide on a setting (turn off the power when making changes to the DIP switches) and then reinstall it once the final values are determined. Once set, you'd only need to change it when you change your phono cartridge (unless you replaced it with the same one).

While I like the rear-mounted DIP switches on my Nova Phenomena from a convenience standpoint, Whest's Mr. Henriot points out that having the DIP switches enclosed inside the chassis further reduces the noise floor and aids in the PS.30RDT's keen ability to retrieve micro detail from the inner record groove. So apparently, the implication is that externally mounted DIP arrays raise the noise level thereby causing a loss of inner detail and this is consistent with my experience.

If I were being super critical, and I'm a reviewer so why not, I would admit that the Whest PS.30RDT does have a solid-state character. By that I don't mean that it does anything poorly, only that it does not have that enriched organic character by virtue of the even-order harmonic distortion that tube units generate.

#### Summary

The Whest PS.30RDT is an extraordinary phono preamplifier by any yardstick. It is a grainless, noiseless piece of gear that provides all the dynamic shadings, vivid imagery, and fine detailing that allows reproduced music to sound real. It would be nice if my lower-priced Nova Phenomena could render dynamic contrasts and inner detail as ably as the Whest, but unfortunately such adroit performance is not available from any lower-priced units I have tried.

While I do admit to liking the extra "vibrancy" that some tube units provide, I also realize that any given tube phono stage will be more noisy and less resolving (likely considerably less resolving) than the Whest PS.30RDT. I suppose all one would need to do in order to have the best of both worlds would be to use a very good tube line stage to add that little bit of sonic seasoning, before



sending the signal over to the power amplifier.

Those who are not particularly addicted to tube charms may find that the Whest PS.30RDT is all the phono preamplifier they could ever hope for—and then some! As for me, I may need to purchase the PS.30RDT, because **now that I've lived with it there's no going back.**

*Frank Alles*



**Whest Audio PS.30RDT Phono Preamplifier**

**Price: \$3,995 USD**

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