



David Price auditions Astin Trew's brand new AT8000 phono stage...

Trew Type

Is it really seven years? There haven't been many British start-ups in the past decade, but Astin Trew is one, and a successful one at that. Launching in 2003, the company first came to *Hi-Fi World's* attention with its AT3500. Although not the top silver disc spinner in the world, it surely is one of the best under around £1,500, as repeated comparisons with rival CD players have shown us. It sounded quite unlike most price rivals, with a warmer and more - dare I say it - analogue sound. And that, I assume, is what founder Michael Osborn would like to be the hallmark of the new AT8000 phono stage reviewed here...

Costing £880, it parachutes directly into some of the most hotly contested ground in the UK phono stage market. There are so many well respected products at or around this price it's almost churlish to list them. The company describes it as a "no compromise" sub-£1,000 MM/MC unit with multiple switching to match virtually every cartridge made. A solid-state, op-amp based design, "it has been voiced with components

that offer a very musical and open sound", says Michael. Its heavy gauge copper PCB tracks are gold plated, configured to permit dual mono topography, and sport "very linear precision resistors, plus polystyrene and polypropylene audio grade capacitors in all critical positions". Indeed, it's this profusion of high quality passive componentry that earns the AT8000 its considerable retail price, the company says. The entirety of the RIAA and amplification circuitry is held within a solid Faraday cage, for substantial RFI/EMF protection.

The case itself is styled and priced to match the new AT1000plus preamplifier and the AT2000plus integrated amplifier, but is obviously a lot smaller at 305x160x115mm. It's a longish, well finished aluminium box, weighing in at 1.9kg. This includes the "over-rated" toroidal transformer and other high quality power supply components inside, so there's no need for an additional box; something many will find a relief. Round the back, there's a switched IEC mains socket, a pair of gold plated RCA phono stage and a pair of silver

plated balanced XLR output sockets. The front panel has but a solitary blue power on LED to sully its clean lines. Underneath however, things take a turn for the better; there are three dip switches for left and right channel impedance settings, and gain. Being a proper dual mono you have to get the settings right for both channels, obviously. Once you've set the unit up to your cartridge, there are three rubber 'grommets' (for the want of a better phrase) that need to go over the dip switch recesses, to keep the dust out. It's nice to see that the AT8000 is made in the UK; it's finished as well as any price rival, and better than most.

SOUND QUALITY

Tubeway Army's 'Are Friends Electric' showed the AT8000 to be an expansive, slightly tonally warm performer, much in the mould of the AT3500 CD player we rate so highly. It's a very tidy, architectural sounding device, with all the instruments in the mix carefully and confidently located across the soundstage. There was a good deal of detail, the Astin Trew offering a clean and wide window

into the world of this classic piece of electro. Gary Numan's distinctive *faux* Bowie vocals came over with great immediacy, as did those wonderful Moog keyboard stabs and the clockwork cymbal loops played on a real drum kit with real drums! Bass was strong, providing impressive body to the track, and pushed the song along with distinction. I was surprised to find this phonostage to be very impressive at rhythms; it doesn't quite have the beguiling valvey flow of an Icon Audio PS1.2, for example, but it's very enjoyable all the same, being grippy and full of attitude.

On a completely different note, George Benson's 'Lady Love Me One More Time' showed a more polished aspect to the AT8000. Whereas the somewhat 'basic' sonics of 'Are Friends Electric' impressed in a visceral way, the George Benson track is a far slicker and more expensive sounding track. Again, this new phono stage bristled with detail, throwing out a very wide recorded acoustic into the room, this time

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with a good degree of depth too. The song sparkled with harmonics from the chiming keyboards, the Astin Trew catching their texture with aplomb, and also giving a beautifully creamy rendition of Benson's own dusky, creamy vocal strains. A busy pop number, this phono stage picked through the crowded mix skillfully, and impressed with its superb dynamic prowess; powerfully struck cymbals or violent strummed guitars

jumped out of the mix like italicised print in a sea of regular upright. Again, the phono stage proved a gas to listen to, the song pushing along like a racing driver with a point to prove.

10cc's 'The Things We Do For Love' was positively exuberant, the AT8000 providing a deliciously clean and gleaming rendition, brimming with rich harmonics off everything from the china boy cymbals to the Rickenbacker guitars. Those Godley and Creme harmonies were heavenly, carried with delicious immediacy and tunefulness, making a recent CD version sound like watching paint dry by comparison; the combination of such rich tonality and unbridled musicality is vinyl's genius, and a phono stage such as this shows why. The AT's party trick is its combination of grip and punch, allied

to a rare and unexpected delicacy that lets you enjoy the texture of individual instruments and vocalists in all their finery. Some op-amp based phono stages I've heard have a clean but mechanical sound, but the effortless rhythmic and dynamic swagger of this one just shows it ain't what you do but the way that you do it.

Donald Fagen's 'New Frontier' demonstrated the riflebolt precision with which the AT8000 conveyed the recorded acoustic. Not for it a random assemblage of instruments apologetically announcing themselves from the midst of the mix; instead I heard a massive, covering piano sound, chiming keyboards and a sharp-as-a-knife rhythm guitar all locked in position



as if etched by laser. The song flowed wonderfully, the sequenced synthesiser bouncing along like a puppy in a tissue advert, over which Fagen's plaintive, grimy vocals rang out. Bass guitar was super supple, yet had strong body and real dynamic articulation when the occasion demanded it.

CONCLUSION

If you've heard Astin Trew's AT3500 CD player, with its rich but crisp, expansive and envelopingly musical sound, you'll recognise the new AT8000 phono stage immediately. From a company with no 'previous' in this field, it's an unexpectedly accomplished performer, with a combination of real musicality allied to oodles of detail and insight. This is a rare and desire mix of attributes, and one that puts this phono stage right at the front of the fray; there are other excellent rivals too, but the Astin Trew AT8000 stands its ground with impressive resolve. An essential audition.

VERDICT ●●●●●
 Expansive, detailed, powerful and musical sound makes this a surprise entrant to the first class sub-£1,000 phono stage club.

ASTIN TREW AT8000 £880
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- FOR**
- wide soundstage
 - clean, detailed, composed
 - instrumental timbre
 - bouncy musicality
- AGAINST**
- nothing at the price

REFERENCE SYSTEM:
 Marantz TT1000/OL Enterprise/Ortofon MC Windfeld turntable
 Icon Audio PS3 phono stage
 Musical Fidelity AMS35i integrated amplifier
 Yamaha NS1000M loudspeakers

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

The AT8000 phono stage has a warp filter that introduces -9dB attenuation to warps at 5Hz, our analysis shows. It also inserts a small +1dB hump in response at 40Hz, just enough to provide subtle bass lift. Otherwise, equalisation is very accurate across the audio band and lacks the common treble lift. I would expect the AT8000 to sound smooth and solid in its low end delivery.

Gain was x360 (51dB) at Low, x600 (55dB) at Medium and x1000 (60dB) at High from phono outs, but more than double from XLRs (+8dB). The lowest value is high for MM cartridges and input overload a little low at 20mV as a result, but this is still just acceptable. The High gain phono value is just enough for most MCs, although super low output types need the higher gain from the XLR outputs.

Noise was low, meaning hiss will be inaudible, and hum negligible. With low distortion and wide channel separation the AT8000 measures well and should sound good. NK

Frequency response	17Hz-25kHz
Separation	68dB
Noise	65-75dBV
Distortion	0.002%
Gain	51, 55, 60dB

FREQUENCY RESPONSE

