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## CRACKING THE KODA

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GOLD NOTE'S STUNNING NEW PHONO STAGE



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## Gold Note PH-1000 phono stage

by Jason Kennedy

**P**hono stages by their very nature invite extremes in terms of technology and innovation. Their job is on the face of it quite simple; take the output from a phono cartridge and equalise and amplify it. It's a lot easier than turning digital bits into an analogue waveform, but yet also highly demanding. The problem being that the nature of the signal coming from small transducer is that it's microscopic in voltage terms and highly susceptible to corruption from interference. Moving magnet cartridges have a distinct advantage because of their higher signal strength, but as virtually all high-end cartridges are moving coil types with millivolt outputs this is no consolation for the phono stage designer. He or she has to amplify a tiny signal without adding noise in the process, so needs to create electronics with tremendously low noise floors if they are to realise the potential of the finest MCs. Most take a minimalist, all analogue approach to the problem, but Gold Note distinguishes itself by using processing to provide a far wider feature set than the competition.

The Gold Note PH-1000 is a *piece de resistance* of electronic wizardry, a phono stage that attempts to provide the vinyl enthusiast with every possible means of matching

both the cartridge on their turntable and the vinyl that it is spinning. This starts with loading, which covers the gamut of impedance, capacitance and gain that the cartridge works with. The PH-1000 offers no fewer than 12 impedance settings from 10 Ohms to 100kOhms with the option to add an external loading resistor if required, these are spread across both RCA and XLR inputs with eight (MC only) options on the latter. You can choose between six levels of capacitance if you decide to treat your MM (or stepped-up MC) to this level of preamplification quality, and regardless of which cartridge type you have there are seven levels of gain to choose from on top of the standard 65dB (MM 40dB).

A few of the more ambitious all analogue phono stages offer the above but the next raft of features places the Gold Note in a rather more select league. Where 99% of the alternatives offer RIAA EQ and a few offer one or two alternatives the PH-1000 has a surprising 18 preset EQ options alongside the option to set up four custom curves, which effectively means you have built in high quality tone control. The preset equalisation curves cater to pressings from Decca London (both UK and USA), RCA Victor, Deutsche Grammophon, HMV and Mercury to name but a few. If you're



*“The PH-1000 delivered rather engaging results, not least because of its remarkable ability to extract bass from nearly every slab of vinyl.”*



▶ a collector of vintage vinyl this array of options could be a deal breaker. And that's before you consider that they are accessible from your armchair; the PH-1000 is a fully remote controllable device and that includes virtually all the features, including volume if you go for the preamplifier version which has a single line input for any other sources.

That's not the entire feature set however, as there is an infrasonic filter that works from 10Hz down. This tames warps and rumble. There's also the option to switch phase and play mono releases in three different ways. You can even swap channels should the need arise. All of these options can be accessed by navigating around the display with a Gold Note system remote and clicking through the various parameters. The logic control is processor-driven, and is kept up to date with the occasional firmware update, and unlike a streamer (which inherently has internet access), the updates here require a bit of help with a laptop and USB cable. However, I performed an update and it went smoothly enough, and the processor never crosses paths with the audio signal.

It naturally has more than one phono input as well, with two on RCA and one on XLR for MC only, so would be a perfect match for those inclined toward more than a single tonearm on their turntable. Output is via RCA and XLR again with a third output provided for Gold Note's optional tube output stages TUBE-1012 and -1006. You can even upgrade the PH-1000 with an external power supply. Gold Note appears to have thought of everything.

In my system, and connected to the output of a Rega Aphelion 2 moving coil on a P10 turntable, the PH-1000 delivered rather engaging results, not least because of its remarkable ability to extract bass from nearly every slab of vinyl that the stylus traced. It's not easy for a phono stage to do this at the same time as delivering a dynamic and well-paced sound but this Gold Note is a natural; it manages to sound relaxed whilst producing oodles of detail and avoids the common pitfall of leaning on the mids and highs to create a sense of speed. I got a great result with a recent re-release of Charlie Rouse's *Two is One* [Pure Pleasure] where all the instruments are nicely separated yet the music retains a driving coherence that you can't ignore. The drums, bass, guitar and sax are spread across the soundstage and the lead instruments really shine but there is no glare, often a problem with brass. The Gold Note even managed to reveal that some of the apparently less interesting tracks on this album were actually better than had seemed to be the case, which is the ultimate achievement for any audio component.

I loved the way that the power in the bass provided by this phono stage added space and body to familiar records, and not necessarily with bass heavy material either, it's just that there is a lot of information at low frequencies that defines the acoustic of the venue or studio that other phono stages miss. The Gold Note really liked another jazz album in Charles Mingus' *Newport Rebels* [Pure Pleasure], which sounded so real and vivid that you can't help but wonder whether acoustic ▶



*“The Gold Note PH-1000 is a tour de force of a phono stage/preamplifier.”*

► recordings on valve electronics were the pinnacle of the art. The fact that it's a live performance is also critical, that and the quality of musicianship, you need the likes of Roy Eldridge and Eric Dolphy to get brass to sound this vibrant, and it doesn't hurt having Mingus and Jo Jones in the rhythm section.

One feature I didn't mention is 'Enhanced' mode which uses "proprietary technology inspired by the Neumann Cutting Lathe for superior dynamic and musicality." This improved timing but also makes the balance a bit more forward/bright and ultimately, I preferred the relatively relaxed sound with it off. There was some experimentation with impedance settings too, initially this was set at the 100 Ohms recommended for the cartridge, but it was interesting to note how different options changed the sound. 1 kOhm for instance caused vocals to project further with a slight halo effect, but this also reduced depth of image and separation. 220 Ohms gave the impression of faster tempo and was quickly abandoned so that the beautifully restrained solemnity of Tord Gustavsen Trio's playing on *The Other Side* [ECM] could be fully appreciated.

Connecting the PH-1000 directly to my Moor Amps Angel 6 power amplifier and selecting the preamplifier mode didn't match the result with the reference preamp in the system but got close. It revealed that this is a very low noise device indeed and therefore lets a lot of quiet detail through in a coherent fashion, with a line source it produced excellent scale and image depth. It was also interesting to try the mono feature, there aren't many such records in my collection but one by

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

**Type:** Solid-state, MM/MC phono stage/line pre with multiple EQ presets

**Phono inputs:** Two pair single-ended (via RCA jacks), one pair balanced (via XLR connectors)

**Analogue outputs:** One pair single-ended (via RCA jacks), one pair balanced (via XLR connectors)

**Gain:** 65dB MC, 40dB MM with 7 options: -9dB, -6dB, -3dB, 0dB, +3dB, +6dB, +9dB

**Input impedance:** 10 Ohm–100kOhm + external load

**Input capacitance:** 100pF–1000pF

**Output impedance:** Unbalanced 100 Ohms, balanced 150 Ohms

**Output level:** 2Vrms (nominal), 2.5Vrms (maximum)

**RIAA linearity:** Not specified

**Distortion:** <0.01% THD

**Signal to Noise Ratio:** -100dB

**Dimensions (HxWxD):** 135 x 430 x 375mm

**Weight:** 12kg

**Price:** £8,700/£12,500 with line level preamplifier

**Manufacturer:** Gold Note

**URL:** [goldnote.it](http://goldnote.it)

**UK Distributor:** Airt Audio

**Tel:** +44 (0)7548 796382

**URL:** [airtaudio.com](http://airtaudio.com)

the Modern Jazz Quartet [*At Music Inn*, London/Atlantic] has never sounded good, at least not until 'mono' was selected on the Gold Note. Then it sprang into life, the previously lacklustre sound turning into a high energy vibe that barely sounded like the same band, if you have a few mono pressings this feature will be a game changer. I searched in vain for a record from one of the labels that the PH-1000 has an appropriate EQ curve for, these are mostly classical releases from the 1950s and such things are pretty scarce in my collection.

The Gold Note PH-1000 is a *tour de force* of a phono stage/preamplifier, it may be expensive, but you try and find this sort of feature set for less, it will be a long search. The sound it produces is very even handed and refined, the quality of electronics is clearly in the premium league, and this combined with the ability to change so many parameters on the fly makes it a fabulous piece of kit for vinyl lovers looking to get the best out of their collections. +