



Grandinote Celio Mk IV phono stage

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Over the past two years, I've been fortunate enough to experiment with several Grandinote products to finally come to the conclusion that they are all in a class of their own in the field of high fidelity.

It's amazing to see, after testing a Grandinote device, how many audio critics around the world have immediately adopted it as a reference device. I am no exception to the rule. The integrated Shinai I reviewed a few months ago has become one of my reference tools. Italian Grandinote appliances stand out with their Magnetosolid technology.

More precisely, this technology comes from the fusion and interaction of semiconductors and devices based on ferromagnetism. The circuit uses output transistors loaded by a transformer and each transistor has its own power supply which is totally dedicated to it. This completely eliminates the need for coupling capacitors and results in the successful fusion of tube and transistor, without the tubes.

One of the great benefits of this concept lies in the fact that you do not have to worry about replacing tubes on a regular basis. Gone are the worries of hearing the tubes deteriorate little by little while in use and constantly wondering if it's time to change them. Grandinote products are characterized by a sound that is accurate, precise and, above all, disarmingly natural. Not a transistor sound, not a sound tube. The sound is as if we were present at the performance.

Since I introduced the Grandinote Shinai integrated amplifier into my reference system, I have found myself listening to more music than ever before. I forget about technology, technical considerations and comparisons. It is in this context that I approached the Celio phono preamplifier from the same manufacturer.

Being a little skeptical, I doubted that this phono stage would surprise me to the point of wanting to replace my

current phono stage which is widely regarded as a world class reference.

DESCRIPTION

The Celio is moderately bulky for a phono preamplifier with a depth of 178mm, a width of 316 mm and a height of 148 mm and a weight of 7kg. It sports the industrial look of the brand in its matte black aluminum case. On its fascia, as on the other Grandinote devices, there is a chrome rectangle framing the brand's logo and a red light indicating that the power is on.

At the rear, there are RCA inputs and outputs in addition to a single balanced input and a single balanced XLR output, which is in fact somewhat unusual. This implies that for operation in balanced mode, we need to use two Celio, i.e. one for each channel.

The load adjustment for the phono cartridge is done by means of DIP (dual-in-line package) switches. The Celio offers ten loading options: 10, 20, 30, 50, 100, 200, 300, 500, 1000 Ohms and 47 k Ohms, which is amply acceptable to meet the requirements of all cartridges.

In addition, the gain of the device is adjustable by means of two switches which allow to choose between High and

Low. The grounding cable can be connected to two connectors. The first (GND1) connects it to the chassis, while the second (GND2) connects it to the signal terminals. This is particularly useful and much appreciated since it has happened to me many times to have to struggle to eliminate the background noise (hum) of a phono stages due to a hard-to-manage grounding scheme. Finally, there is a large red push button switch to turn on the power.

The Celio can accommodate MC (moving coil) and MM (moving magnet) phono cartridges. The gain for MC cartridges is 66dB and 45dB for MM.

The Celio works in pure class A without any feedback and direct coupled stages without any capacitors in the signal path between stages.

INSTALLATION

The set up is very simple. There are connections for mains cable, RCA inputs and grounding cable. For the loading of my phono cartridge, the Charisma Audio MC2, I chose the 200 ohms setting and set the gain to High. When powered on, the Celio remains silent for one minute. A warm-up time is recommended for best sound. A grounding check was performed by pushing the volume to a very high level which was without background noise or hum. The device had already been run in, so I did not have to go through this sometimes frustrating step.

LISTENING

Already very Impressed by earlier listening to the Shinaï integrated amplifier from the same manufacturer, I immediately listened to a record that, for me, is revealing in many ways. Henry Purcell's *Dido & Aeneas* with Tatiana Troyanos, Felicity Palmer and Richard Stilwell, the English Chamber Choir and the English Chamber Orchestra under the direction of Raymond Leppard. Erato label STU 71091.

I have long sought to know where the recording took place, without success, but I suspect it took place at Cadogan Hall in London which is a suitable place for an orchestra with choir. The orchestral opening already reveals the space. The orchestra is wide and the instruments are precisely located. First, the violins, on the left, begin delicately, followed by cellos and double basses, which are a little further back on the right. During act 1, Tatiana Troyanos is preceded by the harpsichord scintillating, delicate, unadorned and perfectly located in front of us. Her voice is rich, natural and totally devoid of electronic artifacts. The choir then joins the performance and fills all the space at the back behind the singer and the orchestra.

It was then Felicity Palmer's turn to take over. Her perfectly localized voice is reproduced with authority and ease. When the second voice joins in, one can see them very clearly side by side, and not in a tangled way. Later, we hear two choirs with echo. The first chorus behind the orchestra and the second at the back of the hall. The effect is impressive. What the Celio brings out compared to all the other phono preamplifiers I've heard in this passage is the intelligibility of the voices and the ability to distinguish each of the lyrics. All in all, it's the body of the performance and the music. Everything is by far, richer, fuller and more dynamic. The





location in space is the most realistic I've heard. I insist, in my tests, to start with classical music recorded in a concert hall rather than in a studio, because it is, in my opinion, the best way to evaluate an audio device. The recordings in studio and multi-track are so manipulated that they are not fully revealing the accuracy of the devices reviewed.

Now, silence, we play! Since I acquired this record in 1975, the string quartets of Beethoven by the Vegh quartet on Valois label is one of my trusted references. First, for the performance itself and just as much for sound quality of the recording. A masterpiece. I have been listening to it regularly for forty years and I never tire of it. And now the Celio makes me appreciate it as never before. Two elements stand out in the performance of Celio: the silence and the absence of noise that allows the listener to hear everything. It is as if we had cleaned everything around the music which allows us to perceive many more details in the recording like the move-

THE NATURALNESS AND TONAL BALANCE OF THE CELIO RENDER THE ESSENCE OF MUSIC: THE EMOTION.

ment of the fingers on the strings of the instruments and we clearly feel the space around each musician. In addition, one of the major qualities of Celio is its ability to reveal the gestalt of the music. Everything is precisely proportioned. No more thin music. The body of each instrument is reproduced with accuracy. Body, body and still the body, finally!

It all comes without artifice or coloration. The cellos assert themselves with precision and accuracy, taking their place and make us vibrate with them. We are no longer a spectator, but a participant. Throughout all this, it must be added that the naturalness and tonal balance of the Celio convey the essential element of music: emotion.

Let's move on to the piano with another of my reference discs, that has driven me in my search for the absolute sound system: Martha Argerich performing the «Tocatta in C minor» by Johann Sebastian Bach on Deutsche Grammophon 2531 088. I remember hearing this record in a high-end audio shop at the time and being utterly stirred. I do not remember all the equipment that was playing except for a Goldmund Studio turntable, if I remember correctly.

Since that day, I have been obsessed with the idea of finding this sound again. It has been a long and expensive journey through the successive purchases of turntables, speakers and amplifiers that have been running at my home for the last thirty years. Never have I managed to find that sound. But the Celio, married to the brand's integrated Shinai amplifier, is the last link in my system that has finally solved this conundrum. Three distinctive elements are present: the speakers disappear completely and the piano is well set in its place. The dynamics are phenomenal and the fortissimos are without harshness or unbearable stridency. The tonal balance is perfect. There is nothing lacking in body and bass of the piano that now has all its weight and magnitude. And if we remember the silence mentioned before, it leaves all the room to hear the extended extinction of the notes. This is, in my opinion, a real tour de force that I did not expect. A revelation and for me, a real relief.

ORCHESTRAL MASSES

I was curious to see, or rather hear, how far the Celio could push the reproduction of Gershwin's «Rhapsody in Blue». I was already very impressed listening to the Shinai. In addition to all the qualities listed in my previous review, the Celio adds even more precision, air, space, width and depth to the recording. Once again, the quietness of the Celio allows us to perceive even more details regarding the instruments further back in the orchestra as exemplified in the accuracy and control in the low frequencies of the timpani. And of course, no clogging even in the most extreme passages. The piano, for its part, is just like the previous recording: fluid, dynamic and articulate.

Throughout this test, I have easily listened to almost one hundred and fifty albums. Every time, I rediscovered each recording. I found what I had been missing for so long. It's as if the Shinai / Celio Grandinote combo cleans everything and puts the music in proper perspective with excellent tonal balance, accuracy, naturalness and of course, a musicality that appeals to your emotions rather than to your analytical mind.



In fact, every time I did find myself listening to a musical performance rather than to a sound system. That's really what distinguishes Grandinote devices and puts them in a category of their own that is quite different from anything else in the high-fidelity market.

There might possibly be even higher rated phono stages than the Celio, but, in my opinion, they would be in a stratospheric price order. Even if the Celio is not inexpensive, it is well worth its price and if you can afford it, the Shinai / Celio set guarantees to immerse you totally in the music. I have not heard anything as intoxicating and musical as this ensemble.

After reading this, you can easily guess the answer to the question that came to my mind: should I replace my reference phono preamp with the Celio? Absolutely!

Good listening.

Grandinote Celio Mk.IV phono stage : \$9500
Distribution in Canada: Goerner Audio
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