



Sound of silence

This all-valve phono stage is a fastidiously engineered piece of kit. **Ed Selley** sees if it lives up to the gold standard

Leben's amps and preamps are exclusively line-level only so, in order to provide an in-house option for analogue fans, the RS-30EQ phono stage exists as a standalone external unit that can be connected to a turntable. Like everything else the company makes, it is a valve-based design. The circuit is built around a pair of JAN 12AT7A valves with a single 6X5GT working as a rectifier.

The circuit these valves are placed in uses passive EQ rather than an active current feedback design. This can produce very good results, but is sensitive to induced noise. In order to ensure that this is avoided, Leben fits an 'Orient Core' transformer placed inside a heavy shield within the casework. In keeping with a number of valve designs, it is only fitted for use with MM cartridges. Gain is quoted as 23.5dB and the maximum output of the RCA outputs is given as 175mV. You can use the RS-30EQ with an external step-up transformer so it will work with an MC cart, but at

an additional cost. The level of gain on offer should be sufficient for most applications but some high-output MC designs described as suitable for moving-magnet use might struggle.

A single pair of RCA inputs with a ground post is partnered with a stereo RCA output and the only physical control is a power switch – which, annoyingly, is a different shape and colour to the one on the matching integrated. The connections are slightly recessed which might preclude the use of very bulky cables, but this isn't an issue during testing. The chassis is the same size as the CS-300F (HFC 481) and build quality is similarly superb, with the customary gold metalwork complemented by Canadian White Ash sidecheeks.

Sound quality

Connected up initially to a Chord Electronics CPM2800 MkII amp and AVID's Ingenium Twin turntable (HFC 379), SME M2-9 tonearm and Nagaoka MP-200 cartridge (HFC 434), this is possibly the quietest valve phono stage

I've ever tested. This means everything comes from a silent background and the effect on performance is immediate.

Though it's not especially lush sounding, it delivers Hayden Thorpe's *Diviner* with a feeling of tonal realism and immediacy. Thorpe is a tangible presence in the room; his movements and piano playing stitched into the wider performance and the effect this has on the realism is pronounced. This is further aided by the absolutely sensational tonality. This is a simple album that leaves nowhere for mistakes to hide and the Leben doesn't make any. The piano in particular is superbly presented; the RS-30EQ reproducing the decay of notes in a way that is beyond many rivals.

Switch to a more capable Vertere Sabre cartridge and further positive traits are revealed. The bass weight is extremely impressive, conveying the low-end swell of Marina's *Hand Made Heaven* with authority and so that everything has a very believable feeling of scale. Instrumental to this is that the bass extension is detailed and controlled, starting and stopping with the immediacy needed to ensure it never sounds slow or soft. It reveals some limits to timing when pushed with the ballistic *Mr Ed* on the eponymously titled Mammoth WVH album, but puts up more of a fight than you might expect and the tonal balance stays outstanding throughout.

Conclusion

This is not a cheap phono stage and there are further costs if you want to use it with moving-coil cartridges. Like the recently tested CS-300F integrated, though, the manner in which it uses valves is less about creating a 'valve sound' as it is doing the things that Leben feels are important. This means it is as happy in a solid-state system as it is a valve one and the result is a supremely talented and even-handed phono stage that should win many admirers ●

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Leben RS-30EQ

ORIGIN
Japan

TYPE
Phono stage

WEIGHT
6kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
340 x 140 x 240mm

FEATURES
● MM phono stage with passive EQ circuit
● Single RCA input
● Single RCA output

DISTRIBUTOR
Midland Audio X-Change Ltd.

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WEBSITE
lebenhifi.com

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Vivid and tonally believable sound from a negligible noise floor; very well made

VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** MM only; rather large; not cheap

BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★ **WESAY:** A fabulous-sounding device that brings a considered level of 'valve magic' to your vinyl

FEATURES ★★★★★

OVERALL

