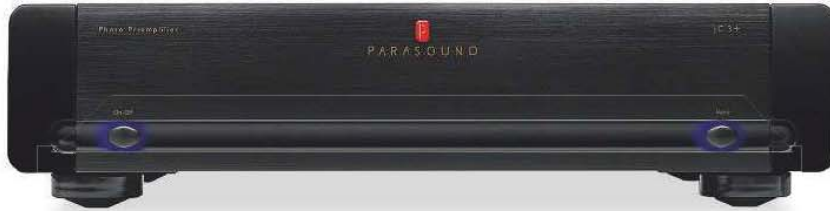


PHONO STAGE

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Parasound Halo JC3+

From the moment the hi-fi world realised that separate phono stages could and usually did sound better than the phono boards built into pre and integrated amps, the market hasn't looked back.

One such was Parasound's JC3, a beautifully finished unit just as lovingly executed internally. Carefully compartmentalised and heavily shielded to reduce noise it also offered a choice between balanced and unbalanced inputs and a mono switch for the enjoyment of early vinyl pressings.

But some vinylistas thought its lack of variable cartridge loading was a serious omission. In truth, most users of modern pick-ups don't really need this facility, and designer John Curl had decided to omit it since it would add complexity which might compromise sonics.

Now though, the designer has decided that it is possible to offer improved flexibility without sullyng the sound, and has come up with the Halo JC3+, pitched at £3300.

'It scythed through the mix like the proverbial knife through butter'

As well as adding independent load adjustment for moving-coil cartridges, the unit's dual mono phono module circuit boards have been improved, and the power supply has been uprated too, says the manufacturer.

The load varying potentiometers on the unit's rear panel are made by Vishay to Curl's specification,

giving fine adjustment capability for each channel from 50-550ohm. Meanwhile the phono module PCB has been tweaked to further optimise the sound, and has 24kt gold-plated copper circuit traces.

In use, the new Parasound has the look and feel of a luxury product, although it is quite large compared to some designs. Its thick, curved alloy fascia has just a power switch, a mono switch and an illuminated logo, while at the rear you find both RCA phono and XLR inputs – and those load-adjusting potentiometers will obviously have real appeal.

FLAVOURSOME SOUND

Essentially, the JC3+ is an unerringly clean and crisp, modern-sounding design, yet one that remains fully able to communicate the alluring sound of vinyl replay.

With the title track from Joan Armatrading's *Me, Myself, I* [A&M Records] the phono stage showed its very low noise levels, making the opening solo vocals appear to come out of nowhere. It carried the opening drum strikes powerfully too, the reverberation audibly bouncing off all four corners of the studio booth in which the drum kit was recorded.

The Parasound can impart the inherent 'flavour' of a recording with consummate ease. For example, the lush early '70s soul strains of the title track from Isaac Hayes' *Shaft OST* [Stax] sounded dramatically warmer and more sugary than the quintessentially late '70s dry rock sound of Rush's 'The Spirit Of Radio' [*Permanent Waves*

ABOVE: The JC3+ comes in a choice of black or silver finishes. Its front panel confines itself to a power button and a mono switch for use with early LPs, while the finely finished rear panel offers unbalanced RCA phono or balanced XLR inputs, plus MC load adjustment potentiometers, MM/MC switching and a ground terminal

– Mercury]. There's no one type of music it thrives on, or is voiced for.

We were delighted by the ease with which the Parasound picked through the Rush track, since it's a compressed recording with close-miked vocals, a tight, heavily damped drum kit and lots of electric guitars running through multiple effects pedals. Yet the JC3+ scythed through the mix like the proverbial sharp knife through butter, hitting just the right balance between detail retrieval and the ability to communicate the innate musicality of the song.

And if it doesn't have the velvety patina of a tube phono stage (or indeed their associated slightly lazy, hazy demeanour) there is none of the tonal brittleness that some transistorised designs possess. It offers an admirably taut and controlled bass, which is strong but not overblown, a smooth and transparent midband completely devoid of the characteristic solid-state sheen than many competitors possess, and a delicate yet well-resolved treble.

It acted like an open window on the Donald Byrd track 'Lhasa's Dream' [from *Street Lady*, Blue Note Records], exposing the distinct sound of the studio with its rather rudimentary four-track analogue recorder, yet letting the music soar out and beguile the listener too. That's quite a trick!

VERDICT

Parasound's Halo JC3+ phono stage indeed stands out: beautifully designed and built, it also boasts a good range of facilities. We've heard few better sounding designs at any price, and this makes it an exceptional product. Ⓜ

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Input loading (MM/MC)	47kohm / 50-550ohm
Input sensitivity (MM/MC, re. 0dBV)	3.04mV / 583µV
Input overload (MM/MC, re. 1% THD)	31.5mV / 6.1mV
Max. output (re. 1% THD) / Impedance	19.6V / 195ohm (balanced)
A-wtd S/N ratio (MM/MC, re. 0dBV)	88.1dB / 71.5dB
Frequency response (20Hz-20kHz)	+0.2dB to -0.45dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, re. 0dBV)	0.0017-0.012%
Power consumption	3W
Dimensions (WHD) / Weight	437x105x350mm / 8.6kg