iFi iPhono 3 Black Label and Chord Electronics Huei Phonostages

Two for the Seesaw

Drew Kalbach

In any vinyl-based audio chain, the phonostage is one of the most important components. It takes the teeny, tiny signal from the cartridge and boosts it enough for the preamp and the amp to make sweet music. It's an extremely sensitive component, doing multiple, insanely important jobs, and I'm picky about my phonostage. Thus, I was very excited to receive two new compact black boxes to play around with, the iFi iPhono 3 Black Label ($999) and the Chord Electronics Huei ($1495).

The iFi iPhono 3 is a long, relatively thin and compact rectangle, with small dipswitches on the bottom. There is no power switch—it remains on at all times. Little green lights glow to let me know it is working. The input connections are at one end of the rectangle, and the outputs at the other. It isn't the sort of thing I'd keep out on a desk. I love a big shiny silver box, but sometimes it's nice to declutter.

The Chord Electronics Huei is also very compact, and it is also black, but it prominently features four glowing lights bumped up along the front with a translucent plastic bit on the top that shows off the guts. While small, the Huei is definitely meant to be shown off. There is a small power switch on the Huei's back, along with the inputs and outputs, but otherwise it is fairly simple.

Despite their small sizes, both phonostages are incredibly versatile. That is the first thing I look for in a phonostage, especially in this price range—most folks spending $999 or $1499 probably need the ability to run some low-output mc cartridges. Since carts come in all shapes and sizes, most phonostages have multiple loading options to maximize their compatibility. If you only plan on using an mm cartridge or a high-output mc, then great, congratulations, you're a fully self-actualized human being, who knows exactly what you want forever and will never change, and I'm jealous. But for the rest of us, flexibility is an asset in itself—part of the joy of high-end audio is trying a wide range of equipment, and both of these phonostages will allow for a ton of variation.

Setup was relatively easy, once I understood how the two different phonostages changed their load settings. Starting with the iFi iPhono 3 Black Label, I attached the RCA cables, then plugged it into mains with the iPower X, which was an upgraded power supply and came standard. Easy enough—but next was the slightly complicated part. The bottom of the iPhono is filled with little baby switches and a ton of options. Fortunately, iFi had a super handy online calculator that essentially did all the work after I input my cartridge specs. The iPhono featured loading options from 22 ohms on up to 47k ohms, with six stops between, and either 36, 48, 60, or 72dB of gain. For my Zu DL-103, I chose 60dB of gain with a load of 330 ohms. The online calculator showed me the dipswitch layout and made executing it totally brainless, which is sort of necessary for me, although there is also a physical chart for anyone without access to the website.

Next up, I plugged in the Chord Electronics Huei, fired it up, and took a moment to marvel at the pretty lights. I'm a simple man and I like shiny things. However, the lights did more than make me happy—they were also buttons that changed the settings. Each color corresponded to a different load, and switching between them was as easy as tapping and watching the colors change. A nice, glossy chart explained how it all worked, and I settled on purple for the load, which was 320 ohms, and blue for the gain, which was 60dB. The Huei included a bunch of different gain steps—from 49dB on up to 70dB, with six total stops in between for the mc section, and 21dB on up to 42dB with six stops for the mm section. The impedance can be adjusted from 100 ohms up to 3.7k ohms for mc's, and is a strict 47k ohms for mm's. The Chord Electronics also included XLR outputs, which changed the gain slightly, allowing for up to 76dB max with an mc, and 48dB max with an mm. Overall, the Huei was the easier of the two to get set up, and had slightly more loading options—but neither was particularly difficult to use, and

The iPhono really nailed the midrange, with Jackson's voice in particular sounding full-bodied and resonant.

both were extremely versatile.

I started my listening session with the Chord Electronics Huei. I put on the Delvin Lamarr Organ Trio's new record *I Told You So*, which is an upbeat, funky joyride of a record. Overall, I was struck by a sense of ease and fluidity. The lower end was solid, though it could sometimes border on wooly, while the top end didn't quite flash like lightning. The organ's upper and sometimes harshest registers were mellowed out, while the deepest bass notes and the drums really shone. It was shockingly pleasant to listen to, and a groove-based record like *I Told You So* really benefited from the Huei's somewhat softer presentation. (In particular, the track "From the Streets," which features a bright opening guitar riff, never bordered on harsh through the Chord Electronics, though it might have through a brighter phonostage.)

Listening to the same record through the iFi iPhono 3 Black Label necessitated a slight shift in perspective. Low end was tighter, mids were equally smooth, but the upper registers sparkled. I dislike using the word neutral, but it felt very neutral, in the sense that no single sound-range stood out. The dynamics were extra tight and shimmery, and that might've been due to the iPhono's very low background noise. Of the two, I felt like the iPhono had a much more forward presentation, and the top end and the midrange both really stood out. On that same track "From the Streets," the guitar riff rang clear over the tight drumming and had a touch more shimmer, the reverb held a moment longer, and the dynamics felt sharper overall. There were some borderline rough moments, but the iPhono never flinched in its performance.

Next up on the turntable was Joe Jackson's album *Night and Day*, recently reissued by Intervention Records. I kept the iPhono 3 set up and dove in to the track "T.V. Age" on the "Night" side. Jackson's voice has a touch of grit at times, a slight growl in the throat, and it came through crystal clear. The shining chimes glistened just so, and the sax was butter smooth. The iPhono really nailed the midrange, with Jackson's voice in particular sounding full-bodied and resonant. Low end was solid enough, tight and pleasant, though it never dug deep, and the kicks didn't blow me away. Vibraphone danced and sparkled, and the pacing was dead on.

Switching over to the Huei, and sticking with the same track, the differences were minute, but definitely there. Low end kicked a touch harder, and the top end didn't sparkle quite as much. The midrange was very charming, and the choral voices sounded enormous. The saxophone had a little chunky force, and while the chimes still gleamed, they didn't have that same sharp gleam they had through the iFi. The dynamic slam around each smash of the vibraphone was forceful, and overall, the drums and the groove were tight, and kept me incredibly engaged.

Specs & Pricing

iFi iPhono 3 Black Label
Frequency response: 10Hz–100kHz (±0.3dB); 20Hz–20kHz (±0.2dB)
Dynamic range: mm (36dB) >108dB (A-weighted); mc (60dB) >106dB (A-weighted)
Signal-to-Noise Ratio: mm (36dB) >85dB (A-weighted re. 5mV); mc (60dB) >85dB (A-weighted re. 0.5mV)
Crosstalk: <-71dB (1kHz)
THD: <0.005% (MM 36dB 1V out 600R Load)
Output impedance: <100 ohms
Dimensions: 6.2" x 2.3" x 1.1"
Weight: 0.58 lbs.
Price: $999

Chord Electronics Huei
Input impedance: mm, 47k ohms; MC 100 ohms–3.7k ohms, 12-step, user-selectable
Gain range: mm, 21dB–42dB, 8-step, user-selectable/ MC 49dB–70dB, 8-step, user-selectable
Equalization accuracy: +/- 0.1dB
Frequency response: 12Hz to 25kHz
Output impedance: 520 ohms (resistive)
Dimensions: 6.23" x 1.61" x 2.8"
Weight: 1.44 lbs.
Price: $1495

iFI AUDIO
Abbingdon N.A./iFi audio USA
105 Professional Pkwy, Suite 1506, Yorktown, VA 23693
1085 Blair Avenue, Sunnyvale, CA 94087
(800) 799-IFIA
ifi-audio.com

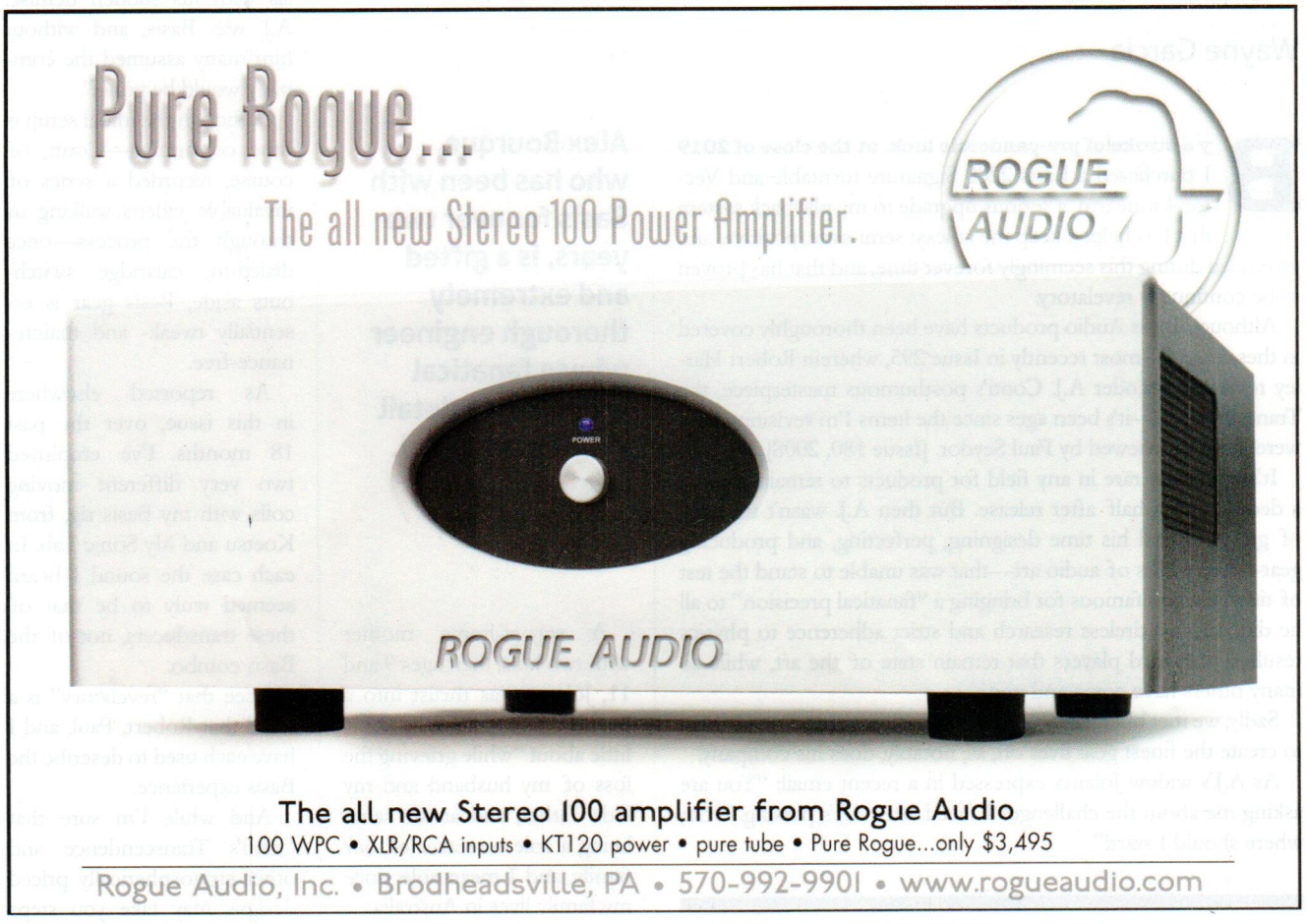
THE SOUND ORGANISATION
(North American Distributor)
1009 Oakmead Drive
Arlington, Texas 76011
(972) 234-0182
soundorg.com
chordelectronics.co.uk

Finally, I wanted to end my listening with a record I am particularly obsessed with: *Tone Poem* by Charles Lloyd and the Marvels. I've been deep into the Blue Note Tone Poet reissues, but was a little skeptical of this one—and boy, was I wrong. That's the best sort of wrong, when my preconceived ideas about something get flipped on their head, and a whole new world of awesome opens up instead. I love an unexpected pleasure, which is maybe a good metaphor for these two phonostages, if you'll forgive my brief digression and allow for a tortured transition. Anyway, starting with the Huei, the track "Tone Poem" opened with a relatively abstract saxophone solo on a syncopated beat. The gentle drums sounded a bit soft, though the sax was tight and centered. When

the song shifted, and the full band came in, the slide guitar waxed gently in the background, drifting over the music like gossamer. It was smooth and pleasant, and lent an airy, gorgeous feel. The Huei did justice to that slide guitar, in particular, and its tailing reverb added a good weight and body to the entire tune.

Switching over to the iPhono 3, "Tone Poem" sounded much sharper and more unrelenting. The taps and soft kicks of the drums were more solid, while the sax was centered and grounded. I suspected that the blacker background helped make the initial, relatively quiet and abstract composition come alive. As the song progressed, the soundstage opened up nice and wide, and the slide guitar continued its lovely wailing, though better focused through the iPhono 3. Cymbals were crisp with a good shimmer. Overall, the presentation was gripping, and the sound well defined and deep. There was nothing lean about it, though the iPhono felt very unforgiving in its strict reproduction of timbre.

One final comparison: My own Rogue Audio Triton II straddled the line between the Huei and the iPhono 3 in a very interesting way. If the iPhono 3 sat at the far end of the spectrum, closest to purely analytical, then the Huei would be at the opposite end, on the warmer and more colorful side. The Triton II combined some of each of their qualities, such as the heavy low end of the Huei and the quiet background of the iPhono 3, and perhaps sat right between them, leaning slightly closer to the sound profile of the iPhono 3. Both the Huei and the iPhono 3 have their strengths, and ultimately exist for different tastes. Which brings me back to the beginning of this review—the ultimate joy of high-end audio is its endless variation, and the ability to tweak a system to personal preferences. And there's the music too, of course.

Wrapping up then, the Chord Electronics Huei and the iFi iPhono 3 Black Label had surprisingly different sound signatures. Both phonostages allowed for plenty of customization options, and both would work with a very wide range of cartridges. The Huei had an almost syrupy sweetness to its sound, with a smooth and pleasant midrange and low end, while the iPhono 3 was aggressively neutral, with deep black backgrounds and an expansive soundstage. I'd recommend listening to either of them, and consider how their sound might work in your particular system. Both are well built, easily tweaked, and have enough customization to future-proof them for a long while. **tas**

Both phonostages allowed for plenty of customization options, and both would work with a very wide range of cartridges.