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Life is - please forgive me pathos - a sequence of stories. Contemporary liberal arts calls them "narratives", but 'stories' better reflect what I intent to convey. Audio manufacturers also tell their stories. We, journalists, add an extra layer to them. Each of them must be interesting, otherwise it all wouldn't make sense - the producer must "tell" the story using sound and product's philosophy, and the journalist must describe the sound, combine it with philosophy, and finally evaluate it.

I must say that the story told by Massimiliano Magri particularly appealed to me. Knowing nothing about his brand, not knowing his products nor himself, without hesitation, I granted the Best Sound | Audio Video • [Praha 2017](#) award to his system. The award-winning system included the company's newest loudspeakers, [Shinai](#) and Volta – a music files player, which I initially took for the amplifier's power supply. It seems that files are for Max, as his friends confirmed, are the main source of the signal.

I've heard it many times from readers, distributors and manufacturers that I was crazy testing the top turntables and cartridges using such a "ridiculous" phonostage - even if they did not say it literally, they meant it. I've been answering calmly that this is a device, which has its weaknesses and is far from perfect. But I know its problems very well and I've used in hundreds test so it is an ideal reference point. In addition, the device is small, compact, offers a lot of settings. And above all it delivers good enough performance, everything in it is put together in such a way, that the most expensive phonostages I know are not just *better*, because that's obvious, but they are more of a development of everything that I already have with the Sensor Prelude IC.



The uniqueness of Grandinote Celio is based on the fact that it meets all the basic requirements of the test device, because it is very well made, solid and reliable. I would prefer that the gain could be regulated in a few steps, but you can not have everything. The most important thing, however, is that it is almost an exact development of the qualities of the RCM Audio phonostage, but with a few modifications that resulted in the same kind of performance but not "the same" and generally - better.

Its main features are saturation and softness. These two features are associated with tubes, but Shinai, the integrated amplifier of this company, sounded in a very similar way. The sound is actually warm, if by that we mean fleshy bottom with a juicy treble and maybe that is why records with Celio are presented from their better side, without pretended neutrality of the sound. There is no lack of it, I will elaborate on the in a second, but we also do not



Max during Audio Video Show 2017 in Warsaw, leaning on Mach 4 loudspeaker, the latest addition to company's portfolio.

However, it might not be quite true - as it seems, the most important product of this company is the inconspicuous, now offered in its fourth version, phono preamplifier called Celio. The long lifespan of this product, subjected to small changes/improvements, but still present in the lineup, has two sources: human and technical based. The human side is represented by the name itself: it honors Massimiliano's Grandfather. Technical side is equally important: the system was built as a "finished" project with a specific purpose. As the constructor of the Shinai amplifier said, his products are actually tube designs only... with semiconductor components replacing tubes. Let's add that power supply is a key element and it occupies roughly 9/10th of the interior of Celio.

| CELIO

Celio is the MM / MC phono preamplifier by the Italian company Grandinote and is the only phonostage in the lineup. Available in the fourth installment is, as I see it, Max's favorite product. It is no coincidence that he writes about it "it's the best phonostage I know" and believes that it can go head to head with any competitor, regardless of its price, and will stand its ground.

And yet it is not the biggest or even the heaviest phono preamplifier I know. Celio features a deep chassis and a small, almost square front panel, where one finds only one element - a red power LED. It is a small black box hosting both, phono preamplifier and power supply stages. Despite this simplicity, the preamplifier looks very nice and robust.

There is much more going on the rear panel. It turns out that this phonostage can be "upgrade" by adding a second unit. In a "single" edition this is a classic, stereo, unbalanced device with RCA inputs and outputs. In the middle of the rear panel, however, you can see a single XLR input and output for balanced signal. And that's because a single Celio unit might be used as a mono, balanced amplification system. One adds a second unit, and creates a two-unit, balanced phono preamplifier with a gain of 45 dB for MM cartridges and 66 dB for MC ones.

There are not that many settings for user to operate, because to change the gain one uses a single switch, allowing him to choose gain for MM or MC pickup. There is also no possibility of changing the capacity. One can change the load for particular cartridge using micro-switches that allow to choose one of ten values: 10 | 20 | 30 50 100 200 300 500 1000 and 47 000 Ω . In previous versions, the load change was performed using properly prepared RCA jumpers.

Below there is also an EIC power inlet and a red, mechanical power switch. In the earlier version, the button was placed on the front panel. Perhaps this change is associated with Max observation, who recommends leaving the device on all the time, because then the preamplifier sounds best. An interesting elements are two ground terminals - one (1) is used to connect the mass to the chassis, and the other (2) to connect mass of the system; the

have an impression of any point of view being imposed on us.



The phonostage perfectly differentiates recordings, because the best sound came from the 45 r.p.m. re-editions of albums such as *After Midnight - Complete Session* by Nat 'King' Cole trio and a fantastic one-sided version of the Count Basie and Tony Bennett *Basie / Bennett* album, released by Classic Records. Celio delivers this type of albums with solicitude, with saturation of the foreground and rich deeper layers. The space of such recordings is marked rather by reducing the size of phantom images than emphasizing the sound attack.

The neutrality that I mentioned here has a "human face", because it does not allow brightness of the sound. The RCM Audio phonostage has also never done it, but its method was different - it showed much more micro information, which combined created a new quality. The Italian device will give a little more weight to the lower midrange, playing it in a more fleshy and dense way. There is a little less information there, it's probably the most important difference between these devices. We also get a stronger momentum, power, something that gives the music real mass. And that's what I missed with the Polish product.

Records cut from digital media and played using Celio have a slightly more "mechanical" treble and not so tangible bodies of instruments, everything is a little flatter, which proves very good resolution of this device. But we also get something with it, which usually does not exist with analog versions, i.e. an extremely black background between sounds. It was very clear with the 140-gram Mobile Fidelity reissue of Dead Can Dance *Into The Labyrinth*, but I guess I liked it even more on the unique album, *Oh, You Beautiful Doll* by Mel Tormé, released by the ephemeral label The Trumpets of Jericho.

This vinyl was prepared from a remaster of a very old material, which resulted in significantly rolled-off treble, the lack of low bass, etc. But what a voice there was! Inherently quite high pitched, used for singing scat, it can become bit coarse when provoked by lean, too bright or harsh sounding device. Celio, together with the Madake cartridge and the Massimo turntable, extracted all the best from it, i.e. density and fullness, without displaying the shortcoming - I really liked it! It's the kind of sound that encourages you to keep listening, without falling asleep.

I would say that this phonostage delivers a non-intrusive, non-offensive presentation. Yes, it exposes the warmer side of recordings, it feels best in the materials that include real emotions, it is clear. The last thing you could say about it, however, is that it enforces something on you, that it imposes itself with its own "personality". And this is a rare combination, because the most common is that the sound is either distanced, striving towards neutrality, or saturated and each of these options is "enforced" on listener. Celio, like the Prelude Sensor IC, does not do one or the other, although the Italian device is closer to the second option than the Polish one.

One could say that it sounds like a tube device, if it was not different from what I remembered from the [Vitus Audio SP-102](#)

user can select the variant that grants him smaller (or no) hum. I have to admit that there is no noise, and the hum is minimal. My reference phonostage was slightly better in this aspect.

Celio is a preamplifier with a two-stage gain system with RIAA correction. The system was built without negative feedback and works in class A, which is to ensure the same "sweetness, musicality and naturalness known from Magnetosolid amplifiers" (a quote from company materials). The individual stages are coupled directly without capacitors. As you can see on the back it is a dual mono circuit, even the left and right channel inputs and outputs are separated, user also sets the (MM/MC) gain separately for each channel.

- Testing Methodology -

The phonostage was reviewed with Transrotor Massimo, and [Miyajima Labs Madake](#) and [Zero](#) cartridges, and also [Denon DL-103](#); the latter featured AL-S body by MusiKraft. For Miyajimas I chose 100 or 200 Ω loading, depending on my mood, for Denon it was 300 or 500 Ω .

I compared it to my reference device, the RCM Audio Sensor Prelude IC. During the test Celio was placed on the middle shelf of the Finite Elemente Pagode Edition rack. It was powered using [Acoustic Revive Power Reference Triple-C](#) with the [RAS-14 Triple-C](#) passive filter.

GRANDINOTE in „High Fidelity”

- Sound -

Recordings used for the test (a selection)

- *Volcano Extravaganza*, The Vinyl Factory VE178, 45 RPM 180 g LP (2016)
- Brendan Perry, *Ark*, Cooking Vinyl/Vinyl 180 VIN180LP040, 2 x 180 g (2011)
- Count Basie & Tony Bennett, *Basie/Bennett*, Roulette/Classic Records SR 25 072, "45 rpm series", 4 x one side pressing, 200 g LP (1959/2006)
- Dead Can Dance, *Into The Labyrinth*, 4AD/Mobile Fidelity MoFi-2-001, "Silver Line Special Limited Edition No. 1545", 2 x 140 g LP (1993/2010)
- Frank Sinatra, *The Voice*, Columbia/Classic Records CL 743, Quix SV-P, „50th Anniversary", 180 g LP (1955/2005)
- Kraftwerk, *Radioactivity*, King Klang Produkt/EMI, STUMM 304, „Kling Klang Digital Master", 180 g LP (1975/2009);
- Mel Tormé, *Oh, You Beautiful Doll*, The Trumpets of Jericho - Silver Line 904333-980, 180 g LP (2000)
- Nat 'King' Cole and the Trio, *After Midnight - Complete Session*, Columbia/Analogue Productions 28180, 3 x 180 g 45 rpm LP (1957/2010)
- Steve Marcus + J. Inagaki & Soul Media, *Something. Adventure In Sounds*, Nippon Columbia NCB-7003, LP (1971)

Japanese issues available at

I will start with a few sentences about the accompanying devices in the reference system of an audio magazine. They must fulfill many, often mutually exclusive, tasks. They must be, above all, of the highest possible quality, reliable, i.e. with repetitive performance regardless of time of day or night, as easy as possible to connect and operate, as well as solid enough to withstand several hours of daily work for at least several years. Each of the reviewers, if they know what they are doing, balances between

(solid-state), Phasemation EA-1000 (tube) and [Convergent Audio Technology SL-1 Legend](#) (another tube). This is not a "tube-like" sound in the same sense, because its character was closer to the sound of the [Audio Tekne TEA-2000](#), which is not a typical tube device. Both saturation and openness are its qualities, there is no place for masking high tones. The bottom is fleshy, but it does not go as low as with RCM Audio preamplifiers, not only Prelude, but mainly [TheRIAA](#).

Summary

What we do - us, or specialist journalists - is something similar to telling a story. By sticking to facts, building events around them, we refer to our knowledge, sensitivity and even feelings that we can't really prove with hard evidence. A truly valuable review is - in my opinion - one that, passing on hard facts, does so casually, keeping the reader's attention and appealing to her or his emotions.

It came to my mind after the first song heard from Celio - *She's Funny That Way* by Frank Sinatra from the *The Voice* Classic Records' Quix SV-P vinyl edition. This is the artist's first studio album released by Columbia Records in 1946, back then on four 78 rpm discs. Two years later, then already very popular material was released on the 10" 33 1/3 RPM record. Finally, in 1955, the 12" version was released with twelve songs, being the basis for the re-edition in question.

This is a disc made of vinyl acetates, and therefore a „double crackling" - due to the source of the signal and the way of its reproduction. And yet with Grandinote Celio it told a great story - but presented in a relaxing, stress-free way, it was „retro" sound - true again - but not closed in melancholy. The Italian preamplifier is perhaps not the best preamplifier in the world, but it does everything that my reference RCM Audio does. In addition, it does it a little differently, because it adds saturation and weight, sweetness and smoothness to the sound. It does not exaggerate with anything and only the most expensive phonostages prepared by the most important players on the market add to this the greater momentum, better pronounced foreground and higher resolution. At this price level though it is a bliss!

- Design -

Celio is a phono preamplifier for Moving Magnet (MM) and Moving Coil (MC) cartridges. It is a medium sized cuboid with a narrow front wall and a large depth. The housing is made of neatly-fitting metal sheets forming a double "C" - upper and lower ones, screwed to the internal chassis. At the front there is a large company logo and a large red LED. The rear panel is made of polished stainless steel. The metal sheet is screwed to the rear wall, to which the RCA sockets are screwed in - they are therefore slightly recessed, which made it impossible to use Siltech Triple Crown cables with thick plugs. I would gladly see in this place Furutech or Cardas RCA connectors. The device stands on three metal hemispheres - one at the front and two at the back.



these elements, determining their own hierarchy of profits and losses. Although we are still exposed to many temptations, because we listen to interesting products, we stick to what we know, knowing that it will pay off.



And so is the story of [Sensor Prelude IC](#) phono stage by the Katowice-based company [RCM Audio](#), a manufacturing branch of the [RCM](#) distributor. It's been almost ten years from its test, that took place in November 2007 („High Fidelity” No. 43). This is a pure coincidence that after 10 years I finally found a phono stage that fulfills all my requirements and could possibly replace RCM in my system.

The electronic circuit is assembled on a single, large printed circuit board. It is not difficult to notice that the audio system is only a fraction of the whole electrical system - the rest is its power supply. We will find there a large toroidal transformer fixed on its bottom, under a rigid steel shielding - there are two secondary windings for the left and right channel, and a capacitor bank - four larger at the input of the power supply and sixteen smaller in the second section, eight per channel.

The audio circuit is surface-soldered and it is based on transistors. At the input there are single ones of medium power, from which the markings were removed. The next stage consists of classic, low-power transistors. In the passive RIAA correction system, there are nice, metalized polypropylene capacitors of a Taiwanese company [JB Capacitors](#).

Technical specifications (according to manufacturer)

Gain:

- MC = 66 dB

- MM = 45 dB

Class A, no negative feedback

Dual-mono

Directly coupled stages, no capacitors

Power consumption: 9 W

Dimensions (W x H x D): 178 x 148 x 316 mm

Weight: 7 kg

Warranty: 5 years

Vinyl Club **AC** Records

Galeria



Gallery