

High Fidelity

monthly magazine for hi-fi enthusiasts

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REVIEW

Text: Marek Dyba

Photos: Marek Dyba

Marcin Olszewski

High Fidelity

High Fidelity

When I planned my trip to Munich for the HighEnd Show in 2013 I had never been to Poland so Munich seemed to be the only place to meet him. I didn't waste any time and contacted him to set up an appointment. Dan told me he was coming but in fact to the other Show that took place at exactly the same time – HiFi Delux in Maribor. He told me that his approach to shows was as reasonable as to hotel. That said, this show might not be visited by as many people as HiEnd, but it is exactly what makes this show more private, less crowded and... surely less expensive to attend. We sat down for coffee with Dan and Kristin Rose Boyd, ModWright's Executive Director of Operations, sipping a very nice, cold Weissbeer and talked for almost three hours about many interesting topics.

One of the "topics" I was particularly interested in were phonostages. ModWright had offered in one of its brochures to send me a very good one (as far as I know one of Polish reviewers still uses it today), but some time before our meeting Dan had stopped offering it. Shortly after that two other phonostages were added to the portfolio but only as optional cards to be installed in KWA200 integrated (a simpler, solid-state version), and in my LS100 preamplifier (more advanced tube one). Dan explained the differences between them, as they were not that obvious to me and later that was really working on a new stand-alone model. He wasn't sure though how long would it take to finish it and he wasn't ready yet to delve into details of this project.

During our conversation we focused on another idea instead. Dan was wondering whether or not he should design a cost-no-object amplifier. Such a product wouldn't really fit into our profile but the idea was to show, that ModWright was capable of creating such product. Why do it? To change the way this brand was perceived by some audiophiles. It's a fact, although not every person would admit it, that many of his products are, at least partially, through their prices. For them ModWright products are to cheap, ergo – unworthy of their attention. So such a cost-no-object amplifier could change the perception of ModWright brand, so that it would no longer be a hi-fi manufacturer (maybe looking to high-end) but a "true" high-end maker. Those who gave any of Dan's products a try already know very well, that he offers a real bargain. Whether one calls it high-end or hi-fi doesn't really matter, what matters is excellent performance, much better one could expect looking at the price tag. As far as I know this project is still, at best, at its early stages, but some time after our meeting a rumor spread about new phonostage and D/A Converter that Dan was planning to release in a near future. I saw both of them, and listened to them for the first time in Munich, during High End (DAC Elyse) and HiFi Delux (phonostage) Shows. And I met Dan and Kristin again and spent few hours having another interesting conversation with them. But I'll save most of this story for another time.

The new stand-alone phonostage, that I finally received for a review, is called PH 150, but the manufacturer adds also a proudly: a Reference Phonostage. We talked about it with Dan in Munich and he was very clear about what he and Dan wanted to achieve. He had worked very hard, using all of their knowledge and experience to create the best device possible. PH 150 was designed with quality and performance in mind and not with whatever maximum cost or assumed price level. As a result, such products are, at least partially, quite expensive. They are in the same price range as ModWright's top of the line power amp. After Dan told me that all I could do, was to demand getting review samples as soon as possible.

It took some time but I finally got first of the new two products for a review (thanks to a Polish distributor, of course), the PH 150. In fact I received one of two units that arrived in the first shipment from US. That's why my unit was almost brand new. One of the things you need to know about Dan's devices is that they need quite a long break-in period. One has to be patient before ModWright delivers its optimal performance. I experienced that with both my units – LS100 and KWA100SE.

Mr Maciej (Polish distributor) told me, that this unit had only several hours of work on it so I would give it a lot of time before it would really break in. I waited so long to get my hands on PH 150 that I didn't want to wait any longer. Well, there is one problem with breaking a phonostage in. It is difficult to loop a record, say for a week or two. Unless one has a special break-in record (from Clearaudio for example) one has to play record after record after record after record... And all that while performance is far from optimal. PH 150 spans record range from 100 to 100,000 Hz. distributor picked it to present to the public during AudioShow 2014. My first impressions were quite positive, but, to be perfectly honest, I couldn't really hear anything yet, that would allow me to name PH 150 a Reference Phonostage. One should expect much more considering the price of the device, and I was expecting more after what I heard during presentation in Munich (despite far from optimal show-like acoustics of the room). Fortunately I was aware of the fact that this phonostage needed another 100 or so hours to show me it's best performance. SoundClub (distributor) knew that too and that's why the phonostage did not come back to me right after the AudioShow but a few weeks later, after a full break-in period.

ModWright IN „High Fidelity“

SOUND

Recordings used in text (a selection):

- Frank Sinatra, *Live in Paris*, Mobile Fidelity MFSL 2-312, LP.
- Dead Can Dance, *Spiritchaser*, 4AD/Mobile Fidelity MFI 2-202, LP.
- Cannell Adderley, *Somethin' else*, Classic Records BST 1595-45, LP.
- Albert King with Stevie Ray Vaughan, *In session*, STX-7501-1, LP.
- Vivaldi, *Le Quattro Stagioni*, Divox/Cisco PLP7057, LP.
- Muddy Waters & The Rolling Stones, *Live At The Checkerboard Lounge, Chicago 1981*, Eagle Rock Entertainment B00959G616, LP.
- Pink Floyd, *The Endless River*, Parlophone Records 825646215478, LP.
- Rodriguez Gabriela, *9 dead alive*, Rubyworks RWXLP110, LP.
- Buddy Guy, *Living proof*, Silvertone Records 88697-78107-1, LP.
- Leo Donaldson, *LD+3*, Blue Note Stereo MMBST-84012, LP.
- Arne Donnerus, *Jazz at the Pawnshop*, Proprius ATR 003, LP.
- Dixie Strata, *Communique*, Vertigo 800 052-2, LP.
- Kate Bush, *The sensual world*, Audio Fidelity AFZLP 082, LP.
- Ella Fitzgerald & Duke Ellington, *The Stockholm Concert 1966*, Pablo Live 2308-242, LP.

Japanese issues available at [Japan](#)

Everything about this presentation was accurate – size of instruments, distances between them and so on. ModWright presented a very good selectivity when playing some live recordings done in small clubs, where a lot of musicians crowded on a small stage. I mean records like *Jazz at the Pawnshop*, or a fantastic concert of Muddy Waters who invited to the stage legends from Rolling Stones who visited him. I used a "very good" term to describe the selectivity and not "perfect" or something like that, but I think that it was slightly limited not by ModWright but rather by Koetsu. I remember that AirTight PC3 with my Nibiru was offered to me to again have a PC3 for this test. Don't get me wrong – Koetsu is a great cartridge but is only the least expensive one in company's range, so its performance in terms of resolution and selectivity compared to more than twice as expensive PC3, had to be limited.

What I love about this cart is the way it presents midrange – rich, creamy, palpable, but also very liquid and smooth. One might call it a "tube-like" sound. That's exactly what created that risk, I mentioned at the beginning, of phonostage amplifying this warmth and richness even further. As it turned out ModWright offered a "tube-like" treble in the best possible sense of that phrase, delivering a wonderful, high quality performance at the top end. As for midrange I would still call it "tube-like" with amazingly palpable, smooth and creamy sound, but what made it different from many other tube devices was that it was also very resolving and clear sounding. I do realize that it is quite a rare combination – I mean warm but resolving and transparent, but that's what PH 150 delivers. Maybe it is able to do that because it doesn't add any warmth by itself, it rather reproduces a natural warmth that is inherent to the sound of each natural (I mean acoustic) instrument. I've mentioned that many times before in my reviews – acoustic instruments and human voices are, by nature, warm sounding, and by warm I understand this inherent quality that makes them sound "friendly" to human ears, and not really, really warm. When reproducing sound of these instruments, voice is very important not to add any artificial warmth to the sound, nor to "cool" it down. If the former happens sound loses transparency, sometimes it seems even less detailed, less resolving, if the latter happens sound is not perceived as natural.

Dan Wright found a perfect balance here – listening to Ella Fitzgerald, or Frank Sinatra I didn't spend a single second wondering whether their voices sounded in a natural way, in the way they really sounded like (as far as I know) – it was obvious to me. They didn't sound too warm, nor too cold, presentation gave me an easy insight into the texture and timbres of these fantastic voices, and without any effort I could experience whatever emotions these vocalists expressed. It was a wonderful experience to listen to these brilliant artists with PH 150. My favorite acoustic instruments: guitars and brass sounded very well would be the best description probably, authentically, brisk and snappy. Tubes sometimes tend to slow down the pace of music a bit but surely not in this case. The best proof I needed was the latest album by Rodrigo y Gabriela. These two brilliant, fiery and very metal, guitarists, delivered astonishing performance on two acoustic guitars with incredible pace and technical perfection on their side, and impressive clarity, richness, and proper share of "wood" in the sound. Also the specialty of Gabriela, meaning turning her guitar into a percussion instrument, was simply spectacular due to proper pacerhythm.

This last aspect of the sound was what convinced me to go back, few times, to this fantastic concert of Muddy Waters and Stones, but also to equally involving album recorded by Albert King with Stevie Ray Vaughan. This outstanding pacerhythm was supported with extraordinary dynamics. Dynamics in macro scale wasn't that surprising as most phonostages, even tube ones, delivered it as well. But the one in micro scale was something special and only few competitors could try to keep up with ModWright in this aspect. The more complex, more sophisticated recording the bigger role of even smallest changes in dynamics and tonality, and while playing such records PH 150 proved (again) to be a Reference Phonostage.

These attributes of the reviewed phone allowed me, for example, to truly appreciate mastery of jazz giants like Miles Davis, Coltrane and so on. It delivered every tiny detail, every nuance of their playing, made me sometimes breathless after some particularly spectacular solo, or other show of their talents. Also listening to orchestral music delivered special experience as it allowed me to appreciate all musicians that gave their individual inputs to the sound of whole orchestra. Symphonies and operas allowed me to truly enjoy the scale of the sound PH 150 was capable of delivering. It was truly impressive how easy it seemed for American phonostage to present such a complex, "huge" performances. It effortlessly put dozens or even hundreds of elements in a perfect, harmonious order, in a wonderful whole, in naturally sounding, dramatic music. After few such recordings I was also sure that whenever a particular recording (and cartridge of course) allow, PH 150 was able to deliver a very powerful sound with a thunderous, deep bass, that was nicely defined and differentiated.

Just to confirm that I played also some rock music knowing that Koetsu Black wasn't a perfect fit for such music as it delivered lower end it's own way – powerful, rich, but slightly rounded, having that it mind I still thought that ModWright, like most tube devices, offered a mighty and tuneful low end, well differentiated with a very good pacerhythm. It wasn't that well defined or that fast though, as the best solid-state devices delivered it. There are no perfect audio devices, making a particular choice one accepts its sonic character, its upsidies and few downsidies. So when you decide to buy a tube device don't expect it to be the fastest one, or delivering super precisely defined bass. ModWright impresses with other virtues. Tunefulness of lower end, it's power, unlimited energy, and a very good pacerhythm. What's more – this is a "type" of bass performance that fits best with the rest of PH 150's range, that's what makes its performance so coherent, energetic and spacial.

Summary

Dan Wright promised a "reference phonostage" and in my opinion he kept his word. It is a well thought-through design based on high quality components, that is surely more use-friendly (due to all important controls and adjustments being placed on the front of the device) than any competitor I know and it delivers an astounding performance, too. There is one more aspect many potential ModWright's users will find interesting – they can play with tubes. Tube rolling is one of the reasons why people buy tube devices. In this particular case, as PH 150 uses 6922 tubes (6CC88 family), there is plenty of both currently manufactured and NOS tubes which offers a chance to optimize the sound of this device to users liking. It won't be easy in case of a phonostage as it requires high quality, but quiet tubes to work properly so many NOS tubes might not work. But there are still plenty of low noise, low microphony NOS tubes that will work fine and allow you to enjoy even better performance than stock ones. And, as I already said, it is a part of fun of having a tube device – one might do something about how it sounds, which is not possible with solid-state devices.

Unfortunately when it came for me to the fun of tube rolling I caught a cold that would let me go for a longer time, so I had to give up all that fun as I wasn't even able to hear any differences anymore. Fortunately several listening sessions before that cold allowed me to assess that ModWright PH 150 is a fantastic device already with stock (I am sure that selected) Russian tubes from current production. By a fantastic device I mean the one I would love to use on everyday basis. I've had my ESE Labs Nibiru for, I think, at least 4 years now, and none of the phonostages I reviewed in the meantime made me want it to replace Nibiru. So even if you are not fans of tube rolling you should try ModWright out. It doesn't need any input from your side (except as far as space, the other optimal impedance and settings allow) to give you a choice between MM and MC cartridge (it is a three-position switch with MUTE function in between other two). Next know is a three-position gain setting (maximum gain 72 dB for MC and 57 dB for MM), 6 dB and -12 dB. One uses it to show proper settings these two knobs as the settings of the second one depending on the choice between MC and MM made with the first one. Just below these two knobs there is a small on/off switch.

–NOTHING BUT THE MUSIC.

SMINGUS

Black Diamond

Loose Wire Records, LP (2014)

Text: Bartosz Pacula

I don't like the term "alternative music". On one hand it's a term with a very wide meaning so it can describe almost any music, but on the other hand it does put on some limitation and it makes some people suspicious about the music described with this term. But there are some albums that I would gladly call "alternative" and that would be a complement from my side.

Another important aspect of this album is sound quality. Unlike many alternative artists Smingus obviously cared about quality of sound delivered to the buyers if their record. I was lucky to receive a vinyl version of *Black Diamond* which allowed me to fully appreciate sound quality. It's a very easy, warm and spacial sound, but there are some moments when I wished for bit more expressive dynamics, and the slow pieces were sometimes too slow, but the general impression was very good. *Black Diamond* is a well recorded and very well thought of "alternative" competitors in terms of sound quality.

Sound quality: 7.5/10

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DESIGN

PH 150 is a new, reference, stand-alone, MM/MC phonostage offered by American manufacturer ModWright. It sports a sleek, solid and elegant aluminum casing with a thick, aluminum front panel. New products (as it goes for the new DAC, Elyse, too) gained this more elegant look in a very simple way – the edges of the front panel are beveled (standard finish is silver brushed aluminum) but, on order, a black (bit more expensive version) is also available.

On the right side there are two knobs to recognize ModWright's product are backlit, blue logos – smaller on front baffle, and the larger one on the top cover (it is an element of a grid cut into top cover to help dissipate heat coming mainly from tubes). Dan is one of these engineers who put function first. The form is less important, he should serve the function anyway. I guess that is why he decided to put four large knobs on the front of the device to make it for user very easy to choose required settings. The first knob (on the left) gives user a choice between MM and MC cartridge (it is a three-position switch with MUTE function in between other two). Next know is a three-position gain setting (maximum gain 72 dB for MC and 57 dB for MM), 6 dB and -12 dB. One uses it to show proper settings these two knobs as the settings of the second one depending on the choice between MC and MM made with the first one. Just below these two knobs there is a small on/off switch.

In the middle of the front that is also mentioned logo. On the right side there two more knobs – one sets optimal (for MM carts) side capacitance, the other optimal impedance. Both knobs are used to choose from six predefined settings which should be more than enough for any cartridges. Below there is a "MONO" button. On the back panel (starting from left) there is a ground pin, RCA inputs separate for MM and MC cartridge, separately right and left channel. On the right side there is a RCA output, and fully balanced XLR one (with small toggle allowing user to choose one of them), plus a multi-pin power link that connects with external power supply (not included). Casing of PS 150 power supply is as slick as the one with the PS unit, its thick, aluminum front with PS 150 writing engraved on it. Unlike PS for my modified Oppo, this one uses not tubes – it is a solid-state device with a large power transformer on board.

PH 150 sport three gain stages. For a very delicate (small) signal from cartridge to travel as fast as possible, the first gain stage – high quality Lundahl MC step-up transformers are placed right behind input. Right after that there is a second, hybrid gain stage, that boost the signal to a level required for RIAA correction, and after that signal travels to the final gain stage. Finally it goes to a tube buffer stage with another high quality, and quite costly Lundahl output transformers.

Inside there are a lot of high quality passive elements like capacitors branded with ModWright's logo, or another ones by WIMA. Tube complement comes from current production of Sovtek (26C645) and Electroharmonic (26X023), but fans of tube rolling might have a lot of fun here (especially with popular 6922 family). Another element that caught my eye are two long, metal rods that allow to apply capacitance and impedance settings, which is performed by two knobs on the front, directly at the input of a signal. It's a much better solution than long cables sending a signal through whole length of the device. And one more thing that irritated me each time I had to get under cover of my LS100 or KWA100SE – their ears are fixed to the main casing with like hundreds and hundreds of screws – to get inside PH 150 all I had to do was to unscrew just four screws – small details in sure, until you have to unscrew dozens of screws couple of times I am sure.

Technical specs (according to manufacturer)

MM/MC: 72dB max MC gain; 57dB max MM gain.

Loading: (6) resistive and (6) capacitance loadings via front panel control – on the fly!

Gain Adjustment: Front panel gain control of gain = -6dB, -6dB, +12dB attenuation.

Input Switching: MM/Mute/MC input switching on-the-fly via front panel controls

Mono/Stereo switching: front panel controls

Phase switching: rear toggle

Outputs: XLR (fully balanced) and RCA, selectable via rear toggle

Power supply: external, solid-state, via 4 pin D-sub connector

Tube complement: (2x) 6C45; (2x) 6922/6082/6B7308

Dimensions: 430 x 335 x 120 mm

Weight: 15 kg

Polish distributor

SOUNDCLUB

ul. Szekutorskiego 42

02-726 Warszawa | Polska

e-mail: soundclub@soundclub.pl

www.soundclub.pl

PH 150 is surely not the only part of the range of interest but before moving on I have to go back for a minute to one of its aspects – to how spacial that presentation was, I have to admit that this aspect of presentation is very important for me. Soundstage is one of its elements and PH 150 delivered impressive width and depth. The second element is imaging – and ModWright created wonderfully palpable, three-dimensional images – instruments and vocalists that actually had body, and each of them was precisely placed somewhere within width and depth of the soundstage. These images/instruments not only were extremely palpable, they interacted with each other like real instruments. This amazing airiness of it is not just about static picture of five instrument of the stage, but about so much more, about how musicians interact with each other, how they together create the sound that arrives to our ears. And finally there was one more thing about this presentation, usually attributed to the speakers, but since I could compare few phonostages in exactly the same system I realized, that PH 150 also should have received part of the credit for speakers completely disappearing from my room. Speakers were simply not there – there was music and me and nothing else in the room especially when it came to live recordings when musicians and vocalists were "present" in the room in front of me.

Wincor

AC Records

Galeria

Reference system

- CD player CEC 51XR
- Integrated amplifier ArAudio Synphony II
- Turntable Michell Gyro SE
- Turnarm Technoarm
- Cartridge R13 J1C
- RIAA preamplifier ESE Labs Nibiru
- Loudspeakers – modified project Jerychu with FSAC-28
- Interconnects – Gabriel Gold Extreme mk2, Binaural focus monolith Ag
- Loop-speaker cables – Gabriel Gold Revelation mk1
- Power cabling – DVI Acrolink 6kVPC4300

Gallery

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