

PHONO STAGES

## Valve Audio Whisper

# Sonic giant-killer!

Regular AVSA readers, and many local audio enthusiasts, will by now be well aware of Valve Audio, a local brand producing some fine amplification products. Embracing integrated amplifiers and pre/power designs, as well as a range of interlinks and cables, the line-up's most recent (and most talked about) member is a no-compromise phono stage.

Aptly dubbed the Whisper, Schalk Havenga's latest baby has been around for about four years now, but has been undergoing a constant evolution, with no less than four updates to the original design in as many years. The unit under scrutiny here reflects the most recent improvements.

Phono stages are notoriously difficult components to master. The signal levels produced by a phono cartridge (and especially moving coil units) are minute by line-level standards, requiring ultra clean signal paths and as close to zero noise levels as possible – despite the need for substantial gain levels.

The Whisper is a fully balanced, dual-mono design, and also physically separates the power supply module from the input, gain and output stages. Unsurprisingly, the unit employs a hybrid configuration, linking a valve input stage to solid-state output.

The aesthetics are clean and elegant in the usual Valve Audio tradition. There are

no frills, but the execution is reassuringly solid, and the design should integrate nicely with most systems. More importantly, the workmanship is flawless – something Havenga is obsessive about.

The all-metal construction actually consists of a single, thick aluminium faceplate fronting separate, mild steel-caged modules. From the front, what you see is a fascia with rounded corners and a row of round buttons. There's a power on/off button, and selectors for moving magnet and moving coil cartridges, while the remaining switchgear is dedicated to a wide selection of cartridge load settings.

A glance the rear reveals the presence of individual modules. The power supply is on the far left, and contains a beefy toroidal power supply, while the MC module is on the far right, with the MC module adjacent to it.

Each module is fully balanced, and offers XLR and RCA inputs and outputs, together with a nicely turned out earthing post.

In theory, therefore, you could link two turntables, one MM and one MC-equipped) to the Whisper – or a turntable with two arms, for that matter.

The modular construction means that the Whisper can be custom-made to suit specific requirements. In other words, buyers could opt for two MC modules instead of the MM/MC combo – or two MM modules.

This versatility also extends to the Whisper's ability to accommodate a wide range of cartridges with different load requirements. For the less critical MM module, the settings are fixed to an input impedance of 47 kOhm and a capacitance of 100 pF.

However, for moving coil cartridges, there are no less than 13 load values to choose from, ranging from as low as 23 ohm, to 470 kOhm. Some values are achieved with a single button push, others by combining two buttons.

This arrangement also means that different load settings can be auditioned in real time, and compared directly – a facility often not available on phono stages relying on internal bridges and dip switches for changing load settings.

The Whisper's hybrid input stage consists of a balanced input gain stage employing 10 low-noise transistors arranged in a differential configuration, and achieving 18 dB of gain. It feeds into a differential triode gain stage employing JJ6922 tubes.

Next, the signal is subjected to passive RIAA equalisation, which Havenga maintains provides the most natural results, albeit at the expense of gain, which necessitates a further differential triode circuit.

As one would expect, power regulation is carefully and comprehensively addressed.

