

hi-fi news

THE HOME OF REAL HI-FI

& Record Review

ULTIMATE HI-FI

2010 – the year's finest products & vintage audio heroes



VINYL ICON
GUSTAV HOLST
Out of this world: The Planets Suite

**'We originally
built 50 but
sold 30,000'**
Audio Milestone, p116

Also inside

- The Best Music of 2010
- Your Guide to buying Vintage
- Opinion: our columnists speak out
- Iconic kit: the A&R A60 integrated amplifier
- Hi-Fi @ Home: corner horns and the hi-fi museum



• **PLUS** 11 pages of music features • **SHOW BLOG** Hi-fi News reports from Hong Kong 2010
• **TURNTABLES** Amazon to Thorens • **DIGITAL PLAYERS** Cambridge to Simaudio Moon
• **AMPLIFIERS** Devialet D-Premier to Pass Labs • **LOUDSPEAKERS** B&W to Wilson Audio

UK £4.00 US \$9.99 Aus \$9.95




**AUDIO
FILE**

 MM/MC phono preamplifier with switchable gain and loading
 Made by: Icon Audio
 Supplied by: Icon Audio
 Telephone: 0116 2440593
 Web: www.iconaudio.co.uk


Icon Audio PS3 (£1699)

For the Leicester-based company Icon Audio, the PS3 is a development prompted by its successful PS1 phono stage, now in MkII form. Both feature – as do its MP3 Mini Amp and HP8 headphone amp – the distinctive ‘peephole’ through which its complement of tubes may be glimpsed.

For the PS3 phono stage, designer David Shaw has specified no fewer than seven triode valves including ECC88s and one 6SN7 for the output. The separate power supply unit has another six (EZ80, ECC83 and 5687 types) used for voltage rectification and regulation.

‘The Icon provided a relaxing and unrestrained picture’

Underneath, the components are all wired point-to-point, avoiding the use of printed circuit boards.

On the front panel of the PS3 itself one rotary control is for volume and the other switches from MM to MC. Shaw personally prefers moving-coils, but you can buy the PS3 as an MM-only unit at £1299 – ours came fitted with the transformers which provide MC

sensitivity and add £200 to the price. Icon uses a high quality British custom wound toroidal transformer with mu-metal screening. Our sample also came with one of Icon’s special upgrade options, namely a set of Jensen capacitors, adding another £200 to bring the price to £1699 as quoted above.

Features include a mono/stereo switch and a ‘ground lift’ switch, used to minimise hum if the turntable wiring creates an unexpected ‘earth loop’.

SPACE AND LIFE

For our test we used Ortofon’s Cadenza Blue [see p22] and Koetsu Black moving-coils, and began with the Harry James direct cut *The King James Version* [Sheffield Lab LP]. The Icon gave a sound with space and life in it, the positioning of instruments heard clearly.

James’ solo trumpet sound had a convincing bite to it, but it had plenty of body too.

Eric Clapton’s ‘Motherless Children’, from *461 Ocean Boulevard* [RSO], seemed to benefit from the Icon’s qualities of detail resolution and balance. You felt encouraged to listen into the mix, and at the bottom end, the bass guitar had weight and body so Carl

Radle’s playing sounded deliberate without becoming sluggish.

On to *Rickie Lee Jones* [Warner] and the ‘Easy Money’ track, where the Icon presented the vocals with a real focus, revealing the subtle nuances of the singer’s delivery and her breathing.

Sir John Barbirolli’s EMI disc of English string music [ASD 521] had a smooth and flowing quality, with a pleasing overall balance and a naturalness to the string sounds. Less forward and punchy than the Lector or Unison valve phono preamplifiers used for comparison [for more, including a detailed Lab Report, see our July ‘10 Group Test], the Icon provided a relaxing and unrestrained picture of the music.

With the Koetsu Black in place of the Ortofon, the Icon still displayed a smooth unruffled character, with attractive instrumental timbres. Bass was weighty but not unduly heavy or uncontrolled in nature.

On moving-magnet (Roksan Corus Silver) the Icon gave a really well-balanced, inviting and musical sound, with fine midrange clarity and satisfying weight to the bass. It was delicious with Dire Straits’ ‘Sultans Of Swing’!

VERDICT

This robust-looking pairing is clearly aimed at the real valve enthusiast with its multiplicity of tubes. It offers low midrange distortion and respectable bass extension, catering for both moving-coil and moving-magnet cartridges (although as noted, there is a cheaper MM-only option). This was declared winner in our Group Test: ‘consistent, always very good, always musical, always inviting’. In fact a truly excellent all-rounder. ☺

ABOVE: Yes, you can look through the peepholes to see David Shaw’s choice of specified valves for both phono stage and PSU. The former has mono/stereo switching and a very useful volume control

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Input loading (MM/MC)	47kohm/100pF / 100ohm
Input sensitivity (MM/MC re. 0dBV)	2.96mV / 0.32mV
Input overload (MM/MC)	115mV / 13mV
Maximum output (re. 1% THD)	17.0V
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 5mV/500µV in)	73.2dB / 73.2dB
Frequency response (20Hz-20kHz)	-0.26dB to -0.42dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, re. 0dBV)	0.0085-0.11%
Power consumption	37W
Dimensions (WHD)	148x165x342mm (each)