



Hansen Phono Stage

Cape Town-based Hansen Audio is the brainchild of Gavin Hansen, who produces a small, bespoke range of high-end, valve and MOSFET-based audio components. The line-up includes a MM/MC valve phono stage, a valve stereo pre-amplifier and MOSFET monoblock power amplifiers.

The phono stage under review here, however, is a new, solid state design, aimed at delivering audiophile-grade performance at a relatively affordable price point. Consider that this little jewel is hand-built in limited numbers, utilising carefully selected and matched circuit components, and the asking price will always reflect exceptional value – especially compared to imported products.

Don't be fooled by the compact format factor, either: this is a true Class A, zero-feedback FET design, with an over-specified power transformer, Faraday-cage shielding to ensure immunity from electromagnetic interference, and a separate, sizeable wall wart-type power supply. The on-board supply circuitry is additionally shielded from the rest of the internals.

The carefully selected circuit components include metal film-type resistors, polypropylene capacitors and high-speed power supply diodes feeding audiophile-grade, low-ESR, high-current Panasonic power supply capacitors.

Six FETs – three per channel – are employed in the Hansen Phono Stage. The FETs feature adjustable bias, and are

painstakingly set up for each, individual unit. According to Hansen, FETs can approach the sonic charm of valves, which is why they were selected for this application.

Much of the circuit design is focussed on protecting the integrity of the delicate, typically low-level audio signal delivered by the phono cartridge. Short, optimised signal paths, thick copper tracks on fibreglass PCBs and hand-soldered circuit components are further hallmarks.

The unit itself is compact but attractive, with a ribbed extruded aluminium enclosure, a thick Perspex faceplate featuring brand and model designations, and a blue LED power-on indicator.

The rear offers a stereo set of RCA inputs for moving magnet and moving coil cartridges,



an RCA stereo output set, a receptacle for the wall wart power supply, an on/off toggle switch, and a MM/MC selector.

In standard trim the Hansen Phono Stage is supplied with the MC stage offering an input impedance of 200 ohms – a little higher than would be the norm for most MC cartridges, but a pretty decent compromise setting.

It certainly worked well enough with the Van Den Hul The Frog MC cartridge used for much of this review, even though that cart prefers a 400 ohm loading. An Ortofon Cadenza Black was equally comfortable with the Hansen's set-up.

The fixed loading could be considered a potential shortcoming – it's okay if you only have one MC cartridge, or if the carts in your MC collection have more or less the same input impedance requirement, but not if you have a large collection of different carts, all with different load demands.

Hansen points out that his phono stage can be customised to meet the specific load requirements of a cartridge. Indeed, for MC fans with no need for an MM input, Hansen can replace the MM input with a second MC input offering a different impedance.

Also, let's not forget that this phono stage focuses on value, simplicity and sonic integrity – if you need the versatility of adjustable loadings, look elsewhere. And besides, Hansen believes that switched input impedance contacts can negatively impact on sound quality and channel balance.

I tested the Hansen Phono Stage in conjunction with my Avid Diva II SP/SME 309/Van Den Hul Frog record deck, which usually delivers its sonic wares via a Sutherland 20/20 phono stage.

The latter served as the reference phono stage for this review. Bear in mind, though, that the Sutherland is a US\$ 2000 phono stage ... The rest of the system comprised a Naim Uniti2, and Vivid V1.5 loudspeakers

On the Polish Chamber Philharmonic Orchestra's marvellously vital performance of Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* (Tacet LP) the Hansen instantly impressed with its broad tonal range, its predilection for fine detail retrieval and

its ability to spread its musical wares wide and deep across a seamless soundstage.

The low-frequency registers were particularly impressive, contributing substance and authority to the overall performance, but never sounding bloated or ponderous. The Hansen therefore accurately reflected the Frog's penchant for punchy, powerful bass, but didn't add any additional emphasis.

The midrange was wholesome and smoothly textured, while reflecting loads of detail, while the trebles were delivered with clarity and confidence, ensuring full retrieval of even subtle sonic finery. A low noise floor further assisted in this regard.

On the title track from Dire Straits' *Brothers In Arms* (Mobile Fidelity 45 rpm Double LP), the sound was rich and engrossing. Mark Knopfler's guitar was rendered with richness and intensity, while John Illsley's bass sounded bold and muscular, but never overbearing.

The Hansen easily kept up with the Frog's nimble pace and eager dynamics. Imaging and focus were spot on, while the staging afforded the wall-to-wall arrangement plenty of breathing room.

Indeed, the Hansen created a satisfyingly layered sound picture that particularly impressed as far as width and depth were concerned. The result was a sonic image that believably reflected the scale and dimension of the music.

Most of these traits were retained when I swapped the Van Den Hul for a high-output Hana SH moving coil cartridge (see review elsewhere in this issue), which allowed me to run the Hansen in MM mode. There was a slight glare to the upper frequencies, and the mids lost some glow, but the pace and power were impressive.

Compared to the Sutherland 20/20, the Hansen sounded slightly more subdued and a tad warmer in the upper mids. It couldn't match the Sutherland's expansive, airy imaging, nor its penchant for transparency, and for retrieving and contextualising microdetail.

The Sutherland's focus was finer, and there was a stronger sense of insight, allowing a more intense, more intriguing

view of the music. It managed to deliver its sonic goods with greater presence and momentum, too. But then, the Sutherland is also significantly more expensive.

That said, the Hansen stood its ground as far as musicality and engagement were concerned. It impressed with its smooth confidence, its tonal breadth, its low-frequency authority, and its overall entertainment value.

Indeed, the Hansen Phono Stage exceeds expectations at almost every level. It's meticulously constructed, and uses its talent for signal integrity and an exceptionally low noise floor to make the most of the music on offer. Excellent value is the cherry on top.

Deon Schoeman

VITAL STATS

MM/MC	Selectable
Selectable loading	No, but customisable
Loading values	MC: 200 Ohms; MC: 47 kOhms
Capacitance	56 Ohms (MC and MM)
Gain	Fixed
Dimensions (WxHxD)	
.....	110 x 67 x 265 mm
Weight	1,0 kg

Verdict

Approachable but detailed delivery that's instantly engaging. Loads of pace and dynamics allow for a lively, entertaining performance.

Price R12 990 (retail)

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OUR RATING: 83/100

