The new Allnic H1202 Phono

The entry level Allnic H1201 phono stage has always been one of the biggest selling units here at Lotus. I'm probably past 100 units now for numbers sold, who knows for sure, it's a big amount though. The baby phono from Kang Su Park just sounds so right and natural in almost every system that rarely did it ever come back returned from home demo or indeed find itself beaten by another rival product.

A little like Mr. Vitus and his recently improved RI-101 amplifier, the H1201 never really needed improving at it's pricepoint and still offered performance that made it competitive more in the £4000-£5000 bracket but not one for resting on his laurels, Kang Su has given the 1201 a very generous rework to create the 2018 model, the H1202.

In the well packaged box not much has changed; you have the unit itself, instruction manual and build sheet. Release the chassis from its plastic wrapping and it's immediately obvious that the '02 sports two extra tube chimneys and has also lost the two small casework handles of its predecessor. The original quadruple of Mullard E180CC's are still in situ but now we have two extra chimneys to the right of these which house an EH 71233 regulator and a tiny little 5654W pentode.

The H1202 then, has an all new Vacuum Tube power supply and if you know Allnic as a brand at all you will surmise that Kang Su would only change from solid state to a presumably more complex and costly Tube PSU if there was a very worthwhile improvement. In Kang Su's own words, this new pure tube Auto Voltage Regulator type increases stability, current and response speed. The various merits of tubes over transistors is applicable to power supplies as it is to the signal path so in addition, I would imagine that the strengths of Vacuum tubes vs. solid state would apply yet again over the H1201, namely an even more natural and effortless presentation with even deeper insight into the fabric of the sound.

Look a little closer and what the new geography of the 1202 also tells you is that some new step up transformers have been fitted as well. Under the new component block that protrudes from the left side of the chimneys lies two newly upgraded step ups which have a wider range and less phase lagging in the high frequencies. So for a measly £250 price rise on the old model, it's fair to say that this new unit offers a decent array of internal upgrades and additional actual physical 'stuff'.

For my listening tests I hooked up both the H1201 and H1202 to a Dohmann Helix 2 turntable + Shroeder CB tonearm + Lyra Etna SL moving coil. The Helix is my one of my flagship decks here and my view is that it's as good as any deck currently on sale regardless of price. Compare it against the likes of the Continuum Caliburn, Walker Black Diamond or Techdas AirForce 1 and you will simply find presentational differences with the Helix doing some things slightly better and maybe some facets not quite as good depending on your own subjective point of view. What is not so subjective though is that the Dohmann will most definitely leave a lot less cash left in your wallet.

For the purposes of this test though, suffice to say that it's an exemplary source to test the Allnic with especially shod with the quite wonderful Lyra Etna SL cartridge, the merits of which can be found on many glowing reviews elsewhere on the net. Downstream I used the venerable Vitus SIA-025 integrated amplifier, a supremely natural and expressive performer and a set of the new endlessley open Avalon PM1 floorstanders. Both Allnics were set on Stillpoint Ultra SS feet when in use, which help extract the most out of the phonostage with increased resolution, precision, air and image stability.

After letting the system play and warm for a good few hours, I began with the outgoing H1201 and Grace Jones's "Private Life" from her Warm Leatherette LP. This is a track I use quite a lot. It's a very dynamic recording with great bandwidth, some fantastic percussion and bass from Sly and Robbie and lots of full on highs that can be tricky to reproduce

realistically. Day to day I am more used to using the much higher H7000 phono and the excellent phonostage in the Tidal Preos so I was a little worried about hearing my cheapest turntable preamp again but to fair, it did an amazing job and certainly wasn't letting the £40,000 turntable setup down in any way. The track is dynamic, open and flows along really nicely. Some of the guitar riffs and drum hits really crescendo out of the mix with lots of power and attack and in between her voice and the percussion there is a wonderful sense of space and ambience that is believable and lifelike.

Switching to the prewarmed H1202 and playing the same track I am afraid cliche number one was starkly apparent from the opening few bars. Everything was closer, more immediate, more tangible, just like those couple of bed sheets had just been pulled off the speakers. There was an instant sense that you are quite a bit closer to the actual grooves in the Vinyl. The H1202 is simply more of everything, more articulate with greater shape to all the sounds, tighter, taughter with fuller and more precise bass and the texture and timbre of instruments sounded more fully developed and expressed. Those snare hits and strident guitar chords near the end almost sounded like they each had their very own limitless amplifier as they leapt out of the mix with a huge amount of force allowing you to appreciate the dynamic power of the Etna in a whole new way.

Out of interest I switched back to the H1201 and ran the track again and sure enough, the outgoing unit now sounded dull, a little polite, a touch blurry and just less structured and dynamic overall. The sound in the room was also just smaller with less space and air in the entire performance.

So far so good then. This to my mind amounts to a fairly generous increase in overall resolution and transparency from effectively a cleaner, lower noise design. If there was ever one criticism of the H1201 it was that customers would have liked the bass to be a little fuller and better shaped and certainly this wish has been fullfileld with this new model.

My next selection was "In the Ground" by Midlake from the album

“Courage of Others”. This is an evocative track with a lot of emotion. It’s end of side, a little compressed and has a slow build to it with quite a bit going on. It’s a difficult track for a system because as the momentum builds, you need to hear the energy and dynamics build and scale up commensurately. Only the best and highest bandwidth systems will prevent this track from evolving into something quite congested, dreary and anticlimactic.

Whilst the Helix/Etna were clearly doing a great job, the H1202 made everything sound much more present and immediate. As the complexity of the song ramped up the newer Allnic gave a greater sense of coherency and order to the music and less energy and impact was lost as things built. Tim Smith’s poignant chanting had more sense of urgency and emotional drama to it and things generally felt more airy and spacious which is what this condensed mastering really needs. In short, through the H1202, this passionate melancholic piece of music had significantly more power and emotional connection.

For my last piece of music I chose “Passage” from Chick Corea’s “Eye of the Beholder”. I really love this lazy rolling track, introduced to me by my brother back when I was a teenager. It’s a great recording, spacious and wide with plenty of musicality, great bass and electric guitars and some lovely melodic piano from Chick.

The H1201 gave a good account. The track felt punchy with a wide soundstage and lots of pleasing air between the performers. The treble on this mastering has a very agreeable sheen across it and this was present too. The H1201 also ensured that the piece felt natural and relaxed, in that slightly loose unforced way that only a tube phono preamp knows how.

Switching to the ’02, “Passage” immediately felt cleaner, fuller and just more ordered and metronomic. There was more texture and body on the bass guitar and it felt like it was digging deeper as well. The rhythm didn’t sound any punchier but it defintely was calmer and more composed. The piano was also noticeably different with a degree more insight into the

space and ambience around the notes. Describing these differences in a more experiential way I would say that the newer Allnic gave a greater, heightened sense of overall performance to the listening experience and a satisfying feeling of greater simplicity and poise. Calmer, yet more drama.

All in all I would say the improvements in the H1202 were consistent across all my three tracks. The tonality, the presentation, the disposition of Allnic's entry phono has not altered at all. We still have the same neutral, dynamic, even handed and ever so natural fingerprint. Now though, with an improved power supply and step up, the new model simply has a lower noise floor and so reveals even more of the music and it's energy, and is able to organise and unravel it with even greater dexterity and cleanliness.

At the time of writing the H1202 is offered at a UK introductory price of £3000, just £250 more than its predecessor. I consider this to be a massive bargain. Obviously I am going to say that but as always my invite to you is to try the unit personally and decide for yourself. Put another way, you could spend literally thousands of pounds improving the old H1201 with expensive mains cables, the best stillpoints, Entreq grounding etc. but I still don't think you could get it to sound as good as this new 1201.

Available in silver or black. On shop and home demo as of now. Any questions, as always please do not hesitate to ask.

FURTHER READING

Allnic H1202 review – Audiophilia
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