

Channel Islands Audio PEQ-1 MKII Phono Preamplifier

Long Time Comin'

Greg Weaver



Channel Islands Audio was founded in 1997, the brainchild of one Dustin “Dusty” Vawter and some friends. Dusty had expressed his fascination with music and all things electronic from an early age, and after completing his education he initially worked for a local home/car audio shop as a repair technician. His early career found him at various other audio companies where he took advantage of working side by side with many top engineers, learning all they would teach him.

By the time I first heard his name, in the mid-1990s, he had become the chief technician for the original and highly innovative company Audio Alchemy. That’s right, the same Audio Alchemy that was recently revived by Peter Madnick, and sold to Elac in November of 2016 in conjunction with Elac’s 90th anniversary. I first heard Channel Audio Islands-modified gear (Vawter was doing some devilishly good mods to Audio Alchemy DACs, power supplies, and reclocking devices) back in 1997, when I reviewed and subsequently purchased the Audio Alchemy DDE v3.0 upgrade and the Monolithic Sound Power Supply. I have owned a good number of CIAudio products over the years, and in fact, my reference Class D monoblock amplifiers are the Channel Islands Audio D-500 MK IIs.

The CIAudio PEQ-1 MKII is the result of a design envisioned almost four years ago, but continually put off as more pressing projects arose. When Dusty finally committed to working on it non-stop until it was complete, he had gone through a total of nine printed circuit board layouts before he decided he couldn’t make any further improvements. He confided to me that this is probably the best electronic design he has ever done.

Born in the USA

The PEQ-1 MKII is impressive right out of the box, before you have a chance to plug it in and give it a listen. It may be small, at just 8 1/2" wide, 2 3/4" tall, and just 6 1/2" deep, but it is robust, weighing in at some 8 pounds. The chassis is thick milled aluminum. The faceplate bears only the stylized CIAudio logo centered near the top, two widely spaced blue LEDs, one each to indicate left- and right-channel power, and the model number near the very bottom left corner.

The rear panel is divided roughly into thirds. The leftmost section houses the right-channel single-ended output and input jacks (high-quality gold-plated Cardas), and a horizontal slot allowing access to a row of seven DIP switches. The centermost section is identical, housing the left channel connections, and the rightmost third holds the chassis ground selector (AC or DC, depending on whether you use the wall-wart DC supply, or an optional \$299 external AC supply), a tonearm ground, and the IEC power input socket.

Before connecting the PEQ-1 MKII to your playback system, you will need to configure the DIP switches to match your phono cartridge and playback needs, and given this realistic price point, you get quite a decent number of options. That task is made super simple with the inclusion of a purpose-built DIP-switch adjustment tool. The first three switches in each row set resistive loading, selectable at 47k ohms (mm), 100k ohms, 470 ohms, or 1k ohms (mc). The fourth and fifth DIPs select capacitive loading options of 100pf, 270pf, and 370pf. Switch six sets gain (45dB and 60dB),

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with custom gain options available if needed (at a nominal fee), while DIP seven provides subsonic filtering, -3dB at 18Hz.

When the unit is plugged in (there is no power switch), power is fed to two independent (dual mono) filter/regulation circuits of identical layout, to ensure exacting performance from, and reduce crosstalk between, both channels. CIAudio claims this results in ultra-low noise on par with the best battery technologies, but without the inconvenience of batteries.

RIAA playback equalization is realized with a passive high-frequency cut followed by an active bass boost. As mentioned, the PCB layout went through nine revisions, the results of which yield the shortest possible signal path from input to output. The layout features a combination of star-grounding power-supply/ground plane components for the audio circuits to present the most silent backgrounds and reduce EMI/RFI pickup. The

Specs & Pricing

RIAA accuracy: +/-0.2dB

THD + Noise: < 002%

(1kHz unweighted/45dB gain/10mV)

IMD: < .002% (SMPTE)

Crosstalk: >108dB

Cartridge loading:

Resistance, 47k ohms (mm), 100 ohms, 470 ohms, or 1k ohms (mc); capacitance, 100pf, 270pf, or 370pf

Gain: 45dB or 60dB

Subsonic filter:

-3dB@18Hz

Output impedance: 100 ohms

Dimensions: 8.50" x 2.75" x 6.50"

Weight: 8.0 lbs. (net), 9.0 lbs. (shipping)

Price: \$995

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circuit board is housed in a heavy steel Faraday cage inside the aluminum chassis to further reject outside interference.

The circuit board is populated with only first-rate components, including Vishay 2% polypropylene signal and bypass capacitors, Nichicon Muse NP power-supply capacitors, Takman metal-film and carbon-film resistors, Grayhill switches, and the Cardas jacks. This is one sophisticated design, exceptionally well implemented, and exhibiting surprisingly high build-quality for a product selling for under \$1000 that is built in the U.S.A. As if that weren't enough, each PEQ-1 MKII comes with a five-year warranty.

Thunder Road

The PEQ-1 MKII's overall sonic character deepened, broadened, and tightened in virtually every regard over a two-week run-in period. Once the unit was fully seasoned and stabilized, bass was remarkably tight, deeply extended, and unusually well defined for a component at this price. Listening to bass-heavy LPs, like the new *Blade Runner 2049 Original Motion Picture Soundtrack* [Epic/ASG], never left me feeling I was missing any power or impact, rendering exceptionally well-demarcated pitches, impressive weight, exhilarating dynamic contrasts, and an amazing sense of musical pace and rhythm, with little hint of bloating or slurring.

While the uppermost midrange may be a tad recessed or lean by comparison to the very best, the midrange in general brimmed with detail and texture, presenting marvelously accurate timbre and exceptional resolution. From large choral works to intimate jazz trios, voices of all variety were illuminated with remarkable clarity and focus.

Treble was both very well extended and remarkably transparent and detailed, with a huge dollop of air and shimmer, delivering rewardingly lifelike and vibrant sound. The PEQ-1 MKII has no difficulty revealing the sparkle of well-recorded triangles, cymbals, bells, or chimes, and seems almost effortless in

doing so, with no glare, grain, or etching, which is not necessarily a common attribute in a sub-\$1000 phonostage.

The PEQ-1 MKII renders images solidly and stably, with surprisingly accurate sizing. Staging is very dimensional, with splendid layering, good height and depth, and excellent width. The PEQ-1 is disarmingly natural sounding overall, with a degree of neutrality rare in this class.

As I have touched on, this preamp offers remarkable detail, yielding an overachieving sense of transparency, due no doubt in part to an impressively low noise floor. As calm and quiet as the unit is, I would really love to have heard it with its optional \$299 AC-15 MKII power supply. While we did plan on such an audition, the AC-15 MKII never arrived. Given my previous experience with CIAudio gear, performance increases gained by using such dedicated high-current supplies are significant, typically in lowering the (already good) noise floor and enhancing tonal purity and imaging and staging characteristics—none of which were particularly wanting to begin with using the stock supply.

The Promised Land

I dropped this little upstart into a system with a sum total price some 300 times its cost, into a slot typically occupied by either an \$8000 tube-based or a \$13,500 reference-grade solid-state phonostage. While there is no chance it would be mistaken for these phonostages, what it did accomplish was utterly astonishing.

Every once in a while, a product comes along that is both inspired and inspiring. The Channel Islands Audio

The Channel Islands Audio PEQ-1 MKII is an exceptional performer.

PEQ-1 MKII is an exceptional performer, one that calls no attention to itself with any particularly egregious sins of commission, delivering an exceptionally refined and engaging level of performance at a surprisingly competitive price. Even the most demanding LP listener shopping the sub-\$1000 phonostage market will benefit from the fact that the bulk of the budget for this device has been allocated where it counts most—in performance and dependability.

What is so special about this affordable upstart is that it so clearly excels at the crucial fundamentals: bass extension and definition, midbass punch, midrange timbre, texture, and purity, treble extension and air, and rhythmic drive. And its remarkable quietness delivers a measure of resolution and transparency to LP playback not found from any phonostage in my experience or memory priced under the \$2000 mark. As a result, the PEQ-1 MKII performs quite beautifully, even in the company of pricier well received phonostages from the likes of Lehmann, Simaudio, and Sutherland Engineering. If you are in the market for a killer phonostage that won't break the kid's college fund, audition the Channel Islands for yourself. It comes with a 30-day in-home trial! **tas**