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Chord Electronics Huei phono stage

by Alan Sircom



Huei is not the first phono stage from Chord Electronics, but it does have a number of 'firsts' in its own right. Specifically, this was something of a labour of love by Chord Electronics designer Matthew Bartlett, and something he was extremely passionate about when it was first discussed at Munich 2019. Between Munich and the actual launch of the Huei, Matthew Bartlett replaced Chord Electronics founder John Franks as Managing Director of the company (Franks moving over to the role of Chairman). Any way you slice it, that's a bumper year for Bartlett.

The Huei comes at an important time for the brand. Chord Electronics initially made its name as a maker of high-performance audio amplifiers, especially power amplifiers using switch-mode power supplies. This was back in 1989, when precisely no-one in audio had ever considered using switch-mode power supplies in high-performance audio

amplification and the trend at the time was amplifiers with gargantuan transformers and enough reservoir capacitance to jump-start an aircraft carrier. Although it made more than just power amplifiers, the brand became known for its power amps. Then... Hugo happened. The personal audio digital powerhouse was quickly followed by desktop and traditional audio digital products, with such a commanding reputation within the audio world, that people almost forgot that Chord Electronics made amplifiers. New amps using Chord's latest feedforward/feedback circuit design (such as the Étude (reviewed in issue 168) and the new Ultima models help reacquaint an ever-changing group of Chord Electronics buyers with the company's core product line, but many of these models are in the distinctly aspirational part of audio. By way of contrast the Huei MM/MC phono stage costs £990. That puts it firmly on the map for those wishing to buy a phono stage in the 'high-performance yet attainably priced' stakes. ►

“This is not some soft and laid-back phono stage, but neither is it stark, etched, or musically bereft. It’s really excellent.”



▶ The Huei is built to the same basic form factor as the company’s Qutest DAC. It’s a small rectangular box with the distinctive scalloped insets with combination controls and indicators that Chord has been using since the Hugo. The box itself is too small for a power supply, so is fed by a plug-top unit.

An extremely clever part of the Huei’s design is that it is microprocessor controlled. This means that all those functions regarding switching between MM and MC, and impedance and gain, are all controlled by pushbutton instead of futzing around with DIP switches. The load itself is divided into individual gain and impedance settings, which are identified by colour codes on the polychromatic round ‘buttons’ on the front panel. Huei includes twelve settings for impedance matching, including 47k ohm for MM and 30 ohm to 47k ohm for MC, and there are eight settings for gain (MM from 25dB to 35dB and MC from 48dB to 70dB). There’s also a subsonic ‘rumble’ filter at -24dB per octave below 50Hz, using a Rausch Slope profile. The use of polychromatic controls does make set-up easy and fast compared to peering inside or underneath a product and adjusting tiny switches with a toothpick.

In fact, the only real omission here is other tone curves. It’s RIAA all the way for the Huei. Once again, how you relate to this depends largely on where you sit in the tone curves debate, and how many records you own that fall within the zone where an extra tone curve or two might prove handy!

I used the Huei with both balanced and single-ended outputs (not at the same time) into a Mark Levinson 5805 integrated amplifier. The Huei was fed by a VPI HW-40 with an EAT Jo No 5 MC cartridge for the most part. Cables were primarily from Nordost.

Chord’s electronics have sometimes been damned with faint praise. They were considered clean, lean and very detailed, but not very musical or rhythmically integrated. That all began to change with the Étude power amplifier, and it’s a trend that’s set to continue with the Huei. This is not some soft and laid-back phono stage, but neither is it stark, etched, or musically bereft. It’s really excellent.

The Huei is all about the excitement, but without being either so brightly lit or so overly excitable and detailed that it leaves you cold. The excitement is key, though; that doesn’t just mean you reach for that collection of Technical Death Metal albums you don’t have. It’s more about the excitement underlying the music itself, whatever that music happens to be. Basically, unless your collection of music came out of an elevator, there is usually some creative force at work wanting to convey a theme or two they consider exciting, and the Huei is perfectly optimised to extract that energy from the groove. It doesn’t matter whether it’s Beck coming to terms with lost love on *Sea Change* [MoFi], Bill Evans digging where his next fix is coming from or Mahler just being, well, Mahler, the Huei is adept at finding that musical communications centre. ▶

“If knowledge is power, the Chord Huei is a small, colourful information tank.”

► This musical insight comes from a position of great – yet not stark – clarity and terrific soundstage properties. Basically, if the LP has some imaging, Huei will resolve it as well as the player and cartridge will allow. More importantly, the amount of detail pulled off a record is remarkable; I had a great deal of respect for the Jo No 5 before this review and afterwards I heard that it was even better than I first thought. It’s ability to dig deep into a record is outstanding and the Huei lets it do that with such aplomb and forthright accuracy, it’s hard not to be captivated. If knowledge is power, the Chord Huei is a small, colourful information tank.

I even played the good/terrible and almost ubiquitous Vivaldi Four Seasons by Marriner and the ASMF [Argo]. This first venture into period instruments predates engineers knowing how to record period instruments without them sounding like audible paint-stripper, but the best products cut through the brightness and give you the detail and information that is being presented beneath that forward sound, and the Huei does that extremely well.

In short, like all the best in audio, the Huei gets out of the way of your music, letting you make the musical decisions rather than having to temper them even slightly to adapt to the nature of the electronics. It’s surprising just how hard this can get, especially in phono stages and especially in this category. Imaging in particular highlights just how far some fall from the musical truth. Many phono stages truncate the width, depth or height of a recording. Many high-end models somehow also tend toward flattening the ‘pan pot and delay’ staging made in most studio albums. The Huei does neither of these things, and instead just plays the soundstage on the record. It’s not rocket surgery, but many fall at this hurdle.

Let’s put this into some perspective. The Huei is perfect for resolving the performance of £1k cartridges on £5k turntables. If you are really ‘going for it’ with £50k’s worth of turntable and a Moving Coil that cost as much as a new car, there are even more resolving phono stages out there, including Chord’s own Symphonic. It’s all about context.

The Huei is not without criticism, but the criticism is functionality-led rather than performance-led. The polychromatic colour-coded controls are a clear indicator of set-up but do require a look-up table to determine precisely

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

MM/MC phono stage

Input Impedance: Moving magnet: 47,000Ω, Moving coil: 100Ω – 3,700Ω, 12-step user selectable

Gain Range: Moving magnet: 21dB–42dB, 8-step user selectable, Moving coil: 49dB–70dB, 8-step user selectable

Input Noise: 1.1nV/Hz

Max Output Voltage RMS: 20v RMS

Equalisation Response: RIAA Curve

Equalisation Accuracy: +/- 0.1dB

Frequency Response: RIAA Curve = 12Hz to 25kHz

Rumble Filter: Rausch Slope -24dB per octave below 50Hz

Output Impedance: 520Ω (resistive)

Input Power Supply: 12v–100v to 240v 50/60Hz PSU

Dimensions (H×W×D): 4.1 × 16 × 7.2cm

Weight: 657g

Price: £990

Manufactured by: Chord Electronics

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what ‘orange’ denotes in terms of loading. Also, even though they can be dimmed, this means the often fit-and-forget phono stage is potentially the most illuminated and colourful part of a whole system. Finally, there’s the power supply. In fact, Huei has a secondary switching power supply internally to create the operating voltages from the external supply, so whether you use linear or switch mode external it doesn’t matter; although changing the power supply will void the warranty! Not many people realise, and it’s not clear anywhere, really, that the main power supply is inside the unit and Chord just uses the external brick to feed ‘raw’ power into the product; the external power supply doesn’t directly power any of the audio electronics. However, the fact remains that audiophiles are allergic to ‘wall-warts’ and I hope this doesn’t put people off what is a stunning phono stage.

There’s clearly the start of a trend here. The Qutest and Huei look to be the start of a range of very small, but immensely strong, components from Chord Electronics. It’s also not hard to see that this emerging collection of attainably priced, high-performance audio products coming to dominate that part of the audio world through the early years of the 2020s. If the Huei is anything to go by; the future’s polychromatic! +