

Moonriver 505 Hybrid all about the vinyl

Thursday, August 22, 2024
Chris Kelly



Moonriver 505 Hybrid phono stage

Regular readers may recognise the Moonriver brand name from two earlier reviews which I submitted for the company's 404 integrated amplifier, in January 2021 and its more powerful sibling the 404 Reference integrated amplifier, in June of last year. To save you scrolling back through the archives let me summarise what I said. I loved the standard version but was blown away by the Reference Edition two and a half years later, and it was fully deserving of the coveted Editor's Choice award bestowed upon it. Hence when the invitation arrived to review the new 505 Hybrid phono stage, I was delighted to accept

I remembered the excellent build quality of the amplifiers so it was pleasing that the 505 Hybrid felt very well built too and was reassuringly weighty, tipping the scales at about 12kg. It shares its siblings design ethos, with beautiful walnut side panels (or cheeks, as the company would have it), a slightly recessed front panel which hosts an array of rotary dials and switches, plus a button for power on/off and orange LEDs which confirm selected settings.

Looking from left to right, the first dial allows the selection of one of four phono inputs, two switches, the top one allowing three levels of intensity from the various LEDs and the lower one allowing switching between mono and stereo. Next is the second dial which allows the selection of one of six gain settings, expressed in dB. The third dial is marked MM Input Capacitance (pF) and has detents for 100, 220, 330, 470 and 650. Next comes a vertical array of three switches marked gain Selector and offering the choice of MM, Mute or MC. Below that is the MM Impedance selector, with the choice of 75k, 47k or 22k. The bottom switch offers the choice of EQ between RIAA or Decca and Columbia 78. The last dial is marked MC Input Impedance expressed in Ohms, with the choices being 10, 47, 100, 470 var, and 1k.

I am no cartridge guru but my first thought having studied the options was that this thing has sufficient flexibility to accommodate pretty much any cartridge currently in production. The dials are perfectly weighted with clear click stops at every setting.

Going around to the rear panel, where the pale grey finish makes it very easy to see the sockets even in a dark room like mine. From the left we find the Phono1 input, which offers both XLR and RCA sockets, then a further three pairs of RCAs for three more phono inputs. Above the RCAs are four phono ground pins. For output from the 505 there are two pairs of RCA sockets and to their right, an XLR pair for good measure. Finally, on the far right we find the IEC



mains power input socket. All in all this is the most generous array of socketry that I have seen on any of the phono stages which have graced my shelves.

However, all those features would be of no great benefit unless the beating technical heart inside the box was not even more impressive. There is an excellent description of both the design philosophy and technology deployed within the handsome body of the 505, which I am sure potential buyers will, and indeed should, read prior to making a purchasing decision. I was intrigued by the word 'Hybrid' in the 505's nomenclature. Rather than paraphrase, I shall quote the words on the Moonriver website: "The hybrid design combines the use of ICs and discrete solid-state circuits to form an ideal, high performance and ultra-low noise circuit. While the IC op amps offer very low noise levels, a discrete circuit offers lifelike drive and dynamics which is impossible to get from IC op-amps."

One of the wonderful things about this phono stage (and we have yet to get on to how it sounds) is that the dial and switch array on the front allow the user to try different setting on the





fly. For me this scores hugely over designs that require the resetting of dip switches to effect changes and it allows the listener to fine tune the sound to suit their own taste.

In integrating the 505 into my current set up I took the arm cable from my Linn Sondek LP12 into the Phono1RCA inputs. I have been using the extraordinarily excellent Vertere Dark Sabre MM cartridge since I bought the one sent for review late last year and that was in place for the majority of the time that the 505 was with me. A pair of Tellurium Q Ultra Silver II RCA interconnects (review due soon) ran from Output1 to an analogue input on my Lyngdorf TDAI3400 integrated amplifier. My Harbeth Compact7 ESXD loudspeakers were used, connected to the TDAI3400 with Tellurium Q Ultra BlackII cable.

Listening to the 505 Hybrid

With the 505 powered up and ready to play, I ensured that I had selected the correct input and that all the other settings were appropriate for the Dark Sabre. I set Gain to 44, Input Capacitance to 100 and Impedance to 47 kOhms. The EQ curve was set to RIAA.

As is my habit, I put my ear to the speaker grille and was greeted with absolute silence - no hint of hiss or hum. So far, so good. I was now ready to cue up my first record. As it is summertime here in deepest Devon I have been spending a lot of time listening to my collection of Beach Boys albums, so I opted for my original 1967 German pressing of *Smiley Smile*, which I bought in the summer holidays that year in West Berlin. Given the rudimentary nature of the systems on which it was played in its early years it has survived almost six decades without picking up too many war wounds, and it has been through my VPI 16.5 record cleaner fairly recently. As the Dark Sabre's nude micro elliptical diamond stylus lowered gently onto the record I took up my usual listening seat.

I was totally unprepared for what happened as the music started. The genius that is Brian Wilson launched into his lead vocal on Heroes And Villains and, familiar as I am with this music, it was as if he and then the rest of the band and the studio musicians who performed it with them had stepped forward from behind a screen and were now playing live in the room. I have always loved this album I cannot recall ever having heard it sound so organic, so intimate, so real. Created in the studio over many months, the whole album feels like a live performance. The Dark Sabre is capable of extracting an astonishing amount of detail from within a record's groove, but not until it was paired with this Swedish masterpiece had I realised just how good this cartridge is.

Whatever I subsequently played through the 505 Hybrid, it seemed to have been voiced as perfectly as any piece of audio equipment of my acquaintance. It must be incredibly challenging for a designer to find the right balance between detail and music flow, between analysis and emotional connection, between light and shade in the subtleties of a performance. Of course this did not come as a great surprise, as I found Moonriver's 404 and 404 Reference integrated amplifiers to be among the most musically rewarding of any that have graced my system, ever. In the following days I was drawn to spend even more time than normal playing records from across my reasonably eclectic collection. I shall spare you from a long catalogue of titles but suffice to say that there was no genre of music that the 505 Hybrid did not play well. Hard rock really rocked while solo classical violin had wonderful tonality, as did solo piano. Human voices, whether massed in choral splendour or in a spot-lit solo, sounded so real as to be as good as having sat front row centre at the recording.

Moonriver 505 Hybrid

In conclusion

This is a masterpiece of audio technology. It seemed as if it had been made to be paired with my LP12 and drew me into long, unflagging listening sessions. The build quality is impeccable and, at least to my eyes, it is a very handsome thing too. I can imagine pairing this with the 404 Reference integrated amplifier and living happily ever after with those, my Harbeths and LP12. I may not have enough time left to play every single record in my collection before I am too shaky to lower a stylus safely onto the disc, but with this in my home I would give it my best shot.



A friend of mine in the UK retail side of audio told me of their admiration for the sonic qualities of Moonriver products, but said that the limited range available was a concern as there was no upgrade path for potential purchasers to follow. From a business perspective I of course understand that point of view, but I would counter that it would be a very long time indeed if I owned a Moonriver based system before I surfaced for long enough to wonder about upgrades. I would simply want to keep playing music. Yes, the purchase price of the 505 Hybrid Phono might seem high, but its features are comprehensive, its build quality impeccable and its sound is sublime. If you are committed to vinyl replay, as I am, I urge you to seek out and audition this wonderful machine – you will not be disappointed.

Specifications

Type: solid-state, MM/MC phono stage

Phono inputs: 4 on RCA, 1 XLR

Analogue outputs: single ended RCA, balanced XLR

Input impedance: MM 22K, 47K, 75K Ω , MC 10, 47, 100, 470, 1K Ω and custom

Input capacitance: 100, 220, 330, 470, 680pF

Gain: variable 34dB to 72dB in 6 steps

EQ options: RIAA, Decca, Columbia

Signal to noise ratio: not specified

Dimensions (HxWxD): 135 x 430 x 390mm

Weight: 12kg

Warranty: 3 years



The ear is all about great music and great sound. It is written by hard bitten audio enthusiasts who strive to find the most engaging, entertaining and great value components and music of the highest calibre. This really is what living is all about.