

Mola Mola Lupe phono preamplifier

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Newly-introduced by Dutch manufacturer Mola Mola, the Lupe is positioned as an archive-grade phono preamplifier. The Lupe does indeed have the comprehensive functionality we might expect of a pro-audio device, but it would be a mistake to assume that only professionals need pay attention to it.

In addition to supporting the regular RIAA equalisation curve, the Lupe has a fully customisable EQ setting plus 43 pre-set named alternatives. Want to use the correct EQ curve to play a pre-October 1954 Mercury record, or pretty much any other recording from yesteryear? The Lupe – like Mola Mola, a name from a book about Hawaiian fish – will oblige. It also accepts four tone arm inputs simultaneously, three RCA and one balanced, each one of which can be assigned different loading, gain and EQ values.

Sure footed

Impressive though all this is, it would count for little were the sound produced below par. However, Mola Mola's design team has been sure-footed and the Lupe is able to make a compelling case for itself just on sonic grounds alone. There are technical reasons for this that I'll return to shortly, but for now it's sufficient to observe that once it had gone through a rather extended burn-in, the brand-new review sample proved to be more than competitive sound quality-wise against a selection of its £ for £ peers, indeed it might even be argued – perhaps a little tongue in cheek – that the Lupe is the Swiss Army Knife of vinyl, but the unique flexibility effectively comes for free.

The Lupe has the same half-width form-factor that Mola Mola employs for its Tambaqui DAC and Makua monoblocks, its black sides contrasting with a swoopy matt aluminium top. The rear panel is somewhat crowded with all the input and >>



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» output connections on offer, but not so much so that setup requires especially nimble fingers. The front panel has four buttons for manual source selection, and a black and white dimmable display that shows the current configuration.

The Lupe comes with an infra-red handset that gives control over basic functions, but the dedicated Mola Mola Android and iOS Bluetooth app is required to access all deep settings. Below the EQ selection drop-down in the app are three further drop-downs; bass turnover, low shelf and rolloff. These are the time constants used by individual record labels to achieve their own house EQ curves before RIAA became the global standard. If we use the app to select, for example, Decca's 1934 78 RPM curve, or any of the 42 others, we see the time constant values change in the app in response and hear relays clicking inside the Lupe as the new values are applied. The three parameters can also be changed in any combination on the fly, so some buyers might use this ability to boost weak bass, or tame an over-bright recording. The app also allows individual channel phase to be reversed, mono or stereo output to be selected, and a subsonic filter to be switched in and out.

More stages

Most phono preamplifiers designed both for moving magnet and moving coil operation use one gain stage to amplify MM cartridge output, with a second gain stage

daisy-chained to the first in order to provide the additional amplification required by low-output MC cartridges. The Lupe differs by having two entirely separate Class A gain stages, one designed exclusively for MM cartridges, the second just for MC. Both are fully discrete designs and are followed by an active analogue filter that uses relays to switch capacitance and resistance in and out to achieve the different time constant values and thereby EQ curves. Mola Mola says this arrangement allows each gain stage to be optimised for the best possible performance, in the case of MC where the lowest voltage noise (and highest gain) is required, and for MM cartridges where the lowest current noise is desirable. The result of this no-compromise approach is a claimed A-weighted signal to noise ratio on MM (45dB @ 1V output, 1kHz) of 86dB and on MC (52dB @ 1V output, 1kHz) of 92dB and a bandwidth of more than 80kHz. In the listening chair those impressive figures prove to be of more than academic importance.

The Lupe was used in the review system with the current reference turntable, an Origin Live Sovereign S fitted with the company's Agile tone arm and a Soundsmith Paua II moving iron cartridge (0.4mV output). Via the app, the first of the Lupe's three RCA inputs was designated a moving coil input, its load resistance set to 400 Ohms from a range of 60 to 1kOhms, and gain sensitivity set to 72dB from a range of 52dB to 87dB. »



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» Buyers will need to be patient. Mola Mola suggests that the Lupe might take some 300 hours to stabilise and while that's relatively unexceptional, bear in mind it's needle-time rather than simply powered-up time that counts here. Once it had stabilised sonically, as expected from its claimed signal-to-noise measurements, the Lupe proved to be almost preternaturally quiet, able to transcribe a forensic level of detail due to the relative silence from which musical events emerge. But this is not to imply that the Lupe's presentation is sterile and un-engaging.

Some years ago an audio manufacturer particularly invested in the use of ultra-high-quality full-sized discrete components told me that 'small components, mean small sound.' The Lupe – which like most contemporary audio products makes liberal use of miniature surface-mounted discrete components – debunks that assertion rather more articulately than I could. It delivers Big Sound with a muscularity that is musically very satisfying.

Well-recorded baritone voices, stand-up bass, piano and floor toms, for example, have a weight that, combined with crisp dynamic agility, fine texture and tonal density make instruments sound more extant and natural than I have heard with any phono stage of my acquaintance up to and beyond twice the price. At the other end of the audioband and the piano keyboard, the Lupe transcribes the highest note on an 88-key piano with an equally convincing percussive energy. The Lupe's sound-staging abilities are of a high standard, resulting in confident placement of instruments and voices in an apparent performance space that has notable front-to-back depth.

The amount of fine detail resolved by the Lupe drove me to re-visit the setup of the Soundsmith Paua II on the Origin Live Agile tone arm due to a sense that something wasn't quite right. Half an hour later I'd satisfied myself that cantilever alignment, azimuth and tracking weight had been spot on. However, using the Agile's positive VTA adjustment to lower the back of the arm a tad had removed a fleeting edginess to some female voices that I had previously assumed was simply pressed in to some tracks. The last two phono stages through my hands had largely glossed over this setup fault, but the Lupe had telegraphed it clearly.

Another indication that the Lupe declines to editorialise is that it also showed up more clearly the wide disparity in quality between recordings. It's not the first audio

component to have done this, but the outcome is always the same; a re-evaluation and sometimes re-arrangement of the remembered hierarchy from good to bad.

Added acuity

What the added acuity does not do is spoil the enjoyment, even of recordings that are shown to be, from an engineering perspective, real stinkers. Yes, we hear the result of poor microphone placement, poor mixing and sloppy production, but at the same time we hear with more clarity subtle details of the tonal and timing choices made by the musicians. In a way, we hear past the faults and attend more easily to the music.

It takes a component of exceptional value to justify purchase, but Mola Mola's Lupe has done just that and it is now my reference phono stage. In common with, I suspect, the majority of buyers, I'll not be using the Lupe's remarkable flexibility to anywhere its fullest extent. The review system has one turntable with one arm, and the household record collection includes little vinyl that is older than the late 50s. No matter. Mola Mola's phono stage has earned its place on the kit table simply because, for the RRP, and benchmarked against its peers, it is a sonic over-achiever. +

Technical specifications

Input noise (MC) 0.35nV/rtHz

Input noise (MM) 0.9pA/rtHz

Sensitivity variable from 30uV to 5mV

THD, IMD not measurable

RIAA conformance +/-0.1dB

Subsonic filter -3dB @20Hz

4 fully programmable inputs

Mola Mola Remote app (Android and iOS)

Dimensions 200mm (W) x 110mm (H) x 320mm (D)

Weight 5.1kg

Price £7,300/\$9,850

Manufacturer Mola Mola  www.mola-mola.nl

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