

# Leema Acoustics Essentials Phono £495



This tiny box of tricks offers an impressive spec, but can it deliver sonic fireworks?

## DETAILS

**ORIGIN:**  
UK  
**SIZE:** (WxHxD)  
110x48x100mm  
**WEIGHT:**  
1kg  
**FEATURES:**  
• MM and MC  
• fixed loading  
**DISTRIBUTOR:**  
Leema Acoustics  
**TELEPHONE:**  
01938 559021  
**WEBSITE:**  
leema-acoustics.com

Leema Acoustics is best known for its range of hefty amplifiers and distinctive multi-DAC CD players, but the Welsh wizards also produce the superb Agena phono stage, and good news for those of us shopping at a more terrestrial price point is that Leema says it has incorporated large amounts of Agena thinking into the Essentials phono stage seen here. This is surprising as the Agena is a great deal more expensive than the Essentials. It is also impressive that Leema can fit much of anything into this tiny box. In a test of diminutive product this is small, measuring roughly 100mm wide by 40mm high and 100mm deep. It is beautifully finished though, with casework that combines excellent detailing and impressive solidity – albeit partly undermined by the unattractive wall-wart power supply...

The little Leema supports both moving magnet and moving coil cartridges, and can be switched between the two settings via two rather hard-to-adjust rear panel switches. There are no other controls and no loading adjustments, and the only front panel feature beyond the name is a single blue LED. Black and silver finishes are available.



## Sound quality

The panel was universally enthusiastic about this product, and found much to like about its music making ability. The most significant aspect is that more than any other phono stage here, the Essentials put in a consistently strong performance with all types of music.

Much of this seems to be down to the handling of the frequency extremes. The Leema has an open, airy and well-extended top end that gives recordings space to breathe. At the low end, this stage consistently had the best bass in the group. It combines impressive low-end heft with the sort of fine details that make the reproduction of a piece more convincing. This in turn means the Leema has a sense of timing and control that makes it easy to listen to, if not quite an effortless rhythm king.

In terms of tonality, it proved equally effective, and panelists were again impressed at how even-handed it was, along with the impressive sense of decay it gave to certain notes. The low noise floor and impressive microdynamics were also remarked upon, and while the soundstage wasn't felt to be the best in the group, it was consistently good. Listeners also liked the way that the Leema can flatter and work with poorer recordings without smoothing off or reducing the dynamics of better pieces. Given that not all vinyl is 'audiophile', this is a useful attribute.

Criticisms on the other hand were slight. Reading across the notes and comments, there's a sense that the Essentials might be a little too civilised for its own good, and that every now and again, it could do with being a bit more effusive and

enthusiastic. Whether this would come at the cost of the more positive qualities of its performance is hard to say, however.

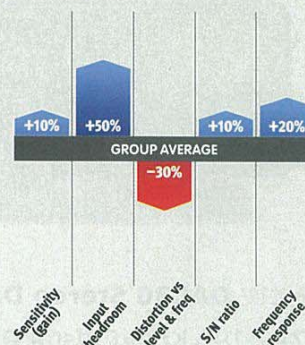
Overall though, the little Leema shows a sufficiently comprehensive range of abilities to handle a wide variety of music in an appealingly even-handed way. Above every other model in the test, it's an all rounder that would work well in the context of quite varied systems. Throw in the solid build and the ability to handle moving coil cartridges, and you have a most worthy group winner.

## ON TEST

This phono stage demonstrates the trade-offs between gain, noise and input headroom facing both the designer and enthusiast consumer. Leema has opted for a low-ish +35.5dB MM gain (requiring 16.8mV from your pick-up to deliver 1V from its output) but the input overload is close to 100mV and the overall A-wtd S/N ratio 81dB (re. 5mV input). The MC input offers a more compatible +62dB gain (810µV from your MC for 1V out) and impressive A-wtd S/N of 77dB (re. 500µV) but with a lower – relatively speaking – 4.6mV input overload margin.

Distortion increases through the bass region from 0.007% at 20Hz to 0.018% at 200Hz, holding true to <0.02% up to 20kHz, as per Leema's specification. Channel separation is >70dB (20Hz-20kHz). In 'flat' mode where the response is ±1dB/10Hz-100kHz, the Essentials still shows a gently rising treble through the presence region and beyond. PM

## RESULTS AT A GLANCE



## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

**SOUND QUALITY**  
★★★★★ **LIKE:** Highly even-handed, detailed and appealing sound

**VALUE FOR MONEY**  
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Dip switches hard to use; ugly PSU

**BUILD QUALITY**  
★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Extremely well thought out and consistently capable design that sings across a wide variety of music

**FEATURES**  
★★★★★

### OVERALL



# Group test verdict

**Ed Selley** puts the this month's group testing into context. How do the contenders fare in the great scheme of things?

None of the models in this test are devoid of redeeming features, but there are some with much greater strengths than others. The Lehmannaudio Black Cube Statement offers compelling timing and strong detail retrieval, but did not manage to generate the sense of involvement needed to win over the panel, and its rather utilitarian appearance didn't appeal.

The Heed Questar offers faithful tonality and low noise levels, but the limited features and narrow soundstage detracted from the overall performance. The lack of support for moving coil also hinders its future upgrade potential.

Thorens' MM-005 puts up a valiant performance considering it is roughly half the price of the next cheapest here. It manages to sound engaging and natural with most music and considering that it offers moving coil support as well, it has to be considered something of a bargain, but if you have more money to spend, there is more performance to be had...

The Creek OBH-15 Mk2 demonstrates this, with more flexible set-up options and a sound that manages to please a great many people. Its less than forgiving behaviour with poorer quality recordings needs to be taken into account, but it's a great little product and worthy of recommendation.

What the Icon Audio PS2 does well, it does with sufficient assurance to warrant its premium price tag in this test. If you're after genuinely enjoyable tonality and a wide and expansive soundstage, the Icon delivers the very best here. But, when you pick up the pace and ask for a bit more low-end clout, it can't deliver the same levels of performance that it does at the top end. If you aren't a rocker, this simply won't matter, and the Icon Audio will have much to offer you. Its support for moving magnet cartridges only is a bit of a limitation, but you can always add an Icon step-up transformer at a later date for a useful upgrade process. Overall, a great way to play vinyl.



Leema's Essentials Phono is our winner, because it gives a wonderfully inviting and invigorating performance across a wide variety of music. It keeps pace with the Icon for top end tonality and soundstaging, but pairs it with a tight, fast and deep bass response. Throw in the solid build and beautiful appearance and it's a worthy champion of this phono stage test.

## RESULTS AT A GLANCE

	 <b>Creek OBH-15Mk2</b>	 <b>Heed Audio Questar MM</b>	 <b>Icon Audio PS2</b>	 <b>Leema Acoustics Essentials Phono</b>	 <b>Lehmannaudio Black Cube Statement</b>	 <b>Thorens MM-005</b>
<b>Price</b>	£300	£300	£500	£495	£350	£150
<b>Sound</b>	★★★★★	★★★★☆	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★☆	★★★★★
<b>Value</b>	★★★★★	★★★★☆	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★☆	★★★★★
<b>Build</b>	★★★★★	★★★★☆	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
<b>Features</b>	★★★★★	★★★☆☆	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
<b>Conclusion</b>	★★★★★	★★★★☆	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
<b>Key features</b>	A great value, nicely packaged and versatile budget phono stage – an excellent entry-level box	Capable, well built and finished product but didn't quite seduce the panel with its sound	Wonderfully expansive and creamy sound will appeal to tube fans, but music-dependent	Brilliant all-rounder with loads of speed, detail and musicality; great build and finish	Nicely built budget box with a good pedigree, but cerebral sound didn't appeal to the panel	Great value budget box that's surprisingly well made, with a clean, smooth sound
<b>moving magnet input</b>	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
<b>moving coil input</b>	yes	no	no	yes	yes	yes
<b>variable loading</b>	yes	no	no	yes	yes	no
<b>mono switch</b>	no	no	yes	no	no	no
<b>offboard power supply</b>	yes	yes	no	yes	yes	yes

## TRY WITH THESE

### TURNTABLE: Rega RP6 **£798**

The beautifully finished RP6 gives a very mature sound, one that's easily good enough to flatter the best phono stage here, and its fine tonearm will take a good mid-price moving coil cartridge too.



### AMPLIFIER: Cyrus 6a **£699**

If you're looking to build a fine quality vinyl system, this mid-price integrated amplifier delivers an organic and satisfying sound. Smooth, fluid, dynamic and lyrical – it really makes music fun.



### LOUDSPEAKERS: Boston Acoustics M25 **£595**

Vinylistas don't go for the sort of sound that could slice the top off a car, so unsurprisingly the consummately smooth and even M25 would work a treat. Civilised yet musical, we love it!

