

# Icon Audio PS1 MkII

Amidst a plethora of new phono stages to exploit the LP revival, Icon Audio's all-tube PS1 MkII is also equipped with a volume control. So it's a phono preamplifier too...

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**H**i-fi is like rock 'n' roll itself. There are 'establishment' brands, and there are 'indie brands'. I like to think of slightly rebellious, not-blatantly-commercial makers such as Icon Audio – with its undiluted, purist approach to valves – as being as indie as it gets. With the rather cool, decidedly goth-feel of the two-chassis PS1 MkII phono stage/preamp (a steal at £1000 in MM-only form, or £1200 with MC), we have for review a product that certainly marches to the beat of a different drummer.

## STUNNING COLOUR COMBO

It starts with looks that captivated me the instant I opened the carton. Although free of wooden trim, it reminded me of the more compact models from Unison Research (another 'indie maker', to be sure) in the way that much of the hardware – beyond the valves themselves – is on display in beautifully finished housings, such as the transformers. Another nice, Unison-like touch is the contrasting top plate, which shows that you can maintain hair-shirt minimalism without completely abandoning aesthetically-pleasing touches. If it didn't upset the more macho among you, I would even call it 'cute', like Quad's similarly-compact PA-One headphone amp [HFN Feb '15].

Why cute? Because it's rather bijou, with dimensions of only 170x105x265mm (whd) for the 2.8kg phono preamp, and 120x160x235mm for its 3.9kg outboard power supply. Overall finish is a nicely-applied matt black coating, with the copper top-plate producing a stunning colour combination: it will certainly be recognised by those aware of the 'power' wristwatches from Hublot and Audemars Piguet. Luxurious? You bet, despite Icon's almost militant, no-nonsense attitude.

Icon Audio has acted this way since 1999, concentrating on parts quality and

eschewing anything solid-state, so there are no transistors or ICs, no computer control circuitry to sully the purity of an all-valve design – including the tube-regulated power supply. A further nod to the golden age is point-to-point hard-wiring with silver-plated OFC cable, so there are no PCBs, and the pots are Japanese Blue ALPS. All of the fittings provide a superior, tactile sensation, but the user is warned to take care of the mini-toggles when unpacking the two chassis.

On the power supply's fascia is the on/off mini-toggle, with an LED above to indicate power on. The back has a socket for a three-pin IEC mains plug, while the 5-pin umbilical cable to the main unit is captive, connecting to the back of the preamp with a screw-in locking mechanism. While connecting it, you will note that the preamp offers fine, gilded RCA phonos for input and output, with a central earthing post. Also at the back is a toggle for 'ground lift' should your system suffer hum.

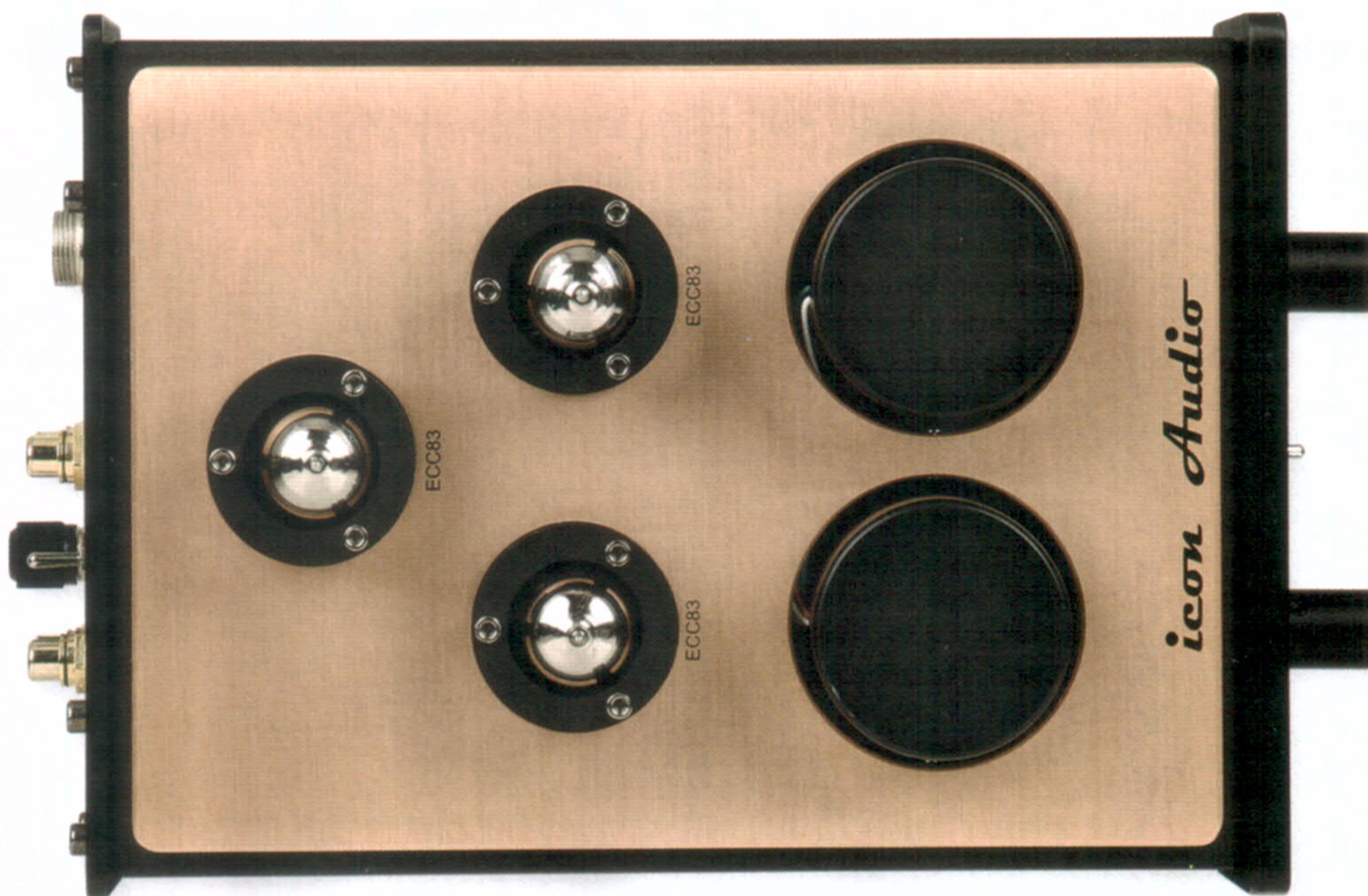
At the front, attesting to this component's suitability as a single-source, LP-only preamp are volume and MM/MC

selection rotaries with a toggle in between to choose mono or stereo. In light of the LP revival, and the availability of top-flight mono cartridges, the function has definite value, as I know I'm not alone in preferring a true mono setting when using mono cartridges, or playing mono LPs with stereo cartridges – it simply sounds *better*.

## CHALLENGE FOR TWEAKERS

With completely passive RIAA equalisation, and an MC option via a transformer with 10x gain, purists can rest easy. The gain for the MM setting is stated as 50dB, while the MC's is specified as 69dB [see PM's Lab Report, p61]. One thing's for certain: level was not an issue, when using this either as a preamp into the Musical Fidelity M1 Power [HFN May '12] or Quad 909 amplifiers or, as for most of my listening, into the Audio Research REF 6 preamp [HFN May '16]. In the latter situation, level was set to 3 o'clock, the position deemed normal in the owner's manual.

Tweakers will love the PS1 MkII: the three valves are ECC83 triodes, with two WY-1/0A2 regulators in the power supply. Those utterly incapable of leaving stuff



**RIGHT:** This all-tube phono preamp employs three ECC83 double-triodes in high-gain stages around a passive RIAA network. The MC option is facilitated by UK-built step-up transformers