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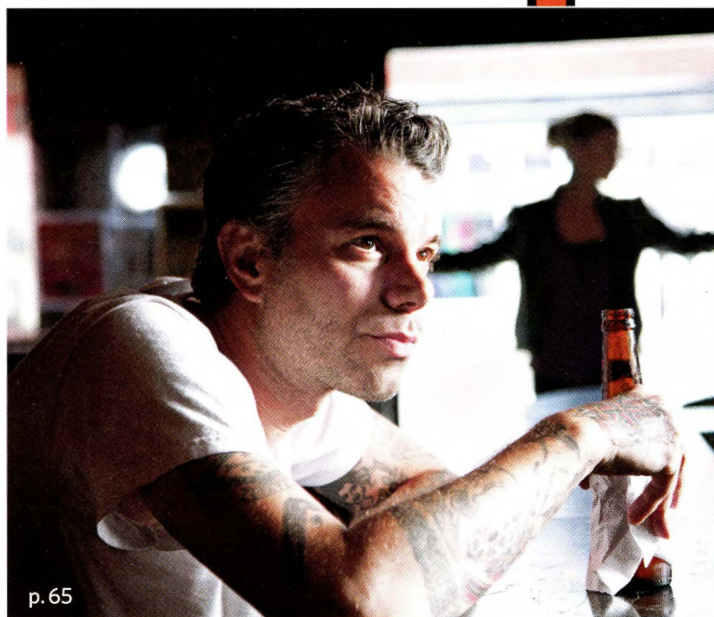


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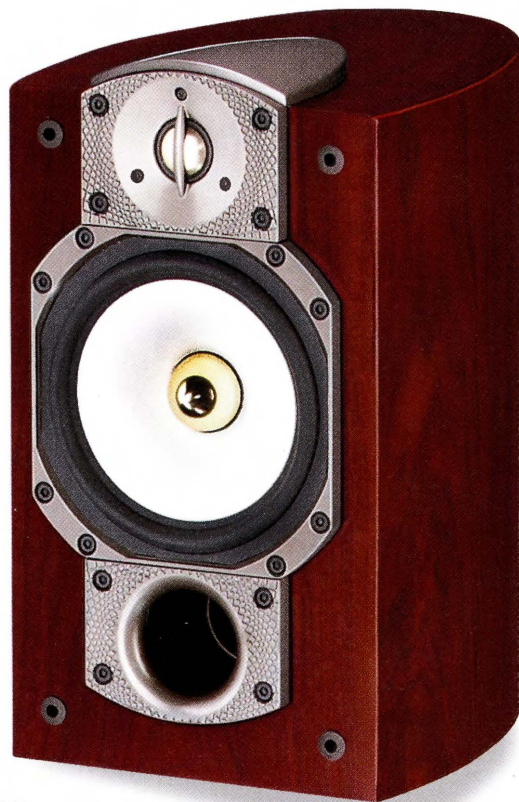
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FOLLOW-UP^{by} **ROBERT DEUTSCH & ART DUDLEY**

THIS ISSUE:

Bob's Devices' CineMag 1131 phono step-up transformer get a second look and listen.

Bob's Devices CineMag 1131 phono transformer

Two years ago, in an e-mail with the subject line "Stop the Nonsense Please," a reader from Altadena, California, decreed that *Stereophile's* writers should immediately cease writing about phono transformers. Perversely, we have carried on nevertheless.

"You are doing a horrible disservice to your readers," this gentleman wrote in his concluding paragraph, "and creating confusion with reviews touting the use of separate devices like 'step-up transformers' not readily available from any reputable dealer I know in L.A., or I'm sure in most other cities." I'll address that last observation in a moment—the thing that really caught my eye was a question posed in our correspondent's first paragraph: "What the 'F' is a step-up transformer?"

Today, as two years ago, Anger and Fear seldom leave the house without their friend Ignorance—and you *know* I can't let such a question go unanswered.

A step-up transformer is a passive gain stage that works by swapping the high current and low voltage of a moving-coil phono cartridge for the high voltage and low current required by a phono preamplifier. Step-up transformers can be made using a variety of materials and techniques; more to the point, they can be made using different turns ratios between their primary and secondary coils, said ratios determining both the amount of gain and the load impedance the associated cartridge will see.

Virtually every MC cartridge I've tried has sounded better—more dramatic, more impactful, more nuanced, more colorful—when loaded with a step-up transformer, compared with being used to drive an active phono preamp alone. Consequently, I'm delighted at how many new manufacturers of perfectionist-quality phono transformers have appeared on the scene in recent years. Not the least of

¹ The HiFi-Tuning Supreme Fuses cost \$59.95 (Small) and \$89.95 (Large), each in fast-blow and slow-blow versions. US distributor: The Cable Company, 125 Union Square, New Hope, PA 18938. Tel: (800) 328-9973, (215) 862-4870. Fax: (215) 862-4871. Web: www.thecableco.com.

these is Bob's Devices, a company in Wilmington, North Carolina, whose generally affordable products are sold direct (see "Listening," June 2010).²

Until very recently, it appeared that two models from the Bob's Devices line were to be discontinued: The CineMag 1131 and CineMag 3440 AH. The problem had to do not with Bob's Devices but with CineMag, a specialty supplier of transformers with roots in the film industry. In recent years, according to Bob's Bob Sattin, the finest-quality "blue label" transformers from CineMag weren't made on the factory floor but were wound by hand, one at a time, by a single employee. That person was Dave Geren, who also designed CineMag's low-inductance 1131 line transformer—and who recently left the company to strike out on his own.

I never auditioned the CineMag 3440 AH, but to lose the CineMag 1131 would be a shame: Last year, well before the supply interruption, Sattin sent me a sample of his CineMag 1131 stereo version (\$1195), which was switchable between high and moderately low gain ratios of 1:40 and 1:20, respectively; this model can also be configured with a choice between 1:20 and 1:10, the latter providing the very low gain and comparatively high input impedance required by certain high-output MC cartridges). The Bob's Devices CineMag 1131 also features a thick powder-coat finish, gold-plated connectors, and a ground-lift switch; both the latter and the gain switch are high-quality C&K toggles with silver contacts. As usual with Bob's Devices products, all electrical joins are said to be made using the American Beauty resistive soldering system, to protect the fragile transformer windings.

During the time the CineMag 1131 was in my home, I also received a sample of the Ortofon Xpression pickup head (0.3mV output; see "Listening," February 2012) and a recent sample of Miyajima Laboratory's Premium BE Mono cartridge (0.7mV; see "Listening," August 2009). With the Ortofon Xpression, the new Bob's Devices step-up transformer far exceeded the performance of my Shindo preampli-



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fier's internal Lundahl transformers: Virtually every performance element was better, including the impact and immediacy of the sound and the emotional intensity of the music. Even very compressed pop recordings, such as a new reissue of Pink Floyd's *Wish You Were Here* (LP, EMI SHVL 814), gained from the apparent dynamic expansion wrought by the CineMag.

That said, the match between the CineMag 1131 and the Miyajima Premium BE Mono was, if anything, even better: No other transformer of my experience has taken the Miyajima to such heights—and those heights were extraordinary. My beloved EMT OFD 25 mono pickup head, which until now had been the juiciest, most colorful, and by far the most dynamic cartridge I'd ever used, mono or stereo, had more than its heels nipped by the CineMag-Miyajima combination.

Those observations were all made with the CineMag 1131 set for high gain; unsurprising, given the low outputs of the Ortofon and Miyajima cartridges. What *did* surprise me was the fact that the same transformer—at the same setting—also worked brilliantly well with my recently acquired EMT TSD 15 pickup head (1.05mV; see "Listening," May 2011).

A 1:40 transformer shouldn't work with a high-output cartridge: If nothing else, the impedance presented by the transformer—in tandem with the 47k ohms of the phono section of my Shindo Masseto preamplifier—is just a few ohms higher than the cartridge's: surely not the optimal conditions for efficient power transfer.

Yet the combination sounded astonishingly good. The CineMag smoked the Masseto's internal transformer—no shock there, of course, given that the

latter is designed around the very low-output Ortofon SPU—but it even bested the EMT-loving Silvercore One-to-Ten by a slight margin: The American CineMag sounded just as dynamic and punchy as the German Silvercore, but was also a little bit richer and far, far bigger. (In its low-gain setting—the "proper" setting—the Bob's Devices transformer sounded fine with the EMT, but a little too tight and constricted, and altogether mechanical, when compared with the high-gain setting.)

The situation, like the sound itself, reminded me of the great

Homage T1, another high-gain (but non-switchable) transformer that has provided the very best performance I've heard with virtually every cartridge at my disposal—even the "wrong" ones. The CineMag bears comparison to that benchmark product, yet sells for roughly one-fifth the price. Price ratio trumps turns ratio.

Now for the good news: Not long before this issue went to press, Bob Sattin told me that David Geren is now the sole owner of CineMag—funny how some situations can be turned around for the better!—and that *all* of the CineMag phono transformers will continue to be available.

As for our not-so-humble correspondent: While it's sadly true that the greater Los Angeles area has no dealers that stock transformers from Hommage, Auditorium 23, or even the excellent models from Audio Note, it shouldn't be hard to find step-up transformers in that city from any number of other makers—including E.A.R., whose distributor, E.A.R. USA, is located in L.A. An adventurous reader might even drive to Canoga Park and visit the CineMag factory, just to see what's what. I think that would be more fun than sitting around, waiting for some guru to tell me what to buy, but I guess not everyone agrees.

Nor is everyone into the phono-transformer thing. But our numbers, like the number of LPs sold in the US every year, are increasing. Just this morning—I'm writing this sentence on Friday, February 3—I received among my e-mail two messages from readers requesting advice about, you guessed it, phono transformers. That's fairly typical. The Bob's Devices CineMag 1131 is now among the top three choices on my recommended list. —Art Dudley ■

² The CineMag 1131 costs \$1195. Bob's Devices, 6251 Turtle Hall Drive, Wilmington, NC 28409-2132. Tel: (910) 612-8666. Fax: (866) 846-4210. Web: www.bobsdevices.com. E-mail: bob@cc.rr.com.