

FEATURE

The Hagerman Cornet 3

American Know How at its Finest

By Jerold O'Brien

Our publisher used to have a Hagerman Trumpet phonostage. A wacky wood box that stood upright and wouldn't fit on any rack, but it sounded great. Big, open soundstage and killer dynamics. Even though it had eight tubes, it was solid-state quiet. Jim Hagerman is a cool cat that never goes to any of the hi-fi shows. He'd rather hang out at home, which is Honolulu. Good choice, I say. Listen to grumpy audiophiles that never buy anything or watch the surf and chill.

What started out as a kit on Kickstarter a while back is now a full blown, off the rack component you can buy. Costs a few bucks more, but I'm guessing even on his worst day Mr. Hagerman can probably do a better job at assembling anything electronic than I can, and I've done more than my share of DIY projects. Knowing you can pull it out of the box and it will work properly – priceless. I'm getting too old for the drama of hoping things I built will work.



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Quite the value

If you're a music lover on a bit of a budget, want way more performance than you'd expect for just under \$500, and only need MM capability, don't even bother reading the rest of the review. Go to the Hagerman Audio Labs website and order this little jewel. Jim Hagerman is even kind enough to provide free shipping anywhere in the world. Pretty chill I say.

And chill you will when you put the first record on your turntable. My first selection for auditioning the Cornet happened to be the Brand X's prog classic, *Moroccan Roll*. Full of time changes and perky percussion, the Cornet keeps the pace locked down. Much like that Trumpet I remember, this tiny, see-through phonostage is quiet and that makes the analog experience so much better.

There's just something cool about tubes and analog that just go together like chocolate and peanut butter. The Cornet has a smoothness about it, yet it never sounds like vintage tube gear; slow or stodgy. Your favorite vocal and acoustic tracks will be done justice, yet everything is crisp enough to make the heaviest rock records come to life too.

Gliding through Deep Purple's *Made in Japan*, Richie Blackmore's crunchy lead guitar in "Smoke on the Water" never sounded better from a budget phono preamp. Even in the context of a vintage system, should you have a 70s integrated or receiver, this is an incredible step up. Using the TONE Dual 1229 and Shure V15 via a Marantz 2275 and some Altec 19s went from being flat and reserved via the on-board phono to a true audiophile experience. *(continued)*

When super size won't do.

Getting great sound in a smaller space requires extra placement and planning. Large speakers usually won't do, components often need to be stealthier and neighbors in close proximity might not appreciate your need to rock out at all hours of the day and night.

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A modern rig proves equally enthralling. Having purchased a Technics SL-1200G of my own after the review here, I've been running an Ortofon 2M Black with excellent results and it really sings with the Coronet3. This is a combination I could easily live with, if I didn't already have the Decware phonostage. (Another great American audio artisan) Thanks to the Technics removable headshells, substituting a few other MM carts was easy and offered equally enticing results. The Ortofon 2M Red (\$99) and Bronze (\$299) both work well with the Coronet3.

This phonostage is an excellent example of well implemented, modern tube design. It offers just

enough of the three-dimensional palpability that comes with tubes, yet the sound is quiet, dynamic and engaging. Classical and solo acoustic music is easily enjoyed, with no tube hiss coming through to dampen the enthusiasm. What stuck me the most clearly was the level of sonic refinement the Coronet3 offers. There's a delicacy to the reproduction you just don't get for \$500 anywhere.

Cute, cool, and compact

The tiny acrylic enclosure looks more like a Lego project (which I kind of like) with banks of little blue capacitors and three tubes poking out. Hagerman doesn't chintz out on the tubes either, a

pair of 12AX7 and a 12U7 Mullard reissue are included with the package. A quick perusal of Music Direct's website reveals that this is about \$60 worth of tubes. I've seen far better components with buck a pop crapola Chinese rejects under the hood.

Kudos to Hagerman for getting great sound out of readily available, decent quality tubes. Should you be obsessed though, and towards the higher end of the MM food chain, an investment in some great NOS tubes will offer up a little more musicality, but defeats the economy of this phono stage. But I know how some of you can be, so yes, exotic tubes will give you still more. *(continued)*



However, you can't upgrade the external power supply, but the best news is that you won't be swapping power cords. Less anxiety again. A 9v wall wart powers an onboard "boost converter" that generates the necessary high voltage to power the tubes. The whole process takes about 30 sec, and three little yellow LEDs light in succession as the party starts. Once up to power, the Coronet3 takes about 20 minutes for the tubes to fully warm up as they would in any vacuum tube powered device.

While the low cost, compact enclosure saves a ton of money in build cost, there is no mechanical shielding, so a bit of care is required in placement. Don't put the Coronet3 right next to the power transformer of a big power amp, or too close to the wall and you'll be just fine. Like it's ancestor, this phono stage is quiet.

What are you waiting for?

The Hagerman Labs Coronet3 is darling in every way, and regarding sheer sound quality, it reveals as much music as units costing 2-3 times as much. By taking advantage of an artisan manufacturer that builds like a major, skipping elaborate casework and eliminating the dealer chain, the music aficionado on a budget benefits tremendously here. Hagerman's been around for a long time, and his products have earned a great reputation for sound and build quality.

Our publisher agrees that this is an Exceptional Value Award winner, and as I said at the beginning of this review if you want an awesome MM phono, put the Hagerman Coronet3 at the top of your list. I can't give it a more enthusiastic recommendation. ●

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