

Double Shot:

**Analog
and
digital
excellence
from
Mola Mola**



Jim Macnie on Jazz

PrimaLuna's EVO Phono

A really nice rack from Finite Elemente

The YG Acoustics Haley 3 speakers

And more!

Mola-Mola Tambaqui and Lupe DAC and Phono

Analog and Digital Excellence.

\$13,500 and \$9,850
mola-mola.nl

Going back and forth between the heavy bass lines in Kruder & Dorfmeisters *The K&D Sessions* on vinyl and via ROON, it's exciting to hear the similarities between these two pieces. About two years ago the Mola Mola Tambaqui DAC got a lot of praise in the audiophile press, and with good reason. It sounds fantastic, looks fantastic, and offers up incredible functionality. The new Lupe phonostage is the same, sharing the same stylish casework, and level of performance. It's really amazing how similar they sound, which is very interesting because there are so few companies/designers that strive this hard to achieve a parity in both domains.

That these two pieces offer such a big slice of “the best of the best” performance in their respective domains is what makes them so incredible. They be destination products for nearly everyone. This has been a trend we've been seeing in a lot of great gear lately, and it's refreshing. This might sound crazy, but the difference between the choices a person putting together a system on a \$50k - \$100k budget is completely different than the person with unlimited fundage assembling their system.

However, if you put the two together over a coffee, you'd be surprised at how similar their goals are. It's always a lot more work when you have to justify every dollar spent, and good as both of these Mola Mola pieces are, I suspect that even if they were the anchors of a carefully assembled \$100k system, and your fortune improved tremendously, they'd still be the last two pieces you'd ever replace.





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There is a fairly steep upward curve in diminishing returns between the world's finest \$10k-\$15k DACs (and phono stages) and those with six figure price tags. While the person seeking the ultimate in performance with the checkbook to back it up will still want those products, and they still deliver more. A Porsche GT4RS still outperforms a Cayman GTS 4.0, even though the specs say they are very close in measured performance. Driving back and forth to work, taking the occasional spirited drive you may not notice all that much difference. Certainly not enough to spend twice the money. But the minute you get some clean air and can really crank it up, you know why it

costs what it does. This is the beauty of the Mola Mola gear – it's so damn good you may never want to go any further. And even in the context of a couple of fairly high quality, high dollar systems, these components deliver dazzling performance.

Between the two of us, we've got a handful of outstanding DACs from dCS, Nagra, and T+A, along with some great to excellent phono stages from BAT, VAC, Backert Labs, Pass Labs, and Nagra. Close in the rear-view mirror have been products from Boulder, Naim, and Audio Research, so fortunately, there are some good data points on the map. While several internet pundits claim the Molas to be "the best," we prefer to say fantastic, but with their own voices and functionality. The level of performance that these two boxes deliver is top shelf indeed. Will they be the best for you? That remains to be seen.



Features and most features

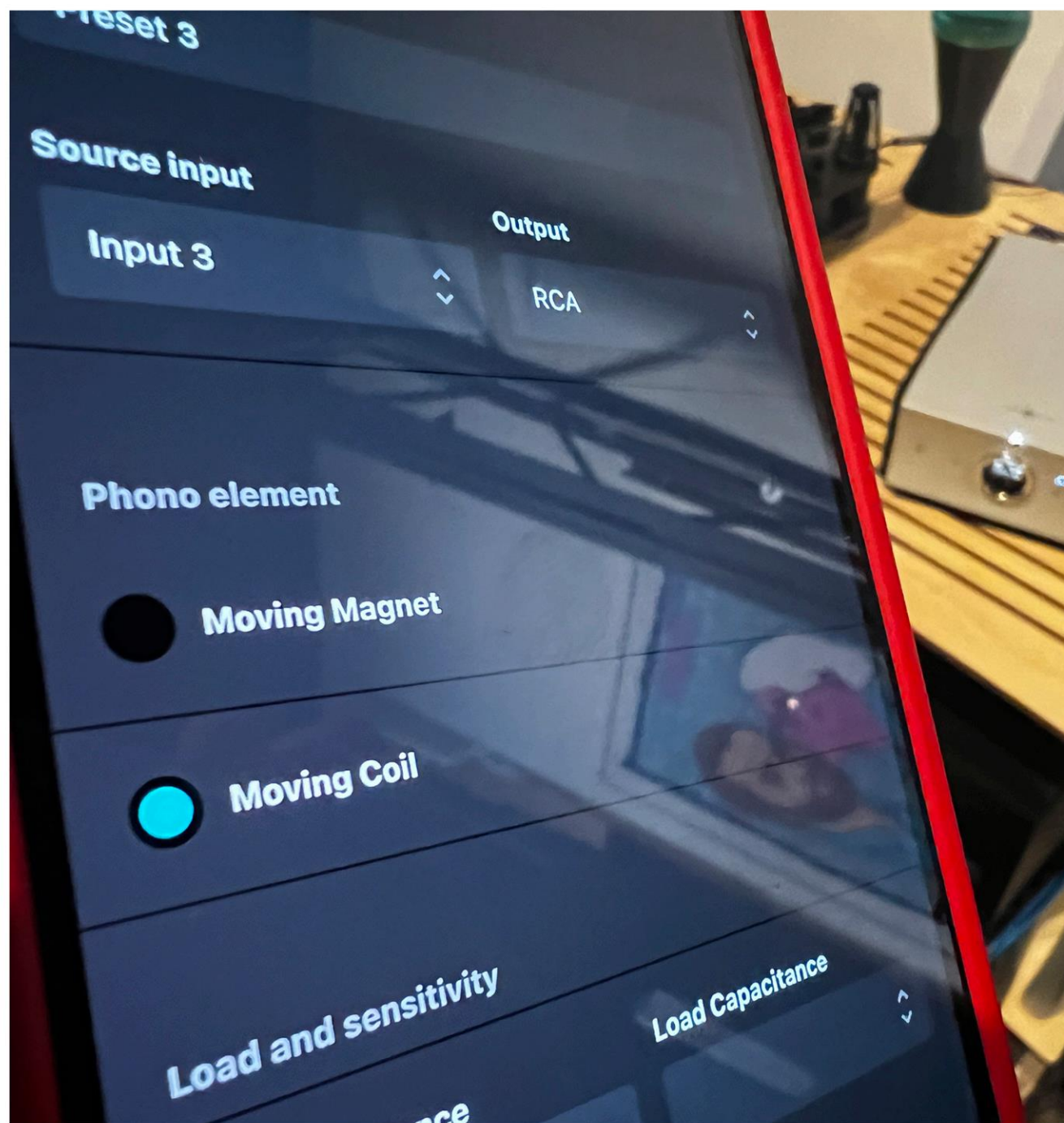
Music lovers can't live on midrange alone, otherwise we'd all still have our PV-2s. Listening to the opening verse of XTC's "Dear God" takes on an entirely new dimension for a track that I've heard thousands of times before. The eight-year-old girl recruited by Todd Rundgren during the recording of the track, sounds much more like a young person singing the lines than before, if that makes sense.

Another exiting aspect of the Lupe and the Tambaqui is how user friendly they are. Thanks to Mola Mola's app, you can control all aspects of them from the comfort of your listening chair. Both products are clearly designed with a 21st century user in mind. A quick trip to the App Store will have you sporting the Mola app in no time, and it connects via Bluetooth, so ultimate purists that have no wifi in their listening rooms will not be at a disadvantage. Every aspect of the DAC and phono can be adjusted via the app, or if you need to get some extra steps, the front panel – it is a nice touch that Mola Mola does let you do it from the front panel if you are app adverse.

Starting with the Lupe, the most exciting thing going on here from a functionality standpoint is that there are four phono inputs, with one of them balanced. If you've never tried a balanced phono connection, I highly suggest it, as it is usually slightly quieter. If your turntable happens to have a very low output cartridge, this will make the overall sonic picture more dynamic. The other three inputs are standard RCA, but again, important to notice the small details. Mola Mola offers a separate grounding lug for each input. Almost no one takes the extra care to do this and it really comes in handy with multiple turntables/tonearms.

If you click here (<https://www.mola-mola.nl/lupe.php>) to visit the Mola Mola site, you can see all the combinations at your disposal for gain, loading, capacitance and EQ. With the various EQ curves and a maximum gain of 87dB, no cartridge or recording is out of your realm. For anyone having a large collection of older discs, this will prove to be invaluable. It's not a major difference, however, once you hear those old Columbia's, or early Rolling Stones Monos with the correct EQ, you'll never go back.

The lowest output MCs we had between us are a vintage Helikon SL (.22mV) and the Denon 103-r (.25mV), so the maximum (82dB and 87dB) weren't really necessary, but if you happen to have a Kondo or one of those super low output MC's that only have four turns of wire on each coil, you won't be left out in the cold with the Lupe.



Digital as good as analog

That's the tagline for the Tambaqui, and when listening to both it and the Lupe, they are remarkably close in voice. Mola-Mola takes the approach of upsampling all incoming data to 3.125MHz/32 bits and converts to noise-shaped PWM. The upsampling police always claim that this doesn't work, but audio is more often about implementation than approach. The dCS DACs offer the option to upsample, and quite honestly I prefer it.

We've mentioned it before, the difference between "really good for digital," and just plain really good sound is a combination of resolution, tonal accuracy, dynamic range, and most importantly, a non-electronic sound that only the world's finest DACs possess. The Tambaqui definitely belongs in this group, and considering it's just below fourteen grand, an incredible bargain. There is a delicacy to the music presented with this DAC that will keep you in the listening chair.

Rather than bore you with endless comparisons, the Tambaqui presents all of the aforementioned virtues with a tonal balance that is very similar to dCS and Boulder – neither adding or subtracting, just delivering the goods. Where my Aqua, with its tube output stage embellishes with more tonal saturation (which I love) that might not be the perfect fit for you, and if you can keep your sources as natural/neutral as possible, fine tuning the end result to your version of perfection can be easily done with amplification, speakers, and cable. Plus, should your taste in amplification change at some point, the Mola Molas will still be excellent source components.

Chris and I both notice how much low - frequency power and control the Tambaqui possesses. Whether listening to synth bass or kettle drums, there is a complete lack of overhang in the lower registers. The bass hits hard and fast, offering a tremendous sense of pace, always anchoring the tracks you choose.



And vice versa

The Lupe leaves a bit on the table in terms of tubey, midrange magic when compared to our VAC, Nagra, and Backert Labs tube phono stages, but the Lupe leaves our tubed favorites in the dust when it comes to low frequency resolution, dynamic range and low noise floor. Which of these characteristics push your buttons the most? Much fun as tubes are, you'll have to replace them at some point. Will you get the same sound you had? Who knows. Or as they say on social media, "ask me how I know." While the lure of vacuum tubes will always be there, solid-state phono stages are lovely because they never change their sound characteristics. This is wonderful as a reviewing tool, and if you are someone who likes to change combinations often. You aren't hitting a moving target as tubes age when you go solid-state.

Remember, there's four inputs. A four input phono stage is like a heated steering wheel. At first glance, you think that's silly, but it came as part of a package when you ordered the car. You think, "I'll never use that." Even though you won't admit it, the first time you tried it, you never went back. Four phono inputs is off the chart analog fun, and once you get hooked on multiple turntable/tonearm combinations, you can't go back. The bigger your record collection, the more this makes good sense. This aspect of the Lupe makes it one of the most versatile phono stages going. Other than an Allnic phono we auditioned years ago with five inputs; I truly can't recall another phono stage of this quality with this many inputs.



However, it's not so much about analog sounding better or worse than digital, it's about them sounding different. If you've ever noticed how the finest all digital recordings still have a different feel texturally than the finest all analog recordings, the two Mola Molas are so good, that if the recording in question delivers more music in digital, that's where it will sound best, as it is with analog.

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Headphone Guru

Just as the Tambaqui has a sonic elegance about it, the Lupe is the same – in terms of the way it renders the finest of textures and sonic contrasts. Cymbals not only sound correct in terms of tone and timbre, but in the way they decay into nothingness in an extremely natural and linear way. If you have a friend that plays drums, ask them to let you (lightly) tap a high hat cymbal and feel the way that decay lingers in the room. Ditto for the piano. The Lupe excels at this stuff.

I suspect it won't take long for you to listen to the Lupe to realize how special it is. Between the two of us, we tried a wide range of turntable/phono cartridge combinations; MM, MI, and MC, so we feel very confident telling you that there should be no compatibility issues with this phonostage.

Don't forget the phones

The Tambaqui also features a first-rate head-phone amplifier, however the ¼ inch stereo and 4-pin balanced outputs are on the rear panel. Depending on how you have your system physically configured, this may or may not be convenient. However, it does make for keeping the front panel scratch and fingerprint free. Depending on how long the cables are on your phones, you may either need to get a longer cable, or sit really close.

That aside, the Tambaqui delivers big headphone sound, with incredible imaging. Zipping through a playlist of favored headphone tracks, with a lot of bouncy stereo effects and big imaging, is a blast. If you already have a pair of good phones, you'll be thrilled – yet the Tambaqui is a good enough headphone amp, you might consider an upgrade in that department. Even using my reference Focal Utopia 2022s, the Tambaqui leaves nothing on the table. Think of it as a free headphone amp, pair of cables and power cord – even if you never use a pair of phones, the Tambaqui is more than worth the asking price as a DAC alone.

Great on paper, better in person

Both of the Mola Molas certainly deliver amazing specifications, but in the real world they reveal a lot of music. This level of depth and transparency is what makes recorded music fool you into thinking it's real.



I suspect that just like Chris's experience, if you happen to purchase either the Lupe or the Tambaqui, you'll be extremely tempted to buy the other shortly after to achieve a seamlessness in sound, as well as being able to control it all from your phone.

While we shy away from the B-word around here, both of these pieces from Mola-Mola are excellent in every way. These are not components that after you live with them for a while will think, "I wish it did this, I wish it didn't do that." There is still more performance to be had from both platforms, but it's going to cost you dearly. To that effect, we are happy to award both the Lupe and the Tambaqui our Exceptional Value Awards for 2023. And because Chris has purchased both, the #toneaudioapproved awards as well.

Very enthusiastically recommended.



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