

Mellow Tone Kits 6or12SL7 Phono Preamp – A Review

The Context – A little about me and a little about how I came to do this review.

Hmmm, so where do I start. I suppose from the time I thought I was truly satisfied with solid state equipment. That is until I heard my first tube/valve integrated amplifier. Believe it or not, this was the Willsenton R8. At this stage I already owned a Rega Planar P6 turntable, Schiit Mani 2 and a NAIM Uniti Atom which I was using to power my newly acquired Q Acoustic Concept 500 floor standing loudspeakers. I also owned a Cambridge Audio CXU for playing Blu-Ray and CD as well as quite a collection of CDs and vinyl records but was really enjoying the ability to stream anything I wished to listen to via Qobuz and Tidal. True, I could also stream music through the CXU too, but found the sound less than satisfactory. I certainly knew I could improve on the Schiit Mani 2, so I purchased a NAIM NX5 XS 2 steamer/DAC and a NAIM Supernait 3. The Supernait contained a rather better sounding phono section and so I started to listen to more vinyl. A little later I also purchased a Hegel H390, and even though the sound was different, I was still not satisfied.

Enter the Willsenton R8, which I bought on a whim, but did not want to spend too much money on something I was quite unsure of, even though the reviews were generally, quite good. So impressed by this “new” technology, I decided to spend even more and buy the Willsenton R800i, a SET amp, and then much later, I purchased the Cayin Soul 170i.

Not long after purchasing the R8, I found out that changing tubes from one brand to another, also called “tube rolling”, was a great way to improve the sound and during this time I first came across the word “NOS” being used a lot. I only knew that NOS was something that made cars go faster, but after finding out that it was also an acronym for “New Old Stock”, I decided to dive down yet another rabbit hole. And I’m so glad I did. As I was already an avid viewer of YouTube, I quickly learned all the terminology of the “tube world”. I also came across this small, rather unique channel called Tube Lab which had just recently started. I loved his no-nonsense approach to the hobby and so every week I would never miss his latest YouTube video. Of course, by this time, I already owned quite a collection of current production and NOS tubes. Jim, the presenter of the Tube Lab YouTube channel also advertised his tube business at the end of each “episode”, and so I started purchasing tubes, more-or-less solely from valvesNmore. The quality of the tubes Jim sells is exemplary, especially after being “bitten” quite a few times by purchasing tubes from suppliers I believed were trustworthy, only to find the merchandise they were peddling, quite often, was less than perfect. So, Jim was quite the revelation. Over these few years we have also swapped emails, and even though we have never met, total trust developed, and so it came to pass that Jim, who by this time had also been joined by Charles, his son, in his quickly expanding Kit business – suitably named Mellow Tone Kits. They are sold in the form of kits, as the name implies, and as time has gone by, Jim and Charles recently designed a tube phono pre-amp. This being the subject of this review.

To say that I was quite chuffed when Jim asked me to review their latest creation, and the subject of this review, is truly an understatement.

The Design – and Mellow Tone Kits’ philosophy.

Just as their Universal 6or12SN7 pre-amp uses a dual mono topology, so does this new addition to their kit repertoire. Both pre-amps use the same R-Core transformer for the high voltages required in tube equipment, while a switching power supply (SMPS) is used to power the tube’s filaments. The advantage is that while most common tube pre-amps/integrated amps require 6.3 volts (technically AC or DC), there were also tubes manufactured that used 12.6 volts for the filament. Both of these pre-amps can therefore use either tube, with the bonus that as 6.3 volt filament tubes become more scarce (even unobtainium), their 12.6 volt counterpart is generally still available. Additionally, most modern tube equipment can only use 6SN7GTA or GTB, but these pre-amps are designed to also safely use the original lower spec’d 6SN7GT. In simple terms, this means that a huge range of tubes can be used in either of these pre-amps, including their equivalent CV181, VT231, 6N8S (6H8C), 1578, and their substitutes, such as the 6GU7, or the 6CG7/6FQ7 – all substitutes require an adapter as these tubes are 9-pin. In the case of the 6SL7, the equivalent 6N9S (6H9C), 1579, 5691, and the 6SU7 can also be used, as well as their 12 volt versions, providing a 12.6 volt version was manufactured, of course. There are also loctal versions of some of these old-world tubes. The loctal version of the 6SL7 is the 7F7, while the loctal version of the 6SN7 is the 7N7. While the loctal tubes require an adapter, valvesNmore has even gone to the trouble of “re-basing” these tubes as octals for those people who may be hesitant about using an adapter!

Simplicity of design is also at the top the list, meaning you will not find multiple inputs/outputs, nor will you find any remote controls. In fact, both pre-amps are designed with the notion that they should be “a straight wire with gain” with nothing superfluous in the signal path which might degrade the purity of the audio signal.

The Review – finally!

This review was carried out using the following equipment:

- Rega Planar P6 with standard RB330 tonearm
- Nagaoka MP-500& Goldring 2500 moving iron cartridges
- Two other (borrowed) phono pre-amps, one of which has a suggested retail price of several thousand dollars for comparison purposes.
- NAIM NX5 XS 2 streamer/DAC for comparison purposes
- Cayin Soul 170i integrated tube amplifier
- Q Acoustic Concept 500 floor standing speakers
- High quality interconnects and speaker cabling
- Suitably treated room

First of all, I had a problem with hum and buzzing. After a lot of experimentation, it was found that Rega earths (grounds) its turntables in quite a unique way. The turntable does not have a separate earth lead and instead, uses the left channel ground as the grounding point (RCA coax cables use the outer braid as both a shield and ground return path ed.). This was problem was fixed by running an earth wire from one of the tonearm’s mounting screws to the phono pre-amp’s earth lug and disconnecting the earth wire to the left channel ground. This is a simple modification that even I was able to do, so if you own a Rega, do not be discouraged.

Now for some serious listening!

As mentioned above, I used the excellent streaming capabilities of the NAIM NX5 XS 2 to compare the streamed version of the tracks with that produced by the phono pre-amp.

It was immediately apparent that the Mellow Tone phono pre-amp is no slouch. While keeping to streamed tracks which had not been re-mastered, without exception, the phono pre-amp bettered the streamed version in just about every area. To my ears, the following really stood out. The phono pre-amp had a little more sparkle in the top end, while brass instruments were presented with a very pleasing amount of bite. The human voice, both male and female, is also beautifully natural, while the bass is surprisingly articulate with a satisfying amount of texture and tone.

The soundstaging ability is also excellent and as is usual with vinyl records, the variation in mastering quality is very much hit and miss, but given the right recording, of which I have many, the phono pre-amp is easily capable of expanding the sound stage beyond the bounds of the speakers. Not only this, instrument placement across the soundstage is also quite precise. Presumably, this has a lot to do with the decision to use a dual mono topology for each channel. In fact, I have an original (1972) album called Stormy Weekend by The Mystic Moods Orchestra which has rain, lightning and thunder as well as dogs barking and the sound of steam locomotive whistles, and these effects give the illusion of the listener actually being in the storm, meaning that the sound wraps around you 360 degrees! Impressive and spooky all at the same time.

This phono pre-amp is also very dynamically alive, and using either cartridge, presented the music with a nice amount of atmosphere. I also love the sound of piano, and again, I was not disappointed, as it was reproduced in a very realistic fashion. Piano is extremely difficult to record, but there are recordings that do get it right – and so too did the phono pre-amp. Talking about atmosphere, which is NOT “air” that many speak about, is something that most digital recordings cannot quite achieve. True, a digital recording can be crystal clear, but then, so can the phono pre-amp, but with this added atmosphere, which I believe most people might describe as musicality (I know, it’s very cliché), the phono pre-amp is an absolute pleasure to listen to music through.

Albums:

- The Missing Linc – Lincoln Mayorga and Distinguished Colleagues Volume II – Sheffield Lab
- Lincoln Mayorga and Distinguished Colleagues Volume III – Sheffield Lab
- The King James Version – Barry James & His Big Band – Sheffield Lab
- Discovered Again! – Dave Grusin – Sheffield Lab
- I’ve Got the Music in Me – Thelma Houston & Pressure Cooker – Sheffield Lab
- A Talking Picture – The Pasadena Roof Orchestra
- Peter and the Wolf Young Person’s Guide – London Symphony Orchestra – Mia Farrow & Andre Previn as narrators
- Oxygene – Jean Michel Jarre
- Make Your Move – Captain & Tennille

All the above recordings are very early pressings from around the mid 1970s to about 1980. I did play quite a few other pressings, some that are much more recent, including some of which have been remastered at 45RPM.

Still, without exception, the Mellow Tone Kits phono pre-amp’s “special sauce” produced an experience that was totally captivating.

The Cartridges:

Nagaoka MP-500 –an excellent cartridge with a smooth yet extended top end, a midrange with a nice amount of warmth, and upper bass/lower midrange which is very slightly fuller than the Goldring 2500.

Goldring 2500 –another excellent cartridge, and if you want a cartridge which is a little more neutral than the Nagaoka MP-500, then this comes highly recommended.

Still, even though there are minor differences between these two cartridges, when properly aligned and set up, either would be an excellent companion to the phono pre-amp. I prefer the Goldring 2500, but it's such a close match that if I hadn't listened to the Goldring, then I would be more than happy with the Nagaoka. BTW, while the Nagaoka MP-500 is obviously made by Nagaoka, it came as a bit of a shock to learn that the Goldring 2x00 series are also made by Nagaoka!

CONCLUSION:

Is the Mellow Tone Kits phono pre-amp excellent for the money? A Big Fat NO! The MTK phono pre-amp is excellent regardless of the money, and I do not believe that I can be any more complimentary than this.

In a word, buy it, assemble it, and sit back and enjoy the music...it's really that simple!

Rachael W.