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Audio Kultura Iskra 1



MM/MC Phono stage

[\[Italian version here\]](#)

Product name: Audio Kultura Iskra 1 Phono Stage

Manufacturer: [Audio Kultura](#) - Poland

Cost: 291€ ([Currency conversion](#))

([YMMV](#))

Reviewer: [Graeme Budd](#) - TNT France

Reviewed: September 2019

It's phono stage time once again so apologies to all the digital nuts out there for whom the requirement of another amplification stage is a one of those strange things that us analogue fans feel the need to buy and even spend huge amounts of cash on to turn our tiny signals into something that our amps will be able to do something with. This time we're abandoning highish end pricing and we're firmly back in the real world with the Audio Kultura Iskra 1

I admit I wasn't familiar with Audio Kultura so I looked them up on t'internet. The company actually comes from Poland and in fact they produce studio equipment and the Iskra 1 is their first foray into hifi. And what better place to start than with a fully featured phono stage at a competitive price point especially as one of their existing products is a high quality microphone preamp? The Iskra is sold directly from their website with a 30 day money back guarantee so you can try it in the comfort of your own home with your own equipment. There's also free shipping in the EU - so UK residents would be advised to get their orders in quickly.....

I was intrigued where the name Iskra comes from. According to Google Translate it means Spark in Polish. Which could give rise to no end of puns but I promise I won't mention anything being set alight at any point in the review...

The Iskra 1 caters for both MM and MC and presents selectable gain, loading and capacitance options via Dip switches on the underside. These are easy enough to adjust and there's even a QR code printed next to them to access the manual on the web should you lose it, and allow the front panel to be kept clean in a lovely shade of blue. Round the back there's the usual set of input and output phonos along with a ground post. A nifty well made blue ground wire is also supplied keeping with the Audio Kultura family look.

Visually it could be considered a bit of a Marmite product (that means it polarises opinions for our US readers - you can swap Marmite for Mr Trump if you want) - I rather like the blue but it's certainly going to stick out in your equipment rack (unless you own a limited edition Lavardin amp in anodised red in which case it may go unnoticed..). While were talking visuals this is clearly a product where solid construction as been favoured over bling - there's no inch thick faceplates, machined heatsinks or gold feet. This is a good thing as it means the money has been spent inside where it matters and your 291€ have been well spent! This is further shown by the internal layout. Its well built and the PCB appears well laid out.



Insides

Power is from a wall wart DC transformer - no complaints here as it didn't buzz or affect the rest of the system. Maybe this could be upgraded to further increase performance although I didn't try this as the only better PSU I have is the Graham Slee one and that outputs more voltage than the Iskra expects to see. So I left well alone and ran it as standard.

System wise I tried two turntables - Linn Axis/AO Akito/Reson Etile for the MC tests and An TT2 Deluxe/Arm II 2/An lo 1 with AN S3 transformer to run the MM input. The GSP Accession, CEC PH53 and Audio Note R Zero II Phono were on hand for comparison and the habitual Canary Audio CA 608LV and Living Voice IBX-RW3s turned what came out of the Iskra into something I could hear



Rear panel

Listening

I started off with Audio Note turntable combination and the Iskra in MM mode and ran it against the other stages. As would be expected (although as we all know money spent does not always equal better performance) by the price difference it doesn't have the musical flow of the Audio Note or the bass depth or clarity of the GSP Accession. Frankly I would have been gobsmacked if it had. As an example when up against the Audio Note if you play "Have a good time" off the Brand New Heavies "Brother Sister" album the guitar is less present, the saxophone hasn't the same texture and the bass is maybe a tad slower. Continue onto the second track on the album and the interplay between the two lead voices isn't as well portrayed and the voices have less individuality. A few more albums later I can say that the Iskra appears to lack a little bit of bite and sizzle on cymbals (shown on GoGo Penguins HiRez) and attack on female vocals (Sugababes Freak Like me - the Capoeira Twins remix). It can also get a little bit lost with complex left/right hand piano rhythms. But on the other hand it brings out ambient detail like obscure synth noises better and for this alone I could see some people preferring it as it could be said to provide a fuller picture. It also provides a wide soundstage with accurate instrument placement and credible depth portrayal.

Before I get accused of being negative please continue reading because I'd like to add to this the fact that the Iskra isn't very far behind the more expensive competition on any of the points I've mentioned and I'd be inclined to suggest that in a system with speakers that would normally accompany a sub 300€ phono stage the differences would be negligible. And that ladies and gentlemen (alright - maybe ladies was a bit optimistic on my part) is what's important here. Play it in isolation and with likely partnering components and you'll realize the Iskra puts in a very fine performance indeed!

To prove this point my Canary 608 decided to throw a wobbly and massacre a couple of output valves. During it's (too long) absence I ran the Iskra with my olde faithful Cyrus One. With this combination I was much more pushed to spot differences and even more-so significant musical ones. I could mention a slightly narrower soundstage or a tad less separation between instruments if I was being critical (which is the objective of this article) but I feel I'd be missing the point somewhat. The Iskra gets the important bits right allowing you to enjoy what's on your records.

During this period I also used the Iskra's MC input with my Reson Etile - the loading options allowed me to set it to Reson's specified 100 ohm value so I was off to a promising start. Often at this price level the MC option is a bit of an also ran. It's not surprising as a low noise MC stage is an expensive thing to get right and some manufacturers obviously feel at this

price point most people will have MMs but feel the need to add an MC for the sake of completeness. Obviously this isn't Audio Kultura's case as frankly I didn't notice any inferior performance when compared to the MM and there was no intrusive noise. I pitted it against my personal CEC PH53 (which was 750GBP 5 years ago) and again the Iskra came up with a more than creditable performance losing out only fractionally on similar points to those alluded to earlier.

Conclusion

So to summarize what we effectively have here is a sub 300€ phono stage that gives up minimal performance to stages costing 3-4 times its price. Based on this result I think Audio Kultura has done a superb job on the Iskra. When listened to in isolation there are no glaring omissions and you never get the impression that it's holding back the music. The fact that it can be configured to suit a vast variety of cartridges and amps via its gain, loading and capacitance options makes it a good long term prospect for buyers.

I never didn't enjoy what it does and if I had to abandon my other stages I could happily live with it. If you are running a decent MM or affordable MC it could well fulfill your phono preamp needs. For those with an expensive MC I understand there is an Iskra 2 in the pipeline - the Iskra has whetted my appetite enough to make me feel that it could be something very special indeed.

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