

47 Lab Midnight Blue Series 4730/4733/4735, reviews by J. Roberts, on :



4730 Midnight Blue Series Tuner Review by Jack Roberts | December 2011



Publisher's note: The MSRP of the 47 Labs 4730 "Midnight Blue" series tuner was increased, due to the higher exchange rate, from \$1,300 to \$1,500 after the conclusion of this Review. Comments expressed by the reviewer in this Review are based on the previous MSRP of the 47 Labs 4730 tuner. Nonetheless, the author of this Review believes his points remain valid. Please enjoy the review.

When I was in college FM was the main way we listened to music and in fact, it was about the only way we heard new music. I knew guys who used reel-to-reel recorders to record hundreds of hours of music from their favorite FM stations. To make it in the music industry, you had to have a hit on the radio. Man, how things have changed – it seems like more people find new music on video games than radio nowadays.

47 Lab's Model 4730 tuner and another unique product, a pre-amplifier with a USB DAC input that serves also as a headphone and integrated amplifier, are the first two products to appear in the company's new Midnight Blue Series. One has to ask, who is crazy enough to release an analog FM-only tuner at this point in time? It seems that FM was Kimura-San's original expertise so he was ready to release a tuner with the 47 Labs name tag. The 4730 is a full analog tuner with a special air variable capacitor. It has both 75 Ohm and 30 Ohm antenna inputs, and a single pair of RCA outputs. It is as simple as a product can get.

The first things I noticed about the 4730 tuner are its size and looks. It's smaller than a shoe box, a lot smaller. The small front panel is made up of a large tuning dial and a small tuning knob. There are also two LEDs, a green tuning indicator, and a red stereo indicator. When the tuner is off, it remains very nice looking and seems to just say turn me on and see how nice I look; so I did. Upon doing so I have to say I was a little disappointed. It's not that the tuner isn't nice looking when turned on, it's just that I was expecting some subtle green or blue coloring, and I wasn't expecting the light to escape out the top of the front panel. Yet, overall it's a really nice retro-looking tuner.



Using the 4730

The back panel is laid out very simply. There are connectors for a 75 ohm antenna and a 300 ohm antenna, a pair of RCA jacks, a power plug, and an ON/OFF toggle switch. That's it, so all you have to do is connect a power cord, your antenna wires, and an interconnect to your line stage. I did find it slightly inconvenient for the ON/OFF switch to be on the back panel.

Once you turn it on the only thing left to do is to turn the tuning knob until you find a station to listen to. If you're in a city this is pretty easy, but if you're out away from the stations you'll find this tuner isn't the most sensitive of units. I have to admit that my current home is in one of the hardest areas I have ever lived to pick up radio stations. The hills that surround our area of the San Francisco Bay Area are beautiful to look at, but they also seem to do a good job of blocking radio signals. Even the car radio struggles with picking up stations.

I took the tuner over to Oakland and San Francisco, and in both cases I could pick up plenty of stations. I was lucky enough at my place to pick up a Berkeley Public Radio Station that plays a very diverse selection of music, as well as one good jazz station, and a local classic rock station. The jazz station and another sounded quite good. In fact, the jazz station sounded as good and at times better than CDs. Some of the shows on the Public Radio station were simply stunning. The sound of the 4730 was very solid, and produced a nice and natural soundstage. It was much more transparent than I had expected, and with the best program material, sounded better than a lot of CDs. There's the catch though – there is so little decent program material to listen to where I live. If I lived in Berkley, Oakland, or San Francisco I would be more excited about this little tuner, because it does sound very good. However, music from that classic rock station was so compressed that it sounded worse than MP3s on satellite radio.

In my opinion, there are several features missing on the 4730. Why would you make such a nice little tuner and not put a mono/stereo switch on it? If I had could switch from stereo to mono I could pull in at least five more stations, maybe even ten. Some kind of signal strength indicator would also be nice. I guess the "Midnight Blue" Model 4730 Tuner is just the kind of product we have come to expect from 47 Labs. It's small, it's cute, it sounds really good, and it doesn't have many features.

Still there are concerns about this product that have to be mentioned.

The 4730 tuner costs \$1300; as I write this a number of vintage tuners are available on Audiogon, including McIntosh MR77 for MR78 for \$800 and \$1000 respectively, a Sansui TU-9900 Tuner for \$600, and a Quad FM-2 for \$350. I didn't have any of these on hand for comparison, but I've owned three of these and they were all very good sounding tuners with more features and better sensitivity than the 4730. Of course none of these are new, and I don't know of any new tuners for this price that sounds this good

4733 Midnight Blue Headphone Amplifier-Preamplifier-USB DAC Review by Jack Roberts | May 2012



After going to CanJam at the RMAF, \$2,000 doesn't sound like so much for a headphone amp. Heck, before I went to CanJam I had no idea how big a deal headphones are nowadays. For those who haven't caught on cans, people seriously into their cans want more than an iPod to play them on. So the new headphone/pre-amp from 47 Labs, may be just what some of you are looking for. Especially, one that is also a very good preamp and has a first class DAC built-in.

Still, this is a rather specialized product, like all 47 Lab products. They were first known for their original and simple Gaincard amplifiers. Like those, the Midnight Blue line of products are small and not very impressive looking. Cute, though. There are two 47 Labs products that are rather spectacular exceptions, the KOMA Turntable and the PiTracer digital transport. Both make an incredible visual impression. Yet, despite its simple appearance the Model 4733 Midnight Blue is possibly one of the most flexible headphone/pre-amplifiers out there. It incorporates a headphone amp with an active pre-amp and an onboard DAC with both coaxial and one USB input, as well as two line inputs. It also has a 2-watt amplifier, which will allow it to even drive small computer or very sensitive speakers. This at first to me really makes it an integrated amp with a great headphone output. It is so good as a headphone amp, though I now think that's the way it should first be considered.

Design and Setup

The amplifier section of the 4733 is loosely based on the 47 Labs Gaincard amps. It uses a very simple circuit and opamp to produce its two watts of power. It uses an active and not a passive lines stage. I've been a fan of 47 Labs digital gear, especially our publisher Constantine's PiTracer. If you've read any of my digital review you'll know there is one thing 47 Labs designer and I agree upon; neither of us are fans of upsampling. We like non-upsampling DACs. The 4733 uses the Burr Brown 2707 DAC chip which outputs at 16 bit/48 kHz and uses no upsampling or digital filtering.

Of course, for those of you wanting to play high definition files in their native format, the 4733 isn't for you. Truth is that it's clear 47 Lab products have never been meant for everybody. If you want to hear some really great sounding music over a very simple but versatile product, the Midnight Blue headphone/preamplifier may just be what you've been waiting on.

Setting up the 4733 is very straightforward and simple once you've decided how you are going to use it. To use it is as simple as connecting it to a source. If you choose to use it as a Preamp/DAC all you need to do is connect it to an amp. If you want to use it as an integrated amp just hook up some speakers and a source. Most of all, if you're going to use it for a headphone amp simply hook up your sources and plug in the headphones.



The way to use it that I found really amazing, was as a headphone amp. What makes that so amazing is I don't even like to listen to music over headphones except on the plane or BART train. I went through a stage in the nineties when I tried high-end headphones and amps. If memory serves me right, I bought a Melos headphone amp and a pair of the top-of-the-line of Grado headphones then. When that didn't please me, I tried the Stax electrostatics that came with the tube headphone amp. Both of these were great headphones. It turned out there was just one problem, I don't like headphones. Even so, I wish my Klipsch in-ear phones and iPhone could always sound like they do when played through the 4733. Listening

I used the 4733 in all its many configurations. As far as headphones go I used it mainly with three pairs: Grado's SR 80i headphones (an entry level), Grado's RS1i headphones, and the Klipsch's top-of-the-line Image X10i In-Ear Headphones. By the way as I said in my review, these Klipsch are the best in-ear headphones I've heard without spending four times as much on a comparable competition. For sources I used my iPhone, a Marantz Blue Ray/SACD player, a Mac Mini, and for the heck of it, my Shindo turntable with a TubeGuru phono stage.

As a headphone amp, the Midnight Blue Model 4733 sounds clear and pure with great musical flow. It never had any strain or edge. Compared to the sound coming out of the iPhone's headphone output to the sound when using the 4733 is night and day. It's like moving from a very cheap moving magnet phono cartridge to a world class moving coil with a world class tube phono stage. It was even a major step up from my Peachtree Audio's Decco Integrated amp's headphone output.

Midrange and Top End

The 4733 in the midrange all the way through the top end has clear, clean, and transparent sound that lets music come to life. Voices were simply beautiful, and it handles male and female singers equally well. The amount of inner detail reminded me more of electrostatic headphones than the Klipsch I was using. The top end was very extended and very smooth. The Midnight Blue Model 4733 simply has an exceptionally musical and emotional involving midrange and top end.

Bass

I have a little time talking about bass with headphones; it's not that they don't go deep, they do. It's not they can't be tight or boomy, they can. It's just that headphones don't give me the same kind of visceral experience that a big pair of speakers do. Still the Midnight Blue 4733 gave me tighter, lower, and more tuneful bass than any other headphone amp I have heard. The bass is exceptionally tight, and has great punch.

Soundstage and Imaging

I was rather surprised at how much better this area was with the 4733. Both voices and instruments occupied their own space and had a distinctive amount of air around them. The soundstage didn't seem to be quite so confined to my head as usual with headphones; there was actually some width and depth to be heard.

Now for something a little ridiculous

Just for the fun of it, I took this little jewel down to my big rig and replace my Shindo Giscours with it. I used the TubeGuru phono stage and the same computer audio setup as sources. Well, let me just be honest, it falls short in comparison to the \$28,000 Shindo Giscours. Still it was very musical and most of its faults were omissions. It was never bright, or overly digital sounding. It had very nice detail and imaging, but by comparison was lacking in scale, power, and musical flow. Well anyway, I said this was ludicrous, but it did let me hear the quality the little 4733 is capable of.

Conclusion

The Midnight Blue 4733 is quintessential 47 Labs in the best sense of the word. That is musical, emotionally involving; and at the same time clear, transparent, and detailed. As a headphone amplifier it is simply amazing, as a preamp it would be very good if that's all it was, and as a DAC it is on the short list of \$2,000 DACs. The power amp is pretty limiting though, it's great as a computer amp, but it's not really up to driving large speakers even if they are very efficient. I should admit that it never claims to be. If you're on a budget and have a need for a preamp DAC, or headphone amp, or both then I don't think you'll do much better than this.

In one way I hated this review; it has ruined listening to music on my iPhone for the foreseeable future. Every time I listen on my iPhone I wish it was playing it through the 4733. Why oh why can't Apple and 47 Labs collaborate on an iPhone with a DAC and amp built in? Well, a man can dream, can't he? Who would have ever believed there could be iPods and iPhones.

4735 Midnight Blue CD Player Review by: Jack Roberts | November 2014



The Sakura Systems website provides the following technical description:

« In conventional CD players, or CD transport~DAC combination, with multi-bit DAC chip, the original I²S signal is converted to S/PDIF format at the transport circuit, then converted back again to I²S at the receiver of the DAC section. For 4735 CD player, Junji Kimura created a proprietary 3D circuitry which enabled to avoid this extra conversion by connecting the I²S output of the chip on the transport circuit directly to the I²S input of the DAC chip. 4735 Midnight Blue CD player has opened a new stage to already well-known organic, analog sound of 47 Labs!" CD play back system. »

The Midnight Blue CD Player is a unique and minimalist product, as are all 47 Lab products. They were first known for their original and simple Gaincard amplifiers. Most 47 Lab products are small, simple, and cute, and this is true of the Midnight Blue line. (The two exceptions -spectacular exceptions – are the KOMA Turntable and the PiTracer digital transport, both of which make a rather incredible visual impression.) Despite its simple appearance, the Model 4735 Midnight Blue is possibly the biggest surprise of any product I have reviewed. If you've read any of my digital review you'd be able to tell there is one thing about digital that the 47 Labs designer and I agree upon: Neither of us is a fan of upsampling. We like non-oversampling, digital-filter-less DACs. The 4735 uses the rather simple, and to many, outdated TDA1543 chip set. It isn't anywhere near the newest, greatest chip set. It was chosen because of the absence of the S/PDIF-IS² converting receiver, making it his choice to use in the non-oversampling mode with no digital filtering.

It's the transport on this player that is new to 47 Labs. It is a very high quality transport built by TEAC. Yohshi Segoshi of Sakura Systems (the U.S. importer) explained that it was chosen for its quality, reliability, and most of all because it could easily be modified to the kind of transport that 47 Labs prefers. It also gave them the ability to build with it a very good DAC and power supply in a very small package.

Like other 47 Lab CD players, the CD doesn't go inside the player, but sits on top more like a LP on a turntable. The Midnight Blue does have a hinged lid that you close, and which serves as the clamp for the center of the CD. Despite this, almost half of the CD is exposed when playing. The player has small buttons on top for stop, play/pause, advance track or previous track. It also has a nice remote that adds a few other features such as a repeat button as well as buttons for different views on the display.

I like the way the player looks; it has a rather neat high tech and a retro look all at the same time. I love how small it is; probably because it tucks into my system so nicely that you hardly notice it. My only complaint with its looks is that there is no way to dim, or even better, yet, turn off the display.

The 4735 Midnight Blue CD Player is the third 47 Labs Midnight Blue products I have reviewed and I continue to be very impressed. Both the tuner and the headphone amp were very good indeed, but it is this little CD player that has blown me away. I have to admit part of why it blew me away is because I just didn't expect it to be in the league with some of the digital setups I have reviewed. Let's be honest – a couple of them cost more than ten times as much. I had really planned to hook it up in my digital video system upstairs and to review it in an all Midnight Blue system. At its price point these seemed to be the types of system where it would most likely be used.

Things changed though when I broke my leg and for a few weeks found changing LPs very difficult. So I had my son hook it up for me downstairs where it went into a system with my Teresonic Ingenium XR Silvers, the Wavac EC-300B, and David Slagle's Emia Remote Autoformer with silver windings. Then just because I had them around I used a High Fidelity Cables Ultimate Reference Rhodium Plus power cord and for interconnects, a pair of High Fidelity Cables Ultimates. Everything was plugged in to the HB Cable Design PowerSlave Marble. Now, I know this is a bit ridiculous on a CD player that cost \$3,250. You need to remember though that I wasn't hooking it up just for the review, but to substitute for my AMG V12 turntable for a few weeks.

Later in the review I will get to how it sounded with more price appropriate cables and in my upstairs system. For now, I want to talk about how it sounded in the reference system. Yoshi informed me that it had plenty of time on it but had not been played in over a month. So, I hooked it up and put it on in the background for a few hours and then listened that evening. What did need break in were the cables, so while it sounded very good the first night it was about a week before I realized just how good it was.

What I had on hand to compare it to was the wonderful sounding DAC built into my Electrocompaniet PI 2D Prelude Integrated in the upstairs system, the very good Teac PD-501 player, and a Marantz UD7007 Super Audio CD/Blu-ray Player, which is a pretty fine Red Book player. The 47 Labs player sounds nothing like any of them though. It is more organic sounding, it has a more natural sounding bottom end, and lets the music really flow into the room. To be honest what it reminds me the most of is the Audio Note CD4.1 player I had in house for just a few days before I had to give it up. That should be no surprise considering the similar design philosophy, except 47 Labs doesn't use tubes or tons of silver.

Like I said it has a very organic and tactile sound. There is the temptation then to say « like vinyl », but it doesn't sound like vinyl. What it does sound a lot like is music, more than I am use to from most digital players at any price. The 47 Labs Midnight Blue player is very listenable, more so than I would have ever dreamed possible from a digital source without spending many times as much. I was also very surprised with its ability to let me become so emotionally involved in the music. This is an area that makes or breaks it when I consider whether or not a piece of equipment is a keeper. I just have no interest in listening to music that doesn't move me. This little player does this nearly as well as my vinyl rig on well done CDs. It's not as alive sounding, it's not as quite, it's not as detailed, it's not as powerful sounding as the AMG V12 and SoundSmith combo, but man is it easy and fun to listen to.

It also surprised me with the immediacy and presence with which it played music. Vocals sounded fleshed out and occupied real space, with a great sense of air form the vocalist and around them. These are qualities I had not heard in my digital system upstairs until I put the 47 Labs player in the system. Both voices and instruments had substantial substance, tonal colors, and air. It is in the bass that this player won me over though. It just sounded so natural. It didn't seem to pump out fast, one-note bass. Drums sounded so right; they sounded fast but with lots of air around and within them. The leading edge was good but the decay is what made them sound so real. The same could be said of upright basses.

I have not had any digital in my reference system for several years, other than to review. The only reason I would own a CD player is to play music I like that is not available on LPs. I have made do for several years by going upstairs and listening to these on my video/digital system. So let's talk about the sound of a few of those recordings for a minute.



Let's start with the Mobile Fidelity Gold Disc Jazz Sampler. There is a reason that on E-Bay these bring up to \$300. Not only are they rare, but the music is great. The first track, with Zoot Sims Quartet playing « Do Nothing », « Till You Hear From Me » sounded so rich and alive. Zoot's tenor sax was just right there in the room with me, and the bass was full and occupied a real space. On another track where Buddy Rich's band plays Cottontail, I wanted to get up and clap; it moved me so. The drums and cymbals were life like, powerful, and played in beautiful space with great air surrounding them. Again, the bass of this little CD player sounds so wonderfully natural.

Another one of my favorite recordings not available on vinyl is Mary Lou Lord's « Bright City Lights ». She recorded the performance with a portable DAT recorder in the subway. I love her covers of Bruce Springsteen's « Thunder Road », Bob Dylan's « You're Going to Make Me Lonesome When You Go » and my favorite, her cover of Richard Thompson's « 1952 Vincent Black Lightning ». There is a purity to this recording that, if played on a good system, is beguiling. I have taken this CD to audio shows and people always want to know who it is and where can they get the CD. I answer « Google it ». I don't remember ever hearing her guitar sound better. The air, space, and speed with which it was played made it sound so real. Her voice sounded like she was there in the room. It was a privilege to hear this on my big rig; it was so much more involving than it is on the upstairs system. CDs like these two are the reason I'm reconsidering having a way of play CDs downstairs.

I could go on listing CD after CD that I don't have on LP, but what would be the point? I mean right now I'm sitting here listening to the soundtrack of Corrina, Corrina and enjoying the heck out of the eclectic group of songs. Truth is I love the tonal balance of this little CD player, it reminds me a lot of the tonal balance of an EMT TSD-15 phono cartridge, and that's a pretty darn good thing.

For those of you who want to know, the soundstage is great, the imaging is very lifelike, and the immediacy will compete with most moving coil phono cartridges. None of that is what makes this thing so wonderful though; it simply makes me want to listen to CDs more than I can ever remember. I'm not saying that it is better than my vinyl setup; it isn't. I'm not saying it's the best digital source in the world. I'm sure it must not be, but I haven't heard much of the newest expensive digital players in my system. I'm just saying I love it and it fits a perfect need I had given up on in my reference system.

Conclusion : Why a CD Player in 2014?

That seems like the question, doesn't it? The Midnight Blue CD Player won't play high-rez recordings, it won't play DSD, heck you can't even hook a computer or an iPhone up to it. Well, as good as it sounds I can think of several reasons. First, I have a couple of hundred CDs I've not found on LP, many were never on LP, or maybe they are current artist that for some reason aren't releasing their music on LP. Second, there are thousands of CDs of music I don't have on LP that can be bought used for little or nothing and then cleaned and treated with something like « Essence of Music » that will now be enjoyable with the Midnight Blue player. Last, it also means I don't have to have a computer, monitor, or iPad to play digital music.

For me there is one more very special thing about this CD player: its size and simplicity. It can sit on the corner of the middle shelf of my Box Furniture Rack and take up almost no space. I guess you can tell I really like this CD player. I can't remember when I felt that way about a digital source. Highly recommended!