

PHONO PREAMPLIFIER

MM/MC phono preamplifier
Made by: Musical Fidelity (Audio Tuning Vertriebs GmbH), Austria
Supplied by: Henley Audio Ltd, UK
Telephone: 01235 511166
Web: www.musicalfidelity.com; www.henleyaudio.co.uk
Price: £9999

AUDIO
FILE

Musical Fidelity Nu-Vista Vinyl 2

Previewed at the UK Hi-Fi Show *Live* '23, Musical Fidelity's much anticipated Nu-Vista front-end components – a DAC and phono preamp – see the latter leading the charge
Review: **Adam Smith** Lab: **Paul Miller**

Visitors to Henley Audio's room at the UK Hi-Fi Show *Live* at Ascot's Grandstand back in Sept '23 will already have seen three new items from Musical Fidelity, all partnering the Nu-Vista PRE and PAS amplifiers [HFN Mar '23]. The new M8xTT turntable [HFN Dec '23] has already premiered in these pages and this is followed here by the Nu-Vista Vinyl 2 phono stage and Nu-Vista DAC [see p22], both priced £9999.

In contrast to the UK-designed amps, the DAC and phono preamp both hail from Heinz Lichtenegger's long-standing technical partnership with Slovakian company, Canor. Neither product is exactly a shrinking violet and both contrast with the diminutive 'Box' series of partnering brand, Pro-Ject. At 22kg the Nu-Vista Vinyl 2 is big. Very big. It wouldn't fit into my rack shelves, and dwarfed my Yamaha M-5000 power amplifier [HFN Aug '20]!

AT YOUR DISCRETION

That said, the Nu-Vista Vinyl 2 isn't simply big for the sake of it, for there is a deal of technology hosted inside that increasingly familiar-looking aluminium enclosure. The circuitry is balanced throughout, promising superior sound quality and enhanced noise rejection, but there are inevitably more components required with extra demands on real estate. Moreover, in common with other MF products, ICs give way to discrete components wherever possible, the company stating that IC op-amps 'do not tend to sound so neutral, dynamic or vivid'.

The preamp's internals comprise three distinct amplifier stages that contribute to the eight MM/MC gain options on offer. RIAA equalisation is achieved by passive circuitry laid out in two separate blocks, and the Nu-Vista Vinyl 2 also offers Decca and Columbia EQ curves. Musical Fidelity's traditional 7586 nuvistors valves act as

RIGHT: PSU transformer [top left] feeds HT supplies [main PCB] for the two pairs of nuvistors 'tubes' [right] per channel in addition to the discrete, three-stage transistor circuit surrounding the passive eq section [far right]

a final, fully balanced buffer stage. Four devices are used per channel, with each side laid out on a separate PCB.

Power is provided by a low-noise PSU circuit fed by an encapsulated toroidal transformer. The IEC input socket is industrial grade and incorporates a DC blocker and EMC filter. Each channel has its own power supply regulation while the separate, higher voltage supply for the nuvistors is further filtered and regulated. However, there is (or will be) the option of powering the unit from a partnering Nu-Vista Uni PSU – said to be coming later in 2024. This will bypass all the AC supplies in the Vinyl 2, adding further filtering and regulation for the promise of even better performance.

'I listened in awe as he strutted his stuff'

The outboard PSU sockets are clearly marked on the Nu-Vista Vinyl 2's rear panel [see p63]. Here you'll also find four inputs – two on balanced XLRs and two on unbalanced RCAs – plus balanced and unbalanced outs that are unswitched, so can be used simultaneously. Operation of the unit is simple and intuitive, aided by a front-panel display bigger than your average smartphone. The left-hand rotary selects the input, while the right steps through options in the menu, in conjunction with 'Enter' and 'Back' buttons below it.

BORN TO BE MILD

Each input can be set to MM or MC and this, along with the gain, loading, response



hi-finews
OUTSTANDING
PRODUCT

curve and subsonic filter settings, is stored and remembered. For MM, gains of +40dB, +43dB, +46dB and +49dB are available, along with load capacitances of 50-400pF, in 50pF steps. The input impedance is fixed at 47kohm. For MC, the gain options are +60dB, +63dB, +66dB and +69dB, with loading offered over 5, 10, 25, 50, 100, 400, 800ohm, 1kohm and 47kohm. Unusually, the subsonic filter has two settings – 'Mild' and 'Standard'. The former setting corresponds to the IEC standard of a 6dB/octave roll-off at 20Hz, while Standard sharpens this to 18dB/octave [see PM's Lab Report, p63].

By way of housekeeping, the menu also allows you to switch between 'light' (white background) or 'dark' (black background) options for the display, and set a brightness level. In the lowest setting, the display will switch off and only come on for three seconds when a parameter is altered. All of the functions of the unit can be controlled by the supplied IR remote handset [p63].

Operationally the Nu-Vista Vinyl 2 is an absolute pleasure and MF's florid description of the unit's build quality as 'heroic' actually seems quite reasonable. It is supplied with both spiked feet (with surface-protecting 'cups') and flat feet with stick-on protection pads. A screwdriver, a set of self-adhesive pads for the remote, and even a pair of gloves are also included. These are all thoughtful touches.

VINYL SMILES

With my Michell Gyro SE/SME V/Ortofon Cadenza Black connected to the XLR inputs and the output XLRs into my regular Yamaha C/M-5000 amplifiers, the Nu-Vista Vinyl 2 quickly established itself as one of those designs that brings a smile to your face while setting your feet a-tapping. That said, it only hits its stride after being on for

ABOVE: Seen here in its silver livery, the Nu-Vista Vinyl 2's two huge rotaries govern source selection and navigation of the gain/eq/loading/subsonic/display configuration menu

about 20 minutes or so, which is actually about when the nuvistors illumination changes from yellow to blue to confirm the devices have reached thermal equilibrium.

In practice, this phono stage's sound is as substantial as its appearance suggests although, thankfully, a lot less metallic. It has a confidence and eagerness about its music-making, willing you to drop that stylus into the groove and get going. I've often found Musical Fidelity's designs to have an alluring sense of gusto about them, and this unit upholds the tradition.

A good portion of this is accounted for by the fact the Nu-Vista Vinyl 2 has a seriously impressive low end. Bass lines were tight and deep, with a superb amount of detail at all times. The bass guitar backing Sade on 'Why Can't We Live Together?' from her *Diamond*

Life album [Epic Records EPC26044] was solid, vibrant and magnificently 'chewy'. This – coupled with the sharp, snappy percussion – drove the track along with real enthusiasm and pitch-perfect timing.

DIGGING DEEP

At the other end of the spectrum the Nu-Vista Vinyl 2's top-end was delightful. Crisp, clean, open and precise, it missed nothing and brought a level of insight into performances that could be quite eye-opening at times. Michael Hedges' guitar work on 'Because It's There' [Live On The Double Planet; Windham Hill 37 1066-1] had me listening in awe as he strutted his stuff, with the Nu-Vista Vinyl 2 capturing every single pluck, scrape and twang with ease. Guitar strings seemed to be shimmering in the air right in front of



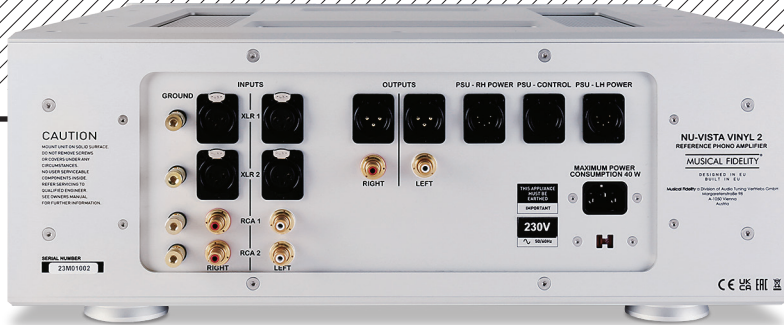
NU-VISTA VINYL

Launched some six years ago when Musical Fidelity was still in the hands of its original owner, the inaugural Nu-Vista Vinyl phono preamp [HFN Mar '18] also combined a solid-state RIAA stage with just one pair of nuvistors feeding each output. This was a less sophisticated model offering single MM and MC settings with a +6dB gain option, amounting to +41.5dB/+47.5dB and +58dB/+64dB steps, respectively. This model had no interactive display [see inset picture] so relied instead on a long row of tiny blue LEDs to indicate gain, loading, subsonic filtering and choice of input, of which there were a full five separate pairs of gold-plated RCAs on the rear panel. The line outputs were on RCAs and balanced XLRs, but only the Vinyl 2 has balanced inputs to service MC pick-ups.

Noise and distortion were already very low on the Nu-Vista Vinyl, which also offered the 'IEC' subsonic filter option carried over to the Nu-Vista Vinyl 2 reviewed here. This new, beefed-up version not only includes twice as many gain settings but these are executed via three separate and fully-discrete FET/transistor stages that surround the fully passive RIAA network [see Lab Report, p63]. Furthermore, the Nu-Vista Vinyl 2's nuvistors-based Class A output buffer is not dissimilar to that designed for the flagship Nu-Vista PRE [HFN Mar '23]. So, unlike the classic A1 integrated amplifier recently reimaged by Musical Fidelity [HFN Jan '24], there's an informed choice here *not* to be entirely 'faithful' to the Nu-Vista Vinyl in the engineering of the Vinyl 2. It's an evolution, not a clone. PM

LAB REPORT

MUSICAL FIDELITY NU-VISTA VINYL 2



ABOVE: The Nu-Vista Vinyl 2 has two single-ended ins for MM/MCs and two balanced ins on XLRs best suited to MCs, all with their own ground terminals. RCA and balanced XLR outs lie adjacent to sockets for use with the outboard Nu-Vista PSU

me, and the impact of him using the instrument's body as percussion had me jumping in my seat. The Nu-Vista Vinyl 2 has abilities in terms of dynamics that are a rarity, even at this not inconsiderable price.

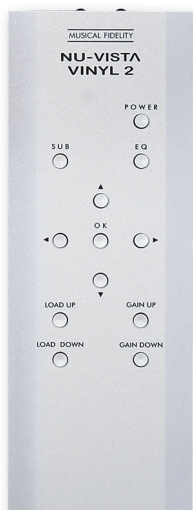
The open-sounding nature of Musical Fidelity's premier phono stage also made it easy to hear the differences between changes in load settings. It may seem odd, but I have encountered lesser units where switching between different MM capacitances, for example, can have you tying yourself in knots wondering if you're actually hearing any difference to the sound. With an Ortofon 2M Black MM [HFN Mar '11], the Nu-Vista Vinyl 2 made even the most subtle of changes obvious. It therefore becomes easy to really get the best from your chosen cartridge.

THAT'S THE SPIRIT

If I'm giving the impression the Nu-Vista Vinyl 2 is only fit for ebullient, big material, then rest assured this is not the case. Singer/guitarist Eric Bibb's 'Needed Time', from his *Spirit And The Blues* release [Opus 3 LP19401], brought the tempo and dynamics down, but the instrument and vocal detail remained exquisite. Bibb's voice was smooth, passionate

and soulful, and locked in a deep, wide space between my loudspeakers. Backing instruments and percussion kept their distance by just the right

LEFT: Solid alloy remote offers control over input, gain, eq type, loading and display modes



amount, and Olle Eriksson's double bass was rich and languid.

I did, however, find myself capitalising on the Nu-Vista Vinyl 2's strengths of weight and scale most often during my time with it. In terms of soundstaging, it offers an expansive instrumental 'footprint'. Nevertheless, if there is a single main performer, they are almost always placed firmly in the centre of the musical picture – it is the backing instruments that seem to expand around them, according to the nature of the recording.

ALL AT SEA

This means that a smallscale band can easily appear to be sitting cosily close to you, giving a fine rendition of an intimate music venue or simple studio. On the other hand, the National Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Anthony Inglis and playing 'The Sea And Sinbad's Ship' from Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade* [Chasing The Dragon VALLP016], filled my listening room. As this big orchestral piece progressed over its ten minutes, each instrument was presented with realism, and the intensity of the performance via the Nu-Vista Vinyl 2 was simply thrilling. 🎧

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

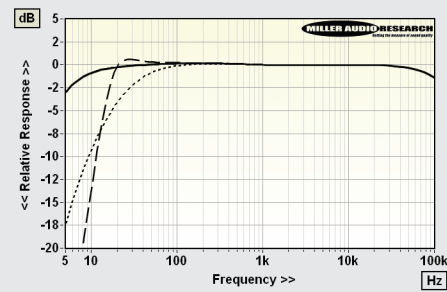
Musical Fidelity's preferred 'neutral, dynamic and vivid' sound is absolutely nailed by its Nu-Vista Vinyl 2. Those who already appreciate this presentation will love it, but I'll wager it will win many new fans, too. Adding in a superb range of facilities and Herculean build quality, the unit merits a recommendation that is as glowing as its illuminated novistors. Just double-check that your rack is big enough!

Sound Quality: 88%

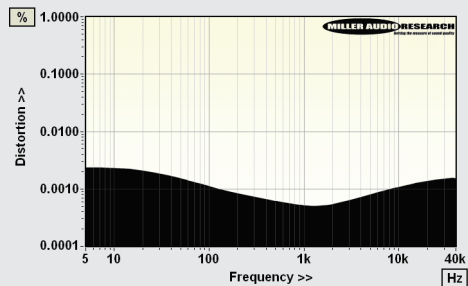


Tested via its balanced in/out the Nu-Vista Vinyl 2 allows for four MM and four MC gain settings, each grouped in 3dB increments. The +40dB to +49dB MM range arrives at +40.5dB, +43.5dB, +46.0dB and +49.0dB, accommodating pick-ups rated between 3.6-9.4mV (re. 1kHz/5cm/sec) to deliver 0dBV from the Nu-Vista Vinyl 2. The MC gain options range from +60dB to +69dB (+60.4dB, +63.3dB, +65.9dB and +68.9dB, in practice) and will match cartridges over a useful 361-956µV specification. Higher and lower output MCs are still perfectly 'useable' at the +60dB and +69dB settings, of course, thanks to the consistent 71dB A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 500µV input) and generous overload limits of 21.8mV (+60dB gain) down to 7.9mV (+69dB gain) – equivalent to a margin of ~33dB relative to their respective sensitivities. The MM stage offers an overload margin of 27dB but this is still comfortably higher than the ~20dB target necessary to accommodate the fiercest of cuts without clipping.

The MM A-wtd S/N ratio is higher at 81.0dB (re. 5mV input), though still 10-15dB behind the 'quietest' of stages, but this is in part due to the very high gain required of the active stages to support a fully passive RIAA network. The latter is accurate to within ±0.2dB from 20Hz-20kHz, rolling off gently to -1.4dB/100kHz and -3dB/5Hz. The 'Mild' subsonic filter [dotted trace, Graph 1] adopts the IEC profile, rolling off below 100Hz to -3dB/25Hz and -6dB/15Hz while 'Standard' [dashed trace] has a +0.6dB lift at 25Hz with a ~3rd-order roll-off thereafter. Distortion, as we saw with the original Nu-Vista Vinyl [see boxout, p61] falls to as low as 0.00055% before increasing to 0.0065%/20kHz [see Graph 2], but even the worse-case figure is still ~1000x lower than that from the average MC pick-up! PM



ABOVE: RIAA-corrected freq. resp. from 5Hz-100kHz (subsonic filter – Mild, dotted; Standard, dashed)



ABOVE: Distortion versus frequency re. 0dBV from 5Hz-40kHz (MM +40dB gain setting, balanced o/p)

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Input loading (MM/MC)	47kohm/50-400pF / 5ohm-47kohm
Input sensitivity (re. 0dBV)	9.44mV-3.55mV / 956µV-361µV
Input overload (re. 1% THD)	210mV-78mV / 22mV-7.9mV
Max. output (re. 1% THD) / Imp.	21.9V / 15ohm-1.115kohm (balanced)
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBV)	81.0dB / 70.8dB (MM/MC)
Freq. resp. (20Hz-20kHz/100kHz)	+0.2dB to -0.2dB / -1.4dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, re. 0dBV)	0.00055-0.0065%
Power consumption	56W
Dimensions (WHD) / Weight	483x188x506mm / 22kg