

# Musical Fidelity Nu-Vista Vinyl S

Undercutting Musical Fidelity's flagship Nu-Vista Vinyl 2, the streamlined Vinyl S looks to offer all the same features and flexibility, including balanced inputs, at half the price! Review: **Adam Smith** Lab: **Paul Miller**

There's always something special about a hi-fi flagship where the company has leveraged all its engineering knowledge in a 'hang the expense' operation. The Musical Fidelity Nu-Vista Vinyl 2 phono preamp [HFN Feb '24] was such a product, but its £9999 price tag and formidable dimensions necessarily 'fine-tuned' its appeal.

Clearly, Musical Fidelity is aware of this and, by way of response, has channelled the core features and nuvistor circuitry of its flagship into the Nu-Vista Vinyl S, retailing at £5499, with a slimmer chassis and some 45% reduction in bulk. This new casework and 'meticulous engineering and intelligent design' lie behind a near halving of the Vinyl 2's cost. Expect other S series separates to arrive in the near future.

## HOT STUFF

The design is still based around three gain stages [see PM's boxout, p77] and the circuitry is balanced throughout. The RIAA EQ section is passive and split into two stages, this permitting the easy addition of non-standard replay curves including the Decca and Columbia options here. Just like the Vinyl 2, the Vinyl S uses nuvistor tubes to drive its balanced, Class A output stage although the flagship's internal LED lighting was one feature lost to the recent downsizing. Do note, however, that while these nuvistors still run hot the Vinyl S lacks the ventilation built into the costlier Vinyl 2's top plate. The entire case builds to 'noticeably warm' over a few hours, so do not park it inside a cramped rack...

Also inside, Musical Fidelity's 'Super Silent Power Transformer' still feeds the PSUs for each channel with DC blocking

**RIGHT:** Transformer [right] feeds PSUs [upper PCB] for the discrete, three-stage transistor circuit surrounding the passive eq section [bottom, underneath] and two pairs of nuvistor output 'tubes' [bottom, top PCB] per channel

and EMI/RF filtering reducing noise on the supply lines to very low levels. Similarly, in functional terms, the Vinyl S offers pairs of balanced XLR and unbalanced RCA inputs, plus balanced and unbalanced outputs. Both outs can be used simultaneously, and as the inputs are selected as 1 and 2 with balanced or unbalanced connectivity an option for each, you could, in theory, connect multiple turntables at once.

Each input can be configured for MM or MC operation. Gain settings of +40, +43, +46 and +49dB can be selected for MM [but see PM's Lab Report, p79], plus input capacitances of 50, 100, 150, 200, 250, 300, 350 or 400pF. Loading is fixed at 47kohm. In MC mode, gain options are 20dB higher at +60, +63, +66 and +69dB and input capacitance is fixed at

400pF. This time, input impedance options of 5, 10, 25, 50, 100, 400, 800ohm, 1kohm and 47kohm are available.

## SETTING UP

The three EQ curve settings can be applied to all options, as can a subsonic filter with Off, Mild and Standard settings. 'Mild' is an

IEC-specification filter that rolls gently away below 100Hz while 'Standard' acts more steeply, albeit from a lower 20Hz.

If this all sounds complex, getting to grips with the Vinyl S phono preamp is far simpler. In

the centre of the front panel is a sizeable display that clearly shows the settings applied. Adjustments can be made on the chamfered alloy fascia using the two large rotary controls – the left for input select

'The hardware's slimmed down, but the music is just as grand'



'A neat remote handset is supplied so you can fettle loading/gain, etc, from the comfort of your armchair'



and the right for menu navigation. Three smaller buttons select on/standby mode, and act as 'Enter' and 'Back' controls for the onscreen configuration menu.

Better still, a neat remote handset [p79] is supplied so you can fettle loading and gain to your heart's content from the comfort of your listening seat. Direct access to input selection, gain, loading, EQ and the subsonic filter is provided but, oddly, you have to navigate through the menu to the 'Cartridge Type' option in order to change between MM and MC. Also, counterintuitively, while the 'Load Up' button increases capacitance value as expected on MM, 'Load Down' is used to *increase* the input impedance for MCs. Perhaps Musical Fidelity is just being literal as the load on the cartridge is reduced as the impedance it is 'driving' is increased.

The Vinyl S's menu allows you to select dark, light or Musical Fidelity blue display themes for the screen, while also adjusting

brightness level. In the lowest setting, the screen is switched off, only coming back on for three seconds if a menu parameter is changed. Finally, both flat and spiked feet are supplied, along with spike cups for the latter. Once again, Musical Fidelity describes the unit's build quality as 'heroic' – it's a claim we will not argue with!



### CONFIDENCE IS KING

With a Michell Gyro SE/SME 309/Clearaudio MC Essence [HFN May '99/Aug '89/Aug '17] connected to the Vinyl S's unbalanced RCA input, and my reference Yamaha C/M-5000 pre/power amplifiers [HFN Aug '20] laced to the balanced XLR out, it was apparent that this new phono amp does a remarkable impression of its bigger, pricier brother. Like that flagship, it approaches the music with confidence and authority, bringing a sense of involvement to every session.

**ABOVE:** Seen here in its silver livery, the Nu-Vista Vinyl S's two rotaries govern input selection and navigation of the gain/eq/loading/subsonic/display configuration menus

Key here is the Vinyl S's clarity, which not only manifests in the obvious way, through a crisp and detailed top-end to spotlight hi-hats and cymbals, but in the precision and immediacy of instrumental leading edges. Each element of a recording is precisely defined, making for a sound that's never jumbled or indistinct.

The gentle percussion backing Colin Blunstone's vocals on The Alan Parsons Project's slow-burning 'Old And Wise' [Eye In The Sky; Cooking Vinyl COOKLP845XX] stood out in a way that I hadn't noticed before, but retained its proper place to the rear of the soundstage. The Vinyl S preamp didn't artificially 'boost' it, rather it simply reinforced its presence.

Elsewhere in the track, which finds the prog rock duo in typically inventive form, there were layers of warm and rich strings, flighty woodwinds, and a saxophone solo from ex-King Crimson member Mel Collins that had

the hairs on the back of my neck standing to attention. Such is the Nu-Vista Vinyl S's detailed, 'in-the-room' delivery.

## BIG BROTHER

Frankly, although the new Nu-Vista Vinyl S is pitched at half the price of the bigger Nu-Vista Vinyl 2 [HFN Feb '24 and pictured right], it still features a balanced, 7586 Nuvistor-based

output buffer and a very similar three-stage, fully discrete transistor circuit around its two-stage passive RIAA network. The input stage offers +20dB gain for MM and +40dB for MC while the second and third-stage 'correction amplifiers' deliver the gain that's soaked up by the split-passive RIAA eq arms. The third stage offers +20dB or +26dB and it's that extra +6dB that was enabled in our sample of the Vinyl S [see Lab Report, p79]. There seems no obvious way for users to switch this +6dB in or out via the remote or menu – in our unit at least!

Power consumption is identical to that of the Vinyl 2 at 56W as are the equalised responses, with or without the two subsonic filters. The respective noise performance(s) are very closely matched too – only the distortion is slightly higher in the Vinyl S compared to the 0.00055-0.0065% achieved by the Vinyl 2 [see Lab Report, p79]. That said, the 0.0012-0.011% measured here for the Vinyl S's MM input is still two or more orders of magnitude *lower* than would ever be possible from a pick-up. Otherwise, that +6dB boost applied in the Vinyl S simply means it is twice as sensitive as the Vinyl 2 in balanced mode (all gain settings), albeit with half the input overload margin. Fortunately there's plenty of headroom remaining to accommodate the most aggressive grooves! PM



## SPACE INVADER

Contributing to an exciting but always realistic performance is a soundstage that stretches wide and extends deep. My experience of other Musical Fidelity preamplifiers has typically suggested an authentic and immersive sense of space, and the Vinyl S is no exception. When a recording is more direct and less capacious the unit makes it clear, but any largescale performance is rendered with a palpable sense of atmosphere. The hardware may have been slimmed down, but the musical soundstaging is just as grand. ➞



## LAB REPORT

### MUSICAL FIDELITY NU-VISTA VINYL S



**ABOVE:** The Nu-Vista Vinyl S hosts two sets of single-ended (RCA) and balanced (XLR) inputs and one set of RCA/XLR outputs (the XLR inputs are suitable for MCs only)

The Divine Comedy's 'Songs Of Love', from the Northern Irish band's 1996 *Casanova* album [Setanta Records SETLP25], is best known in its stripped-down form as the theme from the hit TV show 'Father Ted', but the album version is more densely instrumented. The Vinyl S had no trouble in separating the various musical strands, lifting Neil Hannon's vocals out from the acoustic guitar and revealing the multitracked harmonies, before drawing the listener's focus to the main harpsichord solo.

This entry-level Nu-Vista phono amp also impresses with its low-end delivery. Again, the word 'confidence' springs to mind as basslines were deep and well-defined. The fluidity and richness of the synthesised lows in 'Know Me', from Frankie Rose's *Interstellar* LP [Memphis Industries MIO211LP], made sure this 2012 track had its wonderful '80s-style vibe and rhythm firmly in place.

#### KEEPING IT REAL

However, this is one area in which Musical Fidelity's bigger Nu-Vista Vinyl 2 is still top of the class. The latter's bass is little short of astonishing, seemingly able to make loudspeakers sound about twice as big as they are. The Vinyl S can't quite match it for sheer power and jaw-dropping dynamics, but when such flair is not demanded, it gives little away to the Vinyl 2 in the realism of its performance.

The relaxed groove of 'Peace', from jazz artist Courtney

Pine's debut LP *Journey To The Urge Within* [Island Records ILPS9846] was beautifully conveyed by the Vinyl S. The double bass of Gary Crosby had a warm, woody texture, while Pine's tenor sax was rich in tone yet also precisely drawn and authentically scaled within the centre of the action.

Switching to moving-magnet operation for use with an Ortofon 2M Black [HFN Mar '11] proved that the Vinyl S is just as adept at making the best of high-output pick-ups. Sometimes the MM and MC sections of a phono stage can have slightly different sonic 'flavours', with cartridge matching a chore. In this case, the detailed, open character of the Vinyl S was a welcome fixture.

#### MARS ATTACKS!

As a result, the dynamic crescendos within Gustav Holst's *The Planets* suite [Deutsche Grammophon 419 475-1] powered into the room with intensity and fervour but never came close to overwhelming the tonal subtleties of the instruments of the Boston Symphony Orchestra. On the other hand, ABBA's 'Lay All Your Love On Me' [12in single; Epic Records EPC A 13-1456] was a riot of drums, punchy dynamics and foot-tapping liveliness. Musical Fidelity's Nu-Vista Vinyl S really seems to have no favoured type of music – it sings regardless of genre! ☺

#### HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

The Nu-Vista Vinyl S is a perfect example of trickledown in action, in this instance from the top-end Vinyl 2 phono preamp. Musical Fidelity has successfully captured the essence of what makes its flagship model so compelling, distilling features and performance into a more affordable and slimline – though hardly lightweight – chassis. If you want the best, it's the Vinyl 2, but most will surely opt for the 'S.

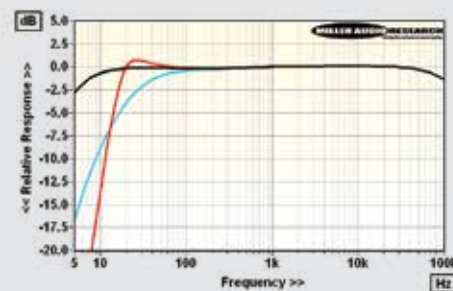
Sound Quality: 88%



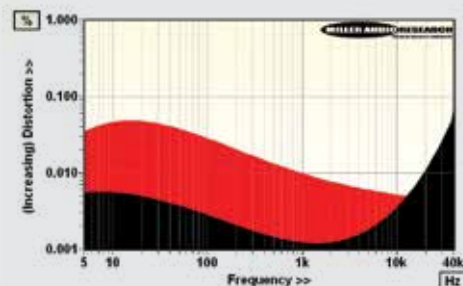
**LEFT:** Compact alloy remote offers control over input, gain, loading, subsonic filter and phono EQ type

The Nu-Vista Vinyl S allows for two groups (MM and MC) of four gain settings, in 3dB increments, although the practical gain is +6dB higher than we saw in the Vinyl 2 when tested via the balanced XLR in/out [see boxout, p77]. As a result, the 40-49dB settings amount to +46dB, +49dB, +52dB and +55dB, handling MM pick-ups of 5.0mV, 3.55mV, 2.53mV and 1.79mV output (re. 1kHz/5cm/sec), respectively, to deliver 0dBV from the Vinyl S. The MC gain options range from +60dB to +69dB (+66.5dB, +69.4dB, +72.4dB and +75.3dB, in practice) and will match lower output MCs over a 473-171µV specification. Higher output MCs are still perfectly 'useable' at the +60dB (+66.5dB) setting, of course, thanks to the 70dB A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 500µV input) and useful 10mV input overload – equivalent to a very healthy margin of 26.5dB relative to the baseline 473µV sensitivity.

That 70dB A-wtd S/N ratio is consistent across all four MC gain settings, as is the higher 81.0dB (re. 5mV input) across the quartet of MM options. The RIAA-corrected response is good to within ±0.15dB from 20Hz-20kHz, rolling off gently to -3dB/5Hz and -1.4dB/100kHz. The 'Mild' subsonic filter [blue, Graph 1] adopts the IEC profile, rolling off below 100Hz to -3dB/25Hz and -6dB/15Hz while 'Standard' [red trace] has a +0.7dB lift at 25Hz with a steep roll-off thereafter. Distortion via the MM input falls to as low as 0.0012%/1kHz before increasing to 0.01%/20kHz [black infill, Graph 2] while the extra gain of the MC stage adds a little distortion to the tune of 0.004-0.045% [20Hz-20kHz, red infill, Graph 2]. Across all gain settings, and over the full 20Hz-20kHz audio bandwidth, distortion remains markedly lower than might be expected from the very finest MM/MC pick-ups. **PM**



**ABOVE:** RIAA-corrected frequency response from 5Hz-100kHz (subsonic filter – Mild, blue; Standard, red)



**ABOVE:** Distortion versus extended frequency from 5Hz-40kHz at 0dBV balanced output (MM/+40dB gain, black; MC/+60dB gain, red)

#### HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

|                                     |                                  |
|-------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Input loading (MM/MC)               | 47kohm/50-400pF / 5ohm-47kohm    |
| Input sensitivity (re. 0dBV, MM/MC) | 5.0-1.79mV / 473-171µV           |
| Input overload (re. 1% THD)         | 112, 76, 54, 38, 10, 7, 5, 3.5mV |
| Max. output (re. 1% THD) / Imp.     | 21.9V / 1.1kohm-10ohm (balanced) |
| A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBV, MM/MC)   | 81.2dB / 70.1dB                  |
| Freq. resp. (20Hz-20kHz/100kHz)     | -0.15dB to +0.04dB / -1.4dB      |
| Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, re. 0dBV)   | 0.0012-0.011%                    |
| Power consumption                   | 56W                              |
| Dimensions (WHD) / Weight           | 483x131x404mm / 14kg             |