

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: £3599

AUDIO
FILE

hi-finews
OUTSTANDING
PRODUCT

Musical Fidelity M8x Vinyl

The M series now has a new flagship – a fully discrete, fully balanced phono preamplifier with loading and gain options to accommodate a huge range of MM/MC pick-ups
Review: **Jamie Biesemans** Lab: **Paul Miller**

As any experienced vinyl spinner will attest, your choice of phono preamplifier can have as great an impact on sound as the partnering turntable, arm and cartridge. Case in point, a few months ago Musical Fidelity's Nu-Vista Vinyl 2 [HFN Feb '24] made a big impression – and not only because of its bulk. The M8x Vinyl is closely related to that unit [see PM's boxout, p65], albeit minus the nuvistor valve stage and equipped with a more practical housing. What the newest phono preamplifier from the company retains is a can-do attitude, offering support for a broad range of moving-magnet and moving-coil cartridges. There's also the dual-mono, fully balanced design, powered by a sizeable 'Encapsulated Super Silent' toroidal transformer. So while there are differences there are striking similarities too.

Even before Musical Fidelity was acquired by Heinz Lichtenegger of Audio Tuning (Pro-Ject) fame, flexible phono preamps were part of the company's DNA. This ethos is only reinforced now the British brand is aligned with one of the foremost turntable manufacturers, and purveyor of lots more vinyl-related kit to boot. The 'x' in the M8x Vinyl is a giveaway that this phono preamplifier is part of a respectfully revived range which has been introduced piecemeal since Lichtenegger took over. As such, the £3599 M8x Vinyl slots between the £9999 Nu-Vista Vinyl 2 and the cheaper M6x Vinyl (£1849), launched in 2023. It has competitors at £3000-£4000, but its flexibility in gain and loading options sets the M8x Vinyl apart from the crowd.

BALANCED ATTITUDE

Compared to lower-cost phono amps, and many rivals, the M8x Vinyl boasts several independent inputs, including balanced connections. This is no real surprise as, for the last few years, Lichtenegger has been

heavily promoting balanced connections for turntables. Part of that strategy has led sister brand Pro-Ject to offer balanced outputs on new models in its mid and top-end ranges [HFN Jan '25], and the Austrian company complements this with balanced cabling and even its own cartridges – including, uniquely, a balanced moving-magnet model. In practice, only moving-coil cartridges are typically wired to deliver a truly balanced output.

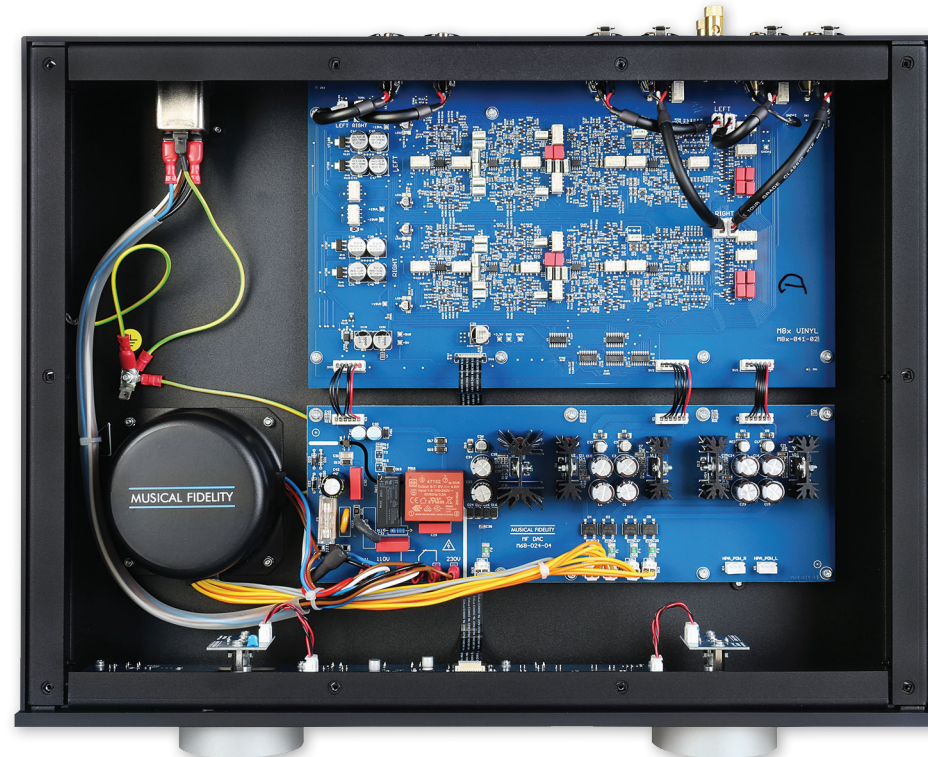
The M8x Vinyl's dual sets of RCA and XLR inputs are selected via one of two large rotaries dominating the alloy fascia. Are you a truly dedicated – bordering on fanatical – vinyl fan with four turntables or a deck with multiple tonearms? This unit has you covered, although as most new Pro-Ject decks are equipped with a five-pin mini-XLR connector, you'll need an adapter to break this out to the standard, full-sized three-

pin XLRs on the M8x Vinyl's rear. Pro-Ject's 'Connect it Phono DS 5P/XLR' will fit the bill, but it's an aftermarket purchase if you plump for a Pro-Ject/MF front-end.

WIDE LOAD

One of the challenges that ownership of the Nu-Vista Vinyl 2 presents is finding a place for such an oversized unit, as the footprint of all Nu-Vista 800 separates is substantial, to say the least. Luckily, the M8x Vinyl is easier to park even if it's still a significant slab of alloy. Its 480mm width is broader than mainstream hi-fi hardware, so slipping it into your AV rack might be impossible. That was the case with my own Blok Stax rack [HFN Nov '24], which is made to house standard 430mm-wide units with space to spare for ventilation on both sides. The dimensions of the M8x Vinyl do match those of other

'As befits
Mingus, this
track is frantic
and chaotic'



RIGHT: Transformer [lower left] feeds PSU DC blocking/rectification [bottom] and regulation [top left] for the discrete, three-stage transistor circuit surrounding the passive eq section [top]



M8x products though, including the EISA Award-winning M8xi integrated amplifier [HFN Jul '20]. Presumably the M8x DAC, which is whispered to be on its way, will be the same, allowing you to build a neat – but oversized – hi-fi system.

LIGHTING THE WAY

Leaving its width aside, the M8x Vinyl speaks the same sleek design language as Musical Fidelity's smaller M marque products, including the M6x DAC [HFN Jul '22]. With its array of blue LEDs on its curved aluminium facade, it's not exactly minimalistic, but not gaudy either. These LEDs, indicating input, gain, loading and other features, are pin-hole types so don't light up the room when spinning discs.

Three tiny buttons select between MM or MC operation, plus eight possible (parallel) capacitances for moving magnet (50-400pF) and nine input loads for moving-coil (50hm-47kohm),

ensuring the M8x Vinyl is suitable for a very broad range of cartridges. Additional flexibility is available via the second large rotary, situated on the right, which scrolls through four levels of input gain. MM cartridges are supported by +40dB to +49dB gain while MCs have between +60dB to +69dB, all in steps of ± 3 dB [see PM's Lab Report, p67]. Fine-tuning 'on-the-fly' is certainly possible with this phono stage, with auto-muting preventing 'thumps' coming through your loudspeakers as you switch gain or load.

Those dabbling in vinyl archaeology will be pleased to discover the M8x Vinyl featuring legacy Decca and Columbia EQ curves [HFN Apr '22], next to the contemporary RIAA setting. Finally, a two-

ABOVE: Seen here in its matt black livery, the M8x Vinyl's two rotaries govern input and gain. A row of little buttons navigates MM/MC loading, (legacy) eq selection and sub filters

stage subsonic filter tackles excess bass from vinyl warps or a prominent tonearm/cartridge resonance.

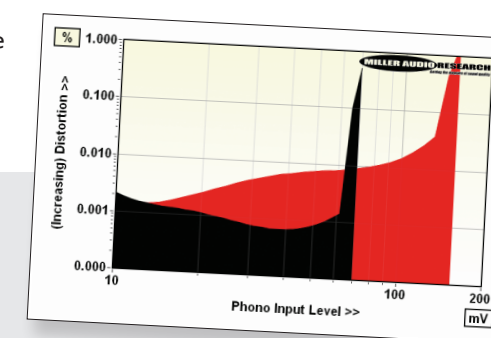
RICH PICKINGS

The phrase 'a chip off the old block' springs to mind with the M8x Vinyl, because while it lacks the tube stage of Musical Fidelity's higher-end Nu-Vista model, it goes about its business in a similar fashion. Connected at first to a Pro-Ject X2 B/MC9 set-up [HFN Sep '22], Primare PRE35/A35.2 pre/power [HFN Dec '19] and a pair of DALI Rubicon 2 standmounts, its presentation was dynamic and vivid, with a richness to it that lured me in to track after track. The comprehensive cartridge settings, meanwhile, enabled fine-tuning from the 'comfort' of the front panel.

The double LP release of *The Man With A Movie Camera* [Ninja Tune ZEN78] is a personal favourite, both as a standalone work and as a reminder of a superb performance by the Cinematic Orchestra that I attended many years ago, where the music was combined with a screening of the eponymous silent documentary by Soviet filmmaker Dziga Vertov. With Pro-Ject's top-tier MC pick-up dialled in for 100ohm, the M8x Vinyl unearthed bags of fine detail in the percussive backing, resulting in an expansive, open portrayal.

It's a 'silent' performer too, my subjective impression being of a brilliantly dark background which suited the measured arrangements of the album. The slow twang of the contrabass and the subtle analogue synth tones were there to be fully savoured, while surges of strings and jazzy brass made a suitably powerful appearance on a well-defined soundstage.

Contributing to the M8x's dynamic, open sound is its excellent channel separation. With no detectable crosstalk I could easily relish the discord between the blasts of baritone saxophone in the left



TUBE VS TRANSISTOR

Enthusiasts can access a deal of information about the M8x Vinyl through MF's website and press releases cut 'n pasted by bloggers worldwide! However, what you won't read on the web is this: the simplest way to understand the M8x Vinyl is to see it as a solid-state version of the Nu-Vista Vinyl 2 [HFN Feb '24] with which it shares the same RIAA eq and balanced gain structure. The key difference between the two units lies in the higher voltage 'swing' available to the latter's tube output stage – 21.9V versus the lower 10.1V offered by the M8x Vinyl. The newer amp's sub-1ohm output impedance confers some benefit over the Nu-Vista's <1kohm (bass) output, but that 6.7dB difference in level translates into a similar reduction in input overload headroom on all MM/MC input gain options.

In practice, the M8x Vinyl offers the same eight gain settings – four MM and four MC – as the Nu-Vista Vinyl 2 but the input level that's tolerated before one or other stage in the preamp clips ($\sim 1\%$ THD) is now 103mV, 73mV [black trace, inset Graph], 53mV and 37mV versus 209mV, 151mV [red trace], 110mV and 80mV, respectively, for MM. The input clipping limits for the four MC gain settings are 10.5mV, 7.5mV, 5.4mV and 3.8mV versus 21mV, 16mV, 11.5mV and 8.0mV, respectively. But here's the good news – MF's engineers have done their homework – for while the M8x Vinyl has, across its settings, 6.1-6.7dB less headroom than the Nu-Vista Vinyl 2, this still leaves it with ~ 1 dB more than the ~ 20 dB target necessary to accommodate the fiercest of cuts without clipping. So, by a whisker, the M8x Vinyl welcomes all MMs and MCs. PM

PHONO PREAMPLIFIER



ABOVE: The M8x Vinyl has two single-ended inputs (on RCAs) for MM/MCs and two balanced ins (on XLRs), best suited to MCs, all with their own ground terminals. RCA and balanced XLR outputs complete the package – there are no DIP switches here!

channel, and the saxophone pushed to the right, in the first track – ‘Solo Dancer’ – from *The Black Saint And The Sinner Lady* [Second Records SRPD0063]. As befits Charles Mingus, a big proponent of jazz improvisation, this track devolves into frantic, chaotic playing, with an especially frenzied ending.

The absence of smearing, or of a muddy representation, helped keep tabs on everything, making it easy to enjoy the rambunctious whole or focus on certain instruments. Handy, considering Mingus’s landmark piece was played by an eleven-piece band, and every instrument seems to be battling the others for prominence. The M8x Vinyl’s strong showing here ensured the album sounded exciting but coherent, even as ‘Mode E’ on Side Two veered from harmony to chaos, and it again let the MC9 cartridge showcase its talent for conveying lots of upper-midrange and high-frequency information.

IN THE LIMELIGHT

With the Pro-Ject turntable and Primare PRE35 I had run the M8x Vinyl in a completely balanced set-up, so what about a more conventional unbalanced approach? Turning to an ELAC Miracord 90th Anniversary turntable [HFN Jul ’17], using a Goldring Elite moving-coil cartridge and the bundled RCA cable, I dug out Daft Punk’s *Random Access Memories* [10th Anniversary Edition; Sony Music 19658773731]. Setting the loading to ‘100R’, as advised by Goldring, proved a good choice to ensure the M8x Vinyl placed the artificial voice of ‘The Game Of Love’ in the limelight.

However, as the Goldring cartridge is relatively bright, I felt the synthesised effects that give this Daft Punk set its retro-nostalgic feel appeared a bit thin, particularly on ‘Giorgio by Moroder’, which builds steadily toward a rousing guitar and drum finale. This is where the M8x

Vinyl’s on-the-fly adjustments come into play. Thanks to the buttons on the front – there’s no need to faff around with difficult-to-reach DIP switches sequestered on the rear panel – it took little effort to add some warmth to the proceedings.

MUSIC WITH SOUL

Switching to a Technics SL-1200GR2 turntable [HFN Sep ’24] and an Audio-Technica VM750SH MM cartridge, the *After Dark: Night Shift* set [Another Late Night ALN36] from the label’s ‘LateNightTales’ series was crafted in a polished manner. A down-tempo album with a lot of funk influences, compiled by DJ historian Bill Brewster, it should be a perfect match for the Technics deck, and the M8x Vinyl played its part in handling the groovy vibes and rhythmic, percussive guitar.

This preamplifier’s delivery of the trumpets, background singing and afrobeat ambience of ‘Soul Machine’ was spot on, all the elements arriving vividly and discretely. And with the follow-up track, ‘Magic’, which turns up the 1970s dial even more, the M8x Vinyl did a first-rate job. This is music with soul, and that’s exactly how Musical Fidelity’s phono stage delivered it. ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

With comprehensive support for 99.9% of MM/MCs, and offering inputs for multiple turntables, the M8x Vinyl is an excellent choice for vinyl enthusiasts wishing to experiment. But even with a single deck, there’s a lot to like about this well-designed unit. Offering rich sound, excellent separation and a dark background, it gets the most out of your turntable, cart and no less importantly... your records.

Sound Quality: 88%

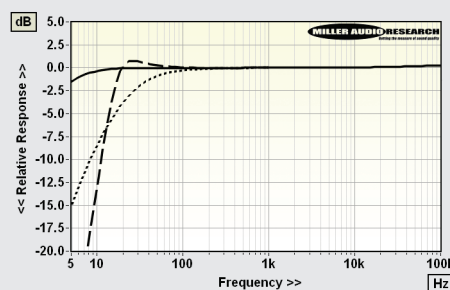
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LAB REPORT

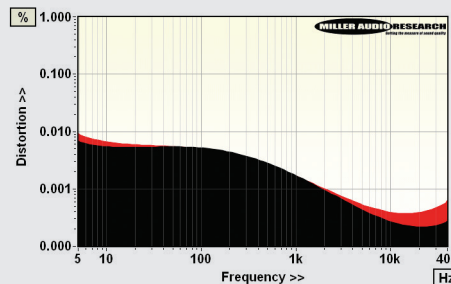
MUSICAL FIDELITY M8X VINYL

Following the Nu-Vista Vinyl 2’s lead [HFN Feb ’24], Musical Fidelity’s M8x Vinyl allows for four MM and four MC gain settings, each grouped in 3dB increments. Tested via its balanced inputs and outputs, the +40dB to +49dB MM gain options arrive at +40.4dB, +43.4dB, +45.9dB and +48.9dB, accommodating pick-ups rated between 3.6-9.6mV (re. 1kHz/5cm/sec) to deliver a 1V (0dBV) output. The MC gain options range from +60dB to +69dB (+60.2dB, +63.2dB, +65.7dB and +68.7dB, in practice) and will match moving-coils over a useful 368-976μV spec’d output. Naturally, higher and lower output MCs are still perfectly ‘useable’ at the +60dB and +69dB settings, respectively, thanks to the consistent 71dB A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 500μV input). The MM stage offers a wider 81.0dB (re. 5mV input) – exactly the same as the Nu-Vista Vinyl 2, and despite also being 10-15dB behind the ‘quietest’ phono stages this figure is still beyond the through-groove vinyl noise of the finest turntables.

Distortion remains very low too, falling to 0.002%/1kHz and a lower 0.0003%/20kHz [see Graph 2], but even the worse-case 0.005% here is still ~300x lower than that from the average pick-up! The M8x Vinyl’s ultrasonic response is flatter than the Nu-Vista Vinyl 2’s (both are –0.05dB/20kHz before diverging to +0.09dB/100kHz vs. –1.4dB/100kHz, respectively) but the bass still rolls away gently to –3dB/4Hz. The ‘Mild’ subsonic filter [dotted trace, Graph 1] adopts the IEC profile, rolling off below 100Hz to –3dB/23Hz and –6dB/14Hz while the ‘Standard’ subsonic filter [dashed trace] has a +0.8dB lift at 25Hz with a ~3rd-order roll-off thereafter to –6dB/13Hz. The M8x Vinyl’s MM/MC input overload margins are sufficient, but lack the massive headroom enjoyed by the Nu-Vista Vinyl 2 [see boxout, p65]. PM



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



ABOVE: Distortion vs. frequency re. 0dBV from 5Hz-40kHz (MM +40dB gain setting; left, black; right, red)

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Input loading (MM/MC)	47kohm/50-400pF / 5ohm-47kohm
Input sensitivity (re. 0dBV, MM/MC)	9.55mV-3.60mV / 976μV-368μV
Input overload (re. 1% THD, MM/MC)	103mV-37mV / 10.5mV-3.8mV
Max. output (re. 1% THD) / Imp.	10.2V / 0.10-0.55ohm (balanced)
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBV)	81.5dB / 71.3dB (MM/MC)
Freq. resp. (20Hz-20kHz/100kHz)	+0.05dB to –0.05dB / +0.09dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, re. 0dBV)	0.0003-0.005%
Power consumption	13W
Dimensions (WHD) / Weight	483x102x381mm / 10.6kg