

# The Musical Surroundings Phenomena II

By Todd Sageser

**W**hat would you think if you received a box with a Phenomena inside? One meaning of the word phenomenon is “a remarkable thing,” so with the varied spelling, maybe this is something remarkable in a phonograph preamplifier. Being in the plural makes sense when delving a little deeper into the manufacturer, Musical Surroundings and Michael Yee. Yee is a highly respected designer of phono stages, and this is the second incarnation of the simplest of three Phenomena models.

PHENOMENA II  
Phonograph Preamplifier





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Retail cost of the Phonomena II is \$600. Sharing the same circuitry with their NOVA phono preamplifier, the less-expensive Phonomena II uses a wall-wart power supply instead of the more sophisticated (and quieter) battery supply from the NOVA.

I was immediately impressed by how solid this little box is: 8 x 5 inches and only 2 inches tall, made of metal with a black matte-textured finish. The front panel is simple but elegant with a power LED and clear plastic front panel with polished edges. The rear panel has a pair of gold-plated RCA jacks for the input and output along with a bank of DIP switches for gain and cartridge loading, two for each channel.

### A Plethora of Adjustment

The four-switch bank lets you adjust gain from 40db to 60db, with 13 settings. Seven of the eight switches on the next bank set cartridge loading from 30 ohms to 100k ohms. The last switch offers two capacitive loading options, 200pf or 300pF. The manual offers good descriptions of how all these settings affect the sound and how to adjust them. If you are a seasoned analog fan, you might skip this section, but those new to the game can glean a bit here.

It will help to have handy the data sheet for your cartridge to know where to begin with the settings. My Sumiko Blackbird is a high-output moving coil (2.5mv), so I used the lowest gain setting (40db) first, with the loading set to 50k ohms, the suggested setting from the manufacturer. Capacitance changes don't affect moving coil cartridges, but if you have a moving magnet cartridge, higher capacitance will roll off the treble response somewhat. Think of it as a tone control, offering a slight treble trim.

After a couple of days of background play, I got down to some serious listening. My analog rig consists of a tried-and-true Technics SP10 MkII that has performed flawlessly since I bought it in 1976. A few other more expensive tables have come and gone over the years, but the SP10 has been the rock of my system. Who knew these tables would be fashionable again in the 21st century?

My first session started with an off-the-wall favorite from the 80s, Thomas Dolby's "May the Cube Be With You." Supported by an all-star cast ranging from the Brecker Brothers to George Clinton, the tune includes some great Ampeg SVT bass lines and, of course, great horn licks, along with Dolby's synths and samples. I immediately noticed the stage width going out past the boundaries of my MartinLogan Summits. The samples and little add-ins that Dolby does so well were jumping out and very clear, but not edgy. The vocals also seemed to be very present, but not too far forward.

Staying with Thomas Dolby for one more track, "Mulu and the Rain Forest," from *The Flat Earth*, the crickets at the beginning of the song were wide and clear with the "swipe" sounds quite striking. The samples floated and the bass was distinct, without any mud or haze, and the upright bass going into the bridge was almost eerie. This song has been one of my benchmarks since it came out in 1984, and I have auditioned a lot of analog gear with this record.

The next disc was *New Baby*, by Don Randi and Quest on Sheffield Labs. I think this record was done as much to show off the direct-to-disc process as the music, but its dynamics and clarity make it a great disc for evaluating analog performance. *(continued)*

Trumpets and percussion are hard-panned to opposite sides. The piano was fairly wide and recorded without the customary reverb found in a lot of pop production. The instruments were all distinct, with no hard edges (a good thing). Overall, it was a very pleasant surprise from an album I hadn't heard in a while.

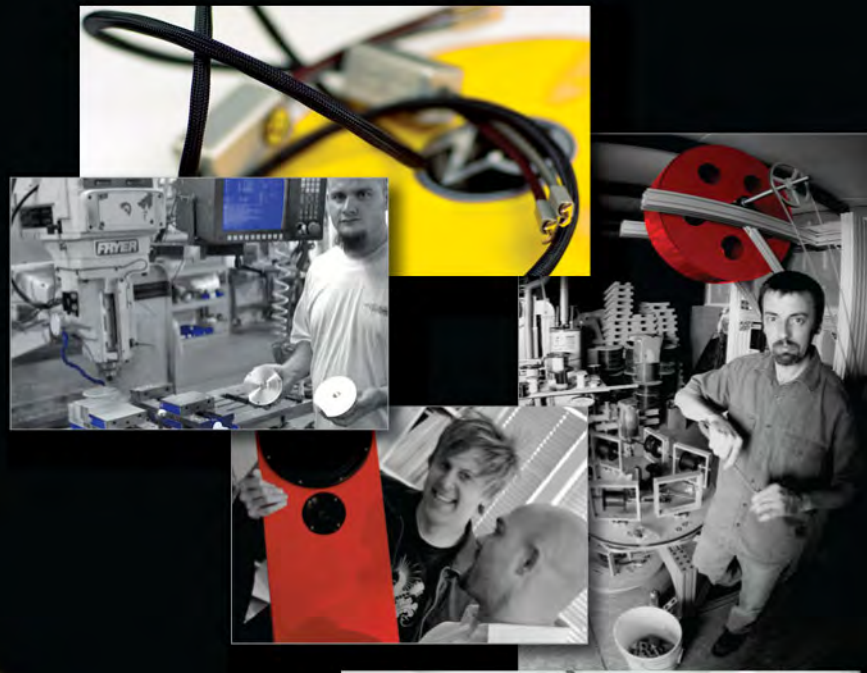
After a quick spin of "The Tempest" on a 45 rpm Reference Recordings LP, I was impressed at how well this modest phono pre-amp did with reproducing the size and textures of the acoustic instruments while maintaining excellent dynamics throughout. Pretty incredible for a \$600 phono stage.

I ended this listening session with *Synchronicity* from the Police, paying careful attention to how well the layers of Andy Summers' guitars were separated, without Stuart Copeland's drumming getting lost in the mix. The guitars appeared in their proper places in the stereo image, with Sting's voice having plenty of bite. Right in the pocket, if you will.

**At the end of every listening session, I came away pleased with this phono stage.**

While it lacks the resolution of my classic (and highly upgraded) Mark Levinson ML-1, it does a great job with the basics. It also lacks the depth and height that the big boys do, but at this price, I was amazed at how well the Phonomena did with musical fundamentals.

I guess you could qualify this Phonomena II as a phenomenon, when you consider the cost and compare it to other preamps costing many times the price. This unit offers a lot of musical satisfaction for the analog lover on a tight budget. *(continued)*



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## Second Opinion

By Jeff Dorgay

We have been listening to a lot of phono stages in the \$600 – \$1,500 range this year and it's exciting to see how much is available, considering how many phono stages there are that cost 10 times that much. There are a lot of analog lovers out there with Technics SL-1200's, Rega P1/2/3's and VPI Scouts (to name a few options) who are going to drop a few hundred bucks on a new cartridge and call it a day.

I made it a point to use the Phonomena II for a couple of weeks before sending it off to Todd, so it would be fully broken in and I could try it with a pile of budget cartridges that I had on hand.

The Phonomena worked very well with MM and MC cartridges and was easy to set up. As Todd mentioned, the noise floor was low, and as much as I love vacuum tubes, I prefer the quiet of a solid-state unit in a budget phono stage.

Trying to stay within the boundaries of what sort of system would likely be used with Phonomena, I matched it up with my Rega Elicit integrated amplifier, Technics SL1200 and a pair of Harbeth Compact 7ES-3's. Shure M97 owners take note: thanks to the 100k setting, the Phonomena offered up the best sound I've ever heard from this budget cartridge, which otherwise has never done much for me.

Moving up the line to the Grado Master at \$500 and the Clearaudio Maestro Wood (also reviewed in this issue), the Phonomena II still made a fine showing. With an equal balance of tonality and dynamics, the Phonomena II is a lot like a pair of Vandersteen 1C's. It does such a great job with the basics, you don't notice what it doesn't do, yet having enough resolution that you get a good feel for what the excitement is really all about for analog.

For \$600, the Musical Surroundings Phonomena II is at the top of the heap in its class and one that I will be recommending highly to anyone asking me for a great budget phono stage. ●

**The Musical Surroundings Phonomena II**  
MSRP: \$600

### MANUFACTURER

#### **Musical Surroundings**

5662 Shattuck Ave.  
Oakland, CA 94609  
510-547-5006

### PERIPHERALS

**Analog Sources:** Technics SP10mk II, Technics SL1200 w/Sumiko Blackbird, Shure M97, Grado Master, Grado Statement, Clearaudio Maestro Wood, Lyra Argo-i

**Electronics:** Mark Levinson ML-1 (updated and modified), Acoustat TNT, Rega Elicit

**Speakers:** MartinLogan Summits, Harbeth Compact 7ES-3

**Cable:** Cardas Golden Reference, Tetra Artet, Shunyata Aries and Orion

**Accessories:** Running Springs Haley and Mongoose power cords, Furutech Demag-1