

MUSICAL SURROUNDINGS NOVA II PHONO PREAMPLIFIER Superduper

Equipment report(/articles/?type=review)

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In one iteration or another, the Musical Surroundings phono preamplifiers designed by Mike Yee have been my references since I reviewed the original Phenomena in 2002 (TAS 134). The design has undergone two upgrades since then. The first, called the Nova Phenomena (TAS 172), incorporated the original's optional outboard battery supply in the main chassis, and now here is the second, called simply the Nova II. Despite the changes, which I'll detail anon, all three models exhibit the same basic sonic personality, which, quoting my original review, I characterized as "Apollonian, all classical grace, poise, and restraint, with a neutrality and freedom from coloration that I have no hesitation in calling state of the art." I've read some reviewers who fault the earlier versions for being *too* neutral—a criticism I've always found odd when made of something the purpose of which is to reproduce something else—and others who crave more in the way of kick, slam, liveliness, what have you. Fair enough, perhaps, but what places Yee's designs ahead of most of the pack is that very neutrality, which translates into a more accurate replica of what is actually being fed it, including the sonic personality of the phono pickup. As Yee has brought out successive versions, however, there have been subtle improvements in both dynamics and that elusive sense of lifelikeness, without compromising the original's neutrality.

Once the Nova II was plugged in and cooked (a few hours does the trick) and the batteries fully charged, I got down to serious listening with the recent Gould/Bernstein Beethoven Fourth as reissued by Impex. It opens with the soloist playing the limpid first theme, his piano set slightly back in the center, the impression of a holographic image so persuasive that Peter Walker's metaphor of a window on the concert hall became eerily real, an impression only deepened with the entrance of the orchestra surrounding the piano. Better still was the lightness, ease, and delicacy of Gould's touch and the severe beauty of his tone—best of all the involvement and vitality of the listening experience. Panorama and detail are ideally resolved, with Gould's famous singing and humming along just evident enough without being emphasized (the way some overly detailed components can).

Being in an orchestral mood, I followed this with Original Recording Group's new reissue of *The Planets* in the Mehta/ Los Angeles Philharmonic recording. I've always found this a checkered recording, with the sound varying from cut to cut and all sorts of shenanigans with levels, balances, and miking, and not very much depth. "Mars" sounds hard, for example, but "Jupiter" quite wonderful, with strings smoother and more beautiful. Overall, however, this recording's dynamic range is impressive, which is one reason I played it: I wanted to see if there were any further improvements in the Nova II—and there were. Nor did I have to listen very long to Stokowski's sensational *Rhapsodies* [RCA] to discover even more. This recording never ceases to thrill me both as performance and as sonics. The combination of weight, warmth, definition, and sheer power in the bass the Nova II rendered as about as spectacularly as any phonostage I've used and better than most because free from any editorializing, while the range from soft to really loud was equally impressive. One reason for this is

the Nova II's quietness. Even in AC mode it's quieter than most phonostages I've heard, but in battery mode it's close to dead quiet even at pretty healthy levels.

I concentrated on music with a lot of dynamic range and weight because I wanted especially to hear the new version's performance in these areas. The dynamic opening of *Graceland* [Sony] made me snap to attention, while the clarification of textures really brought a smile to my face. And if it's toe-tapping rhythmic panache you're after, this unit will give it to you (and without that "clipped" impression you get with some components that tend to etch each beat, i.e., those...that... sound...like...this). Reference Recordings' new album by the blues singer and guitarist Doug MacLeod, made at the famous studio at Skywalker Ranch (the site of so many fine Harmonia Mundi USA recordings), is wonderfully transparent on MacLeod's powerfully expressive voice, at once warm yet raspy and palpably present, with a strong low end in the doublebass and the kick drum.

Sometimes Keith Johnson's recordings can be too spacious, but not here, where focus is never blurred at the expense of atmosphere. A very different kind of singing is to be heard on *Sing We Noel* [Arkiv Music], a longstanding favorite of mine by Joel Cohen and the Boston Camerata. The program is early British and American Christmas music performed by small chorus, soloists, period-instruments, and the like. The recording, made in a reverberant church, captures the voices with rare beauty: rounded, dimensional, and very vivid. It also makes full expressive and dramatic use of the venue—the final number has the whole ensemble singing the "Gloucestershire Wassail" as they recede. A really good setup will allow you to hear a greater portion of reverberant to direct sound as the group moves farther back (and also more bounce off the rear wall), which is certainly true of the Nova II and Ortofon Windfeld/Basis 2200/Vector combination.

The last thing I played before wrapping up this review was the classic first Bernstein recording of *The Rite of Spring* [Columbia], recently newly remastered and reissued on vinyl—just the sort of material previous Novas and Phonomenas were supposed to come a cropper on. Not this time. The recording is close-up, explosive, and cataclysmic, and was reproduced accordingly. Wow!



The new Nova II shares with its past brethren all-discrete, dual-mono circuitry and peerless flexibility when it comes to loading and gain options. Like them, the Nova II's are accessible via DIP switches on the rear panel. A pair of internal NiMH battery packs, one for each phase, supplies the power in full-battery mode. Yee employs a novel "smart-sensing" circuit that automatically causes the unit to go into recharge mode when the batteries lose their charge (without interrupting playback). A charge is good for about three hours of listening, and when full-battery operation is selected, a relay completely disconnects the unit from the AC line (though the wallwart power supply must always be plugged in).

But it is the new aspects of the design that contribute the most, I believe, to its improved performance with respect to dynamic range and lifelikeness. First, the original design's matched pair of transistors went out of production, so Yee had to find a replacement and what he found yields lower noise and, on the basis of what I'm hearing, increased control. (Yee tells me that the new "matched pairs alone are more expensive than the integrated op-amps that most companies use for phonostages.") He has also changed the RF filtering, which reduces the noise floor by some 6dB, which in turn by definition results in increased dynamic range. One of my notes reads that in battery mode especially "this thing is really, really, really quiet!" Finally, the chassis and mechanical design are new and to entirely beneficial effect. Good as the Nova Phenomena was and is, it always looked to me as if it had been manufactured in a garage, with a large Cyclops-like indicator light—the designer himself called it a "flashing eyeball"—that struck me as positively ugly. Based on Yee's MYDAC II DAC and available in

black or silver, the Nova II's chassis is now svelte, sleek, and elegant. The front panel has a single button that allows you to choose among battery, charging, or AC modes. Another benefit of the new case work is improved mechanical isolation, which extends even to the mounting of the circuit board inside the chassis. Yee also tells me it's easier to build, which may help account for why the price increase is so small: at \$1200 the new unit costs just \$201 more than its predecessor—fair to the point of giveaway—and it's still built entirely in California.

Indulge me a few moments about the loading and gain options here, which remain unprecedented for number and scope in any phono preamp known to me regardless of cost. I know I tend to go on about the importance of loading mc's, but it is necessary for optimum performance, and I am far from alone in believing this. Years ago I once asked Dave Wilson, as perfectionist a man as you can get about all things audio, how he felt about proper loading of mc's. He answered with a question, "Would you drive a car without shocks?" Bullseye. All moving coils have resonances in the extreme highs that left undamped (i.e., unloaded) will ring and usually result in some frequency response anomalies, especially in the highs. Many audiophiles, including more than a few reviewers, actually seem to like this effect because they hear it as increased openness, airiness, transient sharpness, and so on. I have no intention of arguing taste here, and if you like these effects, my response is to live, be well, and enjoy. But they are impositions upon the source and they cannot result in accurate reproduction.

If you happen to purchase the Nova or have a phono preamp that has provision for loading, I'd suggest giving it a try. I believe you'll discover that over the long haul, you'll prefer the focus, precision, and accuracy of correct loading, especially with its gains in musical naturalness. Mind you, proper loading will not make a pickup that lacks flat response into one that has it. All correct loading will do, apart from suppressing the high-frequency resonance, is allow the frequency response of the pickup to be as flat as the design itself permits. If that isn't flat, then you won't hear flat; if it is, you will. The Nova II provides loading for 17 values from 30 to 100k ohms and 13 gain settings from 40 to 60dB. There is also a switch to select a capacitive loading of 200 or 300pF to accommodate moving-magnet pickups that are sensitive in this regard. (Typically capacitive loading has little effect as such on moving coils.) The combination of all this flexibility plus truly high performance adds up to why I continue to use Yee's designs as my reference: In addition to their musical pleasure, they are invaluable tools for reviewing pickups of all kinds.

To sum up, the Nova II retains all its forebears' virtues of neutrality and low coloration, with considerably improved dynamic range, robustness, and perceived life and vitality: in other words, this new Nova now has a satisfying infusion of Dionysus in its otherwise Apollonian personality. Although Yee's designs are always very quiet and extremely transparent, this latest one is exceptionally so, ranking up there with some of the most expensive phonostages I've ever heard. Where does it stand in the marketplace? Limiting myself to recent high-performance designs I've reviewed, it doesn't have quite the sheer grip or bottom-end crunch of Plinius' Koru, which costs three times as much, doesn't offer nearly the flexibility, and is trumped by the Nova's neutrality. Nor does the Nova have quite the warmth, body, and ultimate "organic" quality of Zesto Audio's Andros, but the Andros costs well over three times as much, isn't as quiet or neutral, and again has less flexibility for loading and gain (though the Andros is certainly adequate in these respects for the pickups I tend to prefer, such as Ortofon, Dynavector, and a couple of Benz and Clearaudio models). But when I switch from the Andros to this new Nova, I listen with as much involvement and equal, if different enjoyment. So just in case I've not made myself clear: The already superb performance of the Nova II's predecessor has been made even better in the new model, which means that a super value is now a superduper one. I cannot recommend it enthusiastically enough.

SPECS & PRICING

Gain: 40–60dB in 13 steps

Input loading: 200pF/300pF, 30 ohms to 100k ohms in 17 steps

Dimensions: 9 7/8" x 9 7/8" x 2.5"

Weight: 5 lbs.

Warranty: 3 years

Price: \$1200

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