

Nova II Phono PreamplifierSRP: \$1200

By John Sunier

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Specs:

Larger case with silver or black anodized finish
5dB better S/N than Phonomena II preamp
Improved resonance isolation
Battery power supply
Matched transistor pair input for improved linearity
Discrete dual-mono circuitry
Gain Switches for 40 to 60dB
Input Load Switches for 30 ohms to 100k ohms plus 200pF/300pF
Dimensions: 7 7/8 x 9 7/8 x 2.5"
Weight: 5 lbs
Warranty: 3 years

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The Nova II is my replacement for the popular Phonomena II, which I have used for some years now in a strictly AC version. It is the latest phono stage design from Michael Yee and built in California. He is known for designing phono preamps which provide the best sound in their price range. In case you are new to analog turntables and vinyl, the phono preamp is required to bring the low output signal of the phono cartridge up to live level to feed an input on the preamp or receiver, which normally doesn't come with a phono input anymore, or if it does probably not nearly the quality of a separate phono preamp.

The Nova II has rear-panel mini switches just like the Phonomena II, for both loading and gain. I am using the Grado Reference moving magnet cartridge and don't miss moving coils at all. (For one thing, there is less surface noise.) The loading setup is not very important for moving magnet cartridges. I just transferred my previous settings from the Phonomena II, but I had to set up the gain somewhat to bring the turntable audio level closer to that of my Oppo disc player for comparisons.



The Grado is rather low level for a MM cartridge but the Nova II allows raising the gain without affecting the 47K loading setting, which some other phono preamps don't allow.

The preamp has two rechargeable internal NiHM dual-mono battery packs and a Smart Sensing auto recharge feature. All the AC and charging circuits automatically disconnect when you listen in battery mode. The single button on the front switches the unit between Charged, Charging (on which it blinks until it is charged), and Battery. The battery option is supposed to last at least three hours before a recharge is needed. When not in use the unit should be switched left on Charging (red LED). There is an internal power supply and a small wall

wart, so no danger of any hum getting into the Nova II. (I had a lot of trouble with that with some tube phono preamps.) Some of the advancements of the even higher-end SuperNova II have been incorporated by Yee into the Nova II.

I charged up the Nova II overnight and ran it on both the Charged (AC) settings and on Battery. With some LPs there was little difference from my Phonomena II preamp on the AC setting, but a slight improvement on the Battery setting. I then got out a 1978 Direct-to-Disc, *Sunken Cathedral*, by Jackson Berkey of Mannhiem Steamroller. This solo piano album opens with my favorite Debussy piano piece, his *The Sunken Cathedral*. Here the difference in comparison with the Phonomena II was distinct. There was definitely an increased clarity and more high end. The Baldwin piano, which was carefully miced and comes across with great clarity on the direct disc, sounds more like a real piano on the soundstage. There was also a lower noise floor on silent passages than with the Phonomena II, probably due to the battery operation. (It's too bad there are so few direct discs being done today, but the 45 rpm reissues are certainly close to that standard.)

Often when I'm doing a comparison between a vinyl pressing and a SACD or Pure Audio Blu-ray of the same thing the only slight enhancement seems to be a bit more "air" around the instruments on the vinyl vs. the digital source. That is intensified by the Nova II. I got out some of the 45 rpm vinyl reissues from Original Recordings Group, and they also showed up the enhancement of the Nova II over the Phonomena II. I believe I will be less likely to find the digital version and vinyl to sound exactly alike anymore, with the edge going to the vinyl. (And at those prices, I hope so.)

I also did a comparison of the new double-disc vinyl pressing of the Handel *Six Piano Concertos* on CPO with the [CPO SACD version](#) which I recently reviewed. With the Phonomena II the vinyl sounded almost exactly like the two-channel option on the SACD. I would be very hard-pressed to tell any difference. With the Nova II the main difference was again that nebulous quality of "air" around the instruments. And the piano sounded just a bit more like a real piano and less opaque and wooden-sounding than with the Phonomena II. So the vinyl pulled ahead of the SACD by a small margin.

Is the enhancement worth the doubling of price over the Phonomena II? Well, most of us are aware of the price/performance thing in the high end, and it should fall to each individual to make a similar comparison and decide for him or herself. With a very high end moving coil cartridge you might find the enhancement even more pronounced. If you've just been using the MM phono input (with a MM cartridge) built into those few preamps and receivers that have them, you'll be really bowled over.

[By the way (this comes from Mapleshade), remember that stylus suspensions tend to sag with use, whether you're using a MM or MC cartridge. Therefore you should RAISE the VTA of your tonearm every four months or so, until the treble starts sounding harsh. Then back down slightly and tighten it up again to maintain the utmost sonics from your turntable system.]

—John Sunier