

Musical Fidelity Nu-Vista Vinyl

What began as a 'limited edition' series in the late '90s has continued to this day with the revered nuvistor triode finding its way into MF's new flagship phono stage
Review: **David Price** Lab: **Paul Miller**

It's no secret that Musical Fidelity boss, Antony Michaelson, is a fan of the thermionic valve – he says he was, '12 years old in a far distant universe' when he was bitten by the bug. So it's perhaps no surprise that his first commercial product was the Michaelson & Austin TVA-1 valve amp, way back in the late '70s. Yet he would be the first to admit that not all tubes are created equal, with many having real drawbacks that hamper their performance and/or reliability.

The smaller, cooler-running and less microphonic nuvistor is something special: 'the best triode tube that ever lived', in Antony's words [see PM's boxout, p45]. And by way of confirmation, Musical Fidelity's flagship Nu-Vista range features the diminutive nuvistor at its heart.

NUVISTORS FOR ALL

The £3299 Nu-Vista Vinyl tested here is a phono stage for analogue addicts, but the range also includes the Nu-Vista CD Player [HFN Dec '15] for digiphiles and two integrated amplifiers, the 600 and 800 [HFN Nov '14], with a smaller one coming soon. All products in the range have a battleship look and feel, being large, imposing, heavy and impressively finished.

Even the Vinyl that's shown here, measuring 130x482x385mm (whd) and weighing 14.5kg, is vast. Given that it's possible to house a phono preamp in a box the size of a cigarette packet, one might ask why this product needs to be so big? It certainly makes a statement – and this is at least partly the point. For example, those finned aluminium heatsinks are a pure contrivance – there's no need for them as the case never gets hot to the touch.

Inside, things are laid out neatly with short-as-possible signal paths on circuit boards sporting surface mount devices. The layout is dual mono, and both MM and MC gain stages are derived from 'microphone

amp circuitry', says Antony. The twin toroidal transformers (one for the output tubes, the other for the phono stage) are the heart of a sophisticated power system, with over 20 separate supplies and star grounding. The nuvistors are used in both the single-ended and balanced output stages, with each channel getting its own heater and HT feed. These are separate, dedicated supplies that feature numerous stages of passive filtration, including an RF filter at the mains inlet.

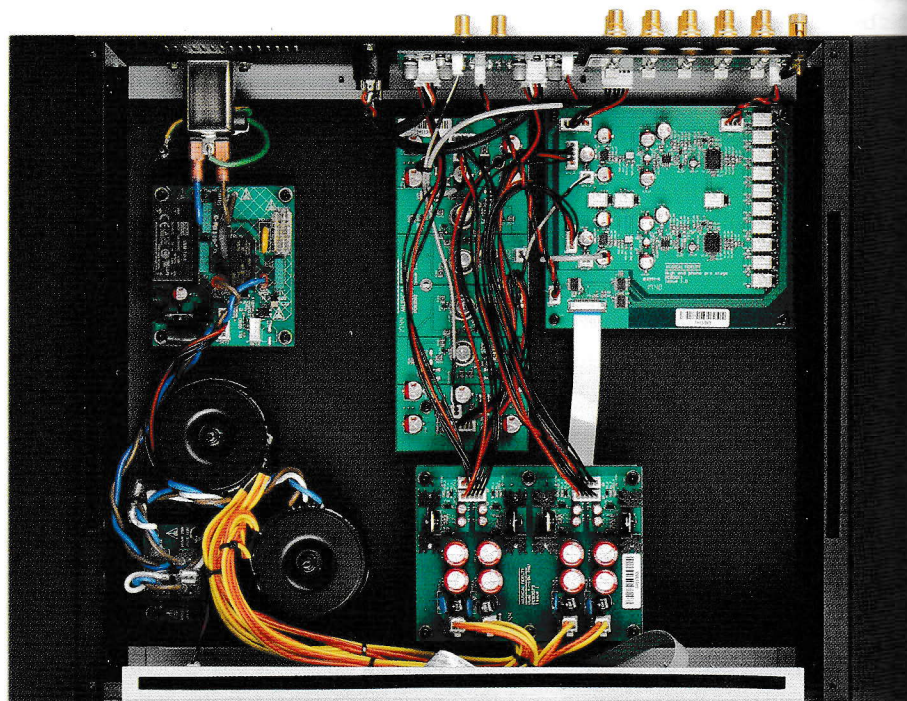
Meanwhile, that thick brushed alloy fascia isn't peppered with blue LEDs for nothing. The unit sports a comprehensive 'user interface' that offers a wide range of switching options. Essentially, it has five individual stereo inputs – and each can be configured for the type of cartridge being used, without recourse to fiddly and/or unsightly DIP switches. This includes MM/MC cartridge selection, a +6dB gain option (together these two settings give four levels of gain, which is very handy for

users of more obscure cartridges), plus switchable MM capacitive loading (50 to 400pF) and MC resistive loading (10ohm to 47kohm).

The switchable IEC warp filter claims 3dB of attenuation at 20Hz and 6dB at 10Hz [see PM's Lab Report, p47]. There's no mono facility and, strictly speaking, no mute switch either, although the unit does automatically mute for a good few seconds every time you change input, gain or loading. Switch off the Nu-Vista Vinyl and it remembers all the settings for each of the five inputs – switch it on again and you're greeted by an impressive light-show as the unit first powers up, before everything returns to how you'd left it before.

JAUNTY RHYTHMS

The Vinyl treads a very cleverly judged path between the cool and stark sound of many solid-state designs, and the loose and fluffy character of some conventional tube phono stages. Instead, it gives a bright and



RIGHT: Solid-state RIAA stage [top right] has relay-switched loading and gain options while two pairs of nuvistor triodes [top centre] drive the balanced analogue output



breezy sound that's neither hard and steely nor soft and fat.

At the same time it has a jaunty rhythmic flow, steadfastly refusing to sound forced on the one hand or lazy on the other. It's a highly transparent all rounder, blessed with a light touch that stops it from getting in the way of whatever music you choose to play. This holds true whether you're running a moving-magnet or moving-coil pick-up – I used an Audio-Technica VM-530EN and Lyra Dorian respectively, with an Audio-Technica AT-33E moving-coil for additional listening. At all times the Nu-Vista Vinyl proved commendably free from hiss, and seemed almost to be urging the best from whichever pick-up was being used.

Tonally, the Vinyl is a particularly fine thing to listen to. Neil Young's 'Southern Man' [Decade; Reprise Records 3RS 2257-2] isn't quite what you would call 'audiophile', but it's one of those recordings that seems to get better the more you improve your replay chain. On poor equipment it can sound gruff and congested, but the Nu-Vista Vinyl made the mist lift away. Its naturally open – almost translucent – character meant that it wasn't adding any

undue warmth to the sound, nor did it appear harsher than it should.

SPARKLE AND LIFE

Instead, it made it unambiguously clear that this track is a typically dry 1970s analogue recording that lacks the warmth and bloom of things being done in the studio just five years earlier. Yet at the same time, you'd never confuse it for the almost clinical and 'black and white' sound of later '80s productions. The Vinyl's innate neutrality let the recording's real flavour flood out – and that's a trick that few phono stages, even cost-no-object ones, manage successfully.

A quick spin of Jolley and Swain's 'Patterns' [Backtrackin'; R&B Records RBLP 1005] confirmed as much. This is a fairly dull early '80s jazz funk track but the Nu-Vista Vinyl managed to pull it out of itself, adding some sparkle and life, again without ever straying into harshness.

Tonally then, this is a great performer, sounding even from bottom to top. Moving on to the title track of Kraftwerk's *Computerwelt* [Kling Klang 1C 064-46 311] showed that the Vinyl has no sweet spot as such, no tendency to focus on one

Vinyl records have at last been allowed to breathe'

ABOVE: The macho alloy fascia is perforated with a long line of pinhead LEDs indicating selection of input, load impedance/capacitance, MM/MC mode, IEC bass filter and +6dB gain

particular part of the mix. The opening bars came over with crystalline clarity, the phono stage conveying the natural timbre of the synthesisers very accurately.

As the bass line kicked in, it was clear that the Nu-Vista Vinyl had a taut and firm grip on the proceedings, with seemingly vast reserves of power, yet still it never sounded overbearing or artificially enhanced, as if it had been on steroids. Indeed, the natural, almost invisible touch of the Vinyl was obvious right throughout the frequency range – perhaps there was just the slightest glimmer of extra light cast upon the upper midband, but it simply pulled previously hidden detail out of the shadows. There's certainly no sense of it shining a bright light on recordings, which throws glare back at the listener.

I revelled in the Vinyl's treble performance, which is little short of stellar. Solid-state designs can sound rather crunchy or over-crisp when, for example, trying to reproduce a clearly struck hi-hat. Yet this phono stage delivered a beautifully open yet smooth top-end. Although not as euphonic as some conventional tube designs, it was nevertheless a joy to hear.

SHIMMERING WALL OF CYMBALS

Rush's 'Subdivisions' [Signals; Mercury 6337 243] is a classic early '80s rock track with drummer Neil Peart serving up a wall of shimmering cymbals throughout the song. The Nu-Vista Vinyl was a pleasure to behold, conjuring up a delicately silky yet atmospheric presentation. Suddenly my listening room was ringing with Peart's supremely percussive snare and hi-hat work, the latter glinting out at me like stars in the night sky. At the same time however, this phono stage remained transparent enough to tell me exactly how the drum kit has been set up and miked. It never made instruments – cymbals for example –

NEW NUVISTORS

Musical Fidelity's founder and chairman, Antony Michaelson, began his love affair with the nuvistor triode in the late 1990s, the miniature and highly ruggedised tube featuring in the Nu-Vista preamp [HFN Aug '98] and Nu-Vista 300 amplifier [HFN Jun '99]. At the time sources of the tube base, if not the tubes themselves, were limited, not least because demand for this diminutive 1959 triode had rather waned following several decades of dominance by the even more rugged transistor! So these first 'Nu-Vista' separates may not have been the first to market – Conrad Johnson had previously used nuvistors in its Premier Seven preamp in 1988 – but they were certainly limited in production volume. Such was the success of these early models that new supplies of the nuvistor tube were uncovered, and a manufacturer for the tube bases commissioned. The rest, as they say, is history and nuvistor tubes have featured in Musical Fidelity's flagship products ever since – including, most recently, the Nu-Vista 800 amp [HFN Nov '14] and Nu-Vista CD player [HFN Dec '15]. PM

PHONO STAGE

MUSICAL FIDELITY NU-VISTA VINYL



ABOVE: No DIP switches here, simply five separate inputs on gold-plated RCAs (configurable via the front panel), and line outputs on RCAs and balanced XLRs

sound in any way generic or artificial. Indeed, one might say that the Vinyl has exceptionally good manners – it is as subtle and sophisticated as the best of them – yet there was never a sense of it being bland.

Whereas some conspicuously ‘hi-fi’ sounding products do well in terms of tonality and detail, they often fall down when asked to string all the information together in a musically coherent way. Some may end up being overly forensic, stripping the music of emotion, while others can be too soft and louché for their own good.

CATHEDRAL-LIKE IMAGES

So I was always mindful – no matter what type of music was played – of how organic the Nu-Vista Vinyl sounds. For example, cue up The Crusaders’ ‘Street Life’ [*Street Life*; MCA Records MCF 3008] and things just sashay along in a delightfully unconstrained, organic and insouciant way. There’s a great sense here of the instrumentalists intuiting everything that each other does so effortlessly. The groove flowed from the bass drum, snare and hi-hat with stabs of brass and Randy Crawford’s beautifully timed vocals, allied to super-fluid bass and rhythm guitars.

This phono stage somehow found the magic in all this, going right to the heart of the music’s phrasing. It didn’t come over as being overly forced or dramatic – it’s not a showy sounding performer – yet it still tracked every last accent in the playing, making for a beautifully coherent and immersive listen.

Impressive stuff, but arguably the finest facet of the Nu-Vista Vinyl’s repertoire is its superlative soundstaging. LPs done properly have a seeming ability to dissolve into the listening room and provide an invisible boundary between the

hi-fi and the original recording. This phono stage proved extremely adept at pulling off this trick, whether it was a rough-and-ready new wave screamer like The Jam’s ‘Down In A Tube Station At Midnight’ [*All Mod Cons*; Polydor PD 6188], or a beautifully recorded classical music standard such as ‘Morning’ from Grieg’s *Peer Gynt* Suite No 1 [Berlin Philharmonic/Karajan; DG 2530 243]. In both cases – and many others too – the Vinyl served up a cathedral-like soundstage, vast from left to right and front to back.

Obviously, the better the recording, the more it had to work with, but even the Jam track showed the four walls of the studio, and let you hear right into the vocal booth, or so it seemed. This product is up there with the best sounding conventional valve designs in this respect, yet seems to suffer none of their issues in others.

Compared to most standard solid-state phono preamps, it’s almost as if someone has pressed an invisible ‘stereo wide’ button. Things sound big, bold and utterly unconstrained – it’s as if the vinyl record has at last been allowed to breathe. ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

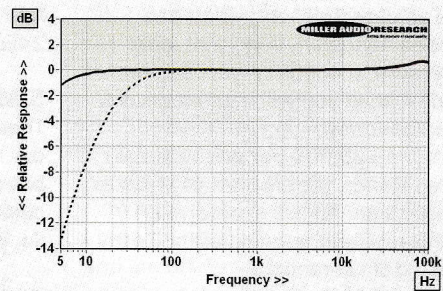
With its delightfully lilting, open and transparent sound, there’s little to criticise about Musical Fidelity’s Nu-Vista Vinyl phono stage. Styling is a matter of personal taste, and not everyone will like its supersized proportions, but there’s no denying its flexibility and consummate ease of use. Frankly, very few rivals, at any price, offer such a heady mixture of superb sonics and versatility.

Sound Quality: 88%

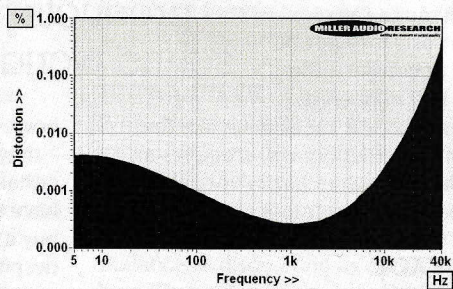


While only having a single ‘MM/MC’ switch, the Nu-Vista Vinyl is still more versatile than it might seem, for its +6dB option enables a total of four gain settings. MF’s specification of 2.5mV/250µV (MM/MC for 300mV) is non-standard but works out to a gain of +41.6dB for MM and +61.5dB for MC. In practice the MM gain is pretty much bang-on at +41.5dB (and +47.5dB with the +6dB option engaged), which equates to sensitivities of 8.41mV and 4.21mV, respectively, for 0dBV out. Both of these settings are better suited to higher output MMs like the Ortofon 2M Bronze and Black [*HFN Dec ’11*], but the generous 25.8dB overload margin means there’s still plenty of headroom to accommodate the hottest of LP cuts. The A-wtd S/N ratio is also generous at 85dB (5mV in/0dBV out) and more than sufficient to bury any electrical noise below the quietest vinyl ‘roar’.

The RIAA-equalised response is flat and very extended, reaching right out beyond the scope of vinyl replay to 100kHz (+0.7dB) and with a –3dB point of 3Hz in the sub-bass. Those with plenty of warped records and/or ported loudspeakers might care to entertain the IEC bass roll-off option which brings the –3dB point up to 20Hz [see Graph 1, below]. Distortion is vanishingly low too, at least through bass and midrange where figures as low as 0.00025% are achieved (at least 1000x lower than most pick-ups at 1kHz/5cm/sec), before increasing very steeply, but inaudibly, to 0.02%/20kHz [see Graph 2]. The MC gains do not quite meet MF’s spec. at +58.0dB and +64.0dB, respectively, but the headroom is still good at +26.3dB and the A-wtd S/N adequate at 74dB. The highest MC/+6dB gain option is still better suited to medium rather than low output MCs. PM



ABOVE: RIAA-corrected frequency response from an extended 5Hz-100kHz at 0dBV via MM input / balanced output (black = left; red = right channel)



ABOVE: Distortion versus extended frequency (5Hz-40kHz), MM input and 1V balanced output

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Input loading (MM/MC)	10ohm-47kohm/50pF-400pF
Input sensitivity (re. 0dBV balanced out)	8.41mV/4.21mV/1.26mV/624µV
Input overload (re. 1% THD)	165mV / 83mV / 24mV / 13mV
Max. output (re. 1% THD) / Impedance	19.4V / 45ohm (balanced)
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBV balanced out)	84.8dB/85.1dB/73.9dB/73.9dB
Frequency resp. (20Hz-20kHz/100kHz)	-0.05dB to +0.17dB / +0.72dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, re. 0dBV)	0.00025-0.020%
Power consumption	19W (2W standby)
Dimensions (WHD) / Weight	482x130x385mm / 14.5kg