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Musical Fidelity M1 ViNL phono preamp

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I guess reasonably unlikely that a middle-aged Hi-Fi enthusiast or audiophile has never had in his own system, although for a short time, a Musical Fidelity gear. In fact, this prestigious label has been in the High-End sector for thirty years, with a production that varies from *entry* levels segments, to high or top levels. Among them, the mythic A1 amplifier: a 20W class A integrated amp, made in 1984, on which grid, with a temperature of 50°- 60°C when switched on, you could even cook a steak. But the music…what delight! A dynamic, a detail, a lightness, an incomparable harmony for a ultra-minimal little box, but of real substance. Also today it is in great demand as a machine, emblem of what has always been the manufacturing philosophy of Musical Fidelity: to create devices with excellent performances but of moderate price.

I was excited in unpacking this umpteenth creature and finding out an envelope and a white cartooned card, like a ceremony invitation, where Antony Michaelson signs a nostalgic miniature manifesto reminding the *home made*, better the *kitchen made* dawn of the English company, and the global dimensions of the recent past and of the actuality, always aiming to offer sound solutions to music enthusiasts; this intimate note, written by who, like Michaelson, is also a committed musician, appears like a declaration of love. The good Antony has got also an excellent nose besides his innate ability of seconding the market trends that makes him design machines in step with the changeability of the mass listening trends. Is low power in A class required? High power? Digital? Analog? High resolution conversion? No problem! There is an offer for every season. Maybe the analog sector has been less handled - although on each MF

amplification you will find a good integrated phono board - with some sorties in it, like the M1 turntable realization; and, as invoked by the renovate attention towards the vinyl, there are also phono preamplifiers.

The **Musical Fidelity M1 ViNL**, is proudly introduced as a top quality phono stage with switchable RIAA/IEC that makes it one of the best Hi-Fi systems of every price range. An ambitious premise considering a list price around 800.00 Euro; ReMusic is here to verify.
Before starting I would like to stress one thing. My audio chain pivots around a transformer preamp, the **Audio Tekne TP8301 MKIII**: this setting is not usual and constitutes a different electric and sonic dimension, both for the transformers along the signal, and the cores' quality in superpermalloy. I have always made my tests with two systems: this one and a classic system, that is source-integrated amp-loudspeakers. Well, sometimes the differences has been abyssal. For reasons of time, there will be no parallel comparison here, but only the main system will work.

The ViNL, designed for MM and MC cartridges, has a weight of 3,5 kg with a simple chassis which dimensions are 22cm of width, 10cm of height and 30cm of depth. In the gray frontal fascia, besides the small on-off switch, are six buttons which offer a considerable versatility. In sequence, it is possible to operate on the MM selection, on the relative resistive and capacitive loading, on the MC and on the resistive loading, to end with the possibility of RIAA/IEC switching.
I cannot be exhaustive on this topic, since it is wide and complex. I just want to point out that the RIAA, acronym of *Recording Industry Association of America*, was born in 1952 to uniform the various equalization typologies applied to the analog recordings. Previously, every label used to work on its own equalization, forcing the Hi-Fi manufacturers to envisage as many curve varieties. There were more than 100 combinations: among the main Columbia78, Decca U.S., European, Victor78, BBC, NAB, Columbia LP, AES. The RIAA curve became standard when the stereo recording was introduced. In 1972, an alternative version was proposed by the *International Electrotechnical Commission*. It introduced a modification at 20 Hz of frequency in order to reduce the subsonic output of the pre phono which was conditioned by the LP surface deformations and by the *rumble* of the turntable. Such curve, mainly adopted in Europe, is of no valid attractive, since it put considerable alterations and phase errors in the low frequencies during the reproduction, in addiction to a minor *rumble* reduction. Basically the two curves are very similar, and the IEC recordings are very few.
For these reasons, although we appreciate the standard equipment of our phono, it would have been more involving, also for didactic and researching purposes and mostly for who has a wide collection of mono recordings, an offer of

more curves options. I have tried to “play” with the switch, but the differences between the RIAA and IEC position have turned out as quite imperceptible.

The MM input is provided with two options of resistive loading - 47 Kohm or 67 Kohm input impedance - plus eight capacitive-loading options: 50PF, 100PF, 150PF, 200PF, 250PF, 300PF, 350PF and 400PF. For the MC stage, there are ten resistive-loading options: 10R, 18R, 25R, 50R, 100R, 200R, 400R, 800R and 1600R, included 47 Kohm, suggested for Moving Coil cartridges with an output equal or superior to 1 mV. The input capacity is not adjustable.
With all these opportunities and the disarming operational facility to *tweak* the cartridge, also contextually to the music reproduction, we have already laid solid foundations to evaluate the machine. This is the main reason to be interested in purchasing this device. The fact that you can modify the setting while the record is spinning is like having a series of amplifications, all identical, but with different values, so to identify a *fine* regulation of the loadings in order to get the maximum expression of the interfacing and the more linear reading. I just want to add that, while the gain for the MM stage is 40dB, the classic one, for the MC is below 60dB. This will require a deep attention to the cartridge output level and, chiefly, to the input sensitivity of the other components of the audio chain, which has to be progressive *by step*, otherwise the risk is that the system won’t perform correctly, also with very expensive components. This is a universal rule, keep it always in mind when you assemble your hi-fi systems. Another thing are the balanced outputs against a circuit that is not balanced.

Inside, the power supply is underdimensioned and there is an invasive use of op amps. There is no transformer, no coils… nothing, only microchips of every shapes, luckily of low noise. Positive is also the brevity of the signal paths, which allows the M1 to reach a remarkable level of *signal to noise ratio*: 90dB for the MM and 88 for the MC.

Be indulgent if I insist on the importance of eliminating the noise floor of the electronics, mostly in the phono stages. The ground silence is fundamental: it is the life blood of the reproduced music. Imagine yourselves comfortable seated in the first rows of an Auditorium to listen to your favourite musician in a *live* event. You have paid one hundred euro for the ticket and all of a sudden at your left side seats an anxiety-inducing Jane Doe who texts to her boyfriends and at your right side a bad lot who bolts pop-corn and coca-cola: dear friends…you have wasted one hundred euro!

Beyond the metaphor, noise reduction is a golden point of this machine. What immediately follows is an innate aptitude in taking out the details, even the more hidden, and the micro nuances, at the ends of subsonic.

To have a confirmation listen to *Tudo bem!*, by Joe Pass, Pablo Records, where the most virtuoso of the jazz guitarists, fulminates on the road to Rio de Janeiro and to Carnavao, takes into the studio the great percussionist Paulinho da Costa and his band, to give us a fresh oasis of Brazil, proposing melodic standards of authors like Jobim, Deodato, Oscar Neves, Marcos Valle, Roberto Manescal and others, filtered by his worthy instrumental style. The smiling Paulinho hits everything around him, wood, metal, peels and other sounding objects that I have not been able to recognize but that I heard thanks to the Musical Fidelity, from which dense meshes sifter nothing escapes. The cues are clean and rapid, although with too much quick decay; more *sustain* would have been desirable. The huge quantity of details gives a good spatial presentation, with a wide scene although defective in depth.

This weakness affects the three-dimensional relation among the instruments, degrading the ambience and making the soundstage thin. It seems that the musicians are on the same row, also in the soloist interludes. Against a remarkable holographic reproduction, the listener is not stimulated in chasing, not only through the hearing, but with all the senses, the instrumental micro nuances through all the three dimensions of the room. For sure I have had the chance of listening rarely to such a cleanness and a high fidelity in phono stage of the same category of the M1 ViNL.

A partial overtaking of these primary sensations has happened when the cartridge has started to track the grooves of the Opera *Daphnis et Chloè*, by Maurice Ravel, EMI Testament, performed by Andrè Cluytens and the Orchestre de la Société des Concert du Conservatoire Paris. A magnificent, sumptuous performance, without sharpness or metallic sounds, full of airiness and extension, rich of detail, with a density of instruments positioned on different depth stages, with the pleasant result of a spatiality closer to the reality, and of a much more electrifying sound. In some passages I have felt little refinement and little weight of the bass lines, besides some shrill notes in the high pitches of the strings.

The M1 is not a real dynamic genius. To appreciate its qualities you have to pump up the volume. The designed based on the opamps, rather than on a pair of good transformers, fatally orients linearity and timbric, projecting it in a pseudo-analog dimension. I mean that the original recordings are polluted by a digital patina that strip them of naturalness and heat; in sum it deprives them of a part of the soul. The reproduction is aesthetically perfect, gorgeous, fluid, rich, reliable, appealing, but artificial, android, like Rachel in Bladerunner.

The performances of the MF phono stage are however surprising; I think that the designing efforts have reach the goal of expressing the highest level of realism for this price range. Notwithstanding objective limits to reveal all the potential held in the grooves of a black record, this small big pre phono, thanks to its versatility and its simplicity of use, shows to have all the stuff to take by hand also the most inveterate lover of the MP3, to accompany him, like a modern Virgil, in the supernatural world of the vinyl.

SCHEME SUMMARY

top score ✳✳✳✳✳ ReMusic Sparks

Timbric: ✳✳✳ | How much balanced and natural can be an analog recording reproduced by operational amplifiers? There is no blood in the veins.

Dynamic: ✳✳✳ | There is no slam. That emission of sound, that waves of notes that assails you also with one volume notch are missing.

Detail: ✳✳✳✳✳ | At a certain point you are urged to say "Stop! I have got it!"

Clearness: ✳✳✳✳ | Transparency and cleanness, on a bed of silence. More effective in the studio reproduction than in the live event.

Image: ✳✳✳1/2 | It's not all that difficult to understand that the dimensions are three.

Tonality: ✳✳✳ | No colouring. Ah! Ah! I was kidding.

Official technical specifications:

MM input
Frequency response: RIAA or RIAA/IEC (selectable) ±0.2dB
Input sensitivity: 3mV in for 300mV out (at 1 kHz)
Input impedance: 47KΩ or 68KΩ selectable
Input capacitance: 50-400pF selectable
THD: at 1 kHz <0.01%
Overload margin: 31dB
Signal to noise ratio: >90dB "A"-wtd.

MC input
Frequency response RIAA or RIAA/IEC (selectable) ±0.2dB
Input sensitivity 500µV in for 300mV out (at 1 kHz)
Input impedance 10Ω to 47KΩ selectable
Input capacitance 470pF fixed
THD at 1 kHz <0.01%
Overload margin 31dB
Signal to noise ratio >88dB "A"-wtd.

Line level outputs
1 pair RCA (phono) left and right 300mV nom 10V max
1 pair XLR (balanced) left and right 600mV nom 20V max

Trigger control
Input 3.5mm (⅛") mono jack ±4.5 to ±15V DC
Output 3.5mm (⅛") mono jack +12V DC

Power requirement
Mains voltages 80-250V AC 50/60Hz universal power supply
Consumption 10 Watts maximum
<0.5W in standby (orange LED on)

Weight
Unit only, unboxed 3.5 kg (7¾ lbs)
In shipping carton 4.0 kg (8⅞ lbs) including accessories

Dimensions
220 mm (8⅔") Wide
100 mm (4") High, including feet
300 mm (12") Deep (front to back) including terminals

Standard accessories
IEC moulded mains lead 10-Amp type

Official current price in Italy: 876.00 EUR