

PS Audio Stellar Phono

Forty-five years after the launch of its inaugural phono preamp, PS Audio launches another, this time in Stellar guise, and with the emphasis on flexibility with convenience
 Review **Jonathan Gorse & Lab: Paul Miller**

Large by phono preamp standards, PS Audio's Stellar Phono is built into the same full-width silver grey or black chassis as its partners in the new Stellar range [HFN Jan '20]. Nevertheless, it's also considerably heavier at a full 10kg because the casework here is steel, not alloy, perhaps in an effort to improve screening. Having asked PS Audio, it seems likely that all Stellars will move from alloy to steel enclosures in time.

According to the company, the Stellar range has been designed to provide a taste of the 'high end' without the price tags associated with its more costly offerings. Nevertheless, as this is the only phono stage that PS Audio offers, it is clearly intended for use with both its flagship and Stellar components.

Regardless of casework, the £2500 Stellar Phono with its separate MM and MC inputs and versatile loading and gain options is geared less towards the casual vinyl listener who is merely dabbling because vinyl is hip and cool again. This product is for those who are heavily committed to the black stuff, whose life has been spent collecting it, loving it, indexing it and playing it. So if that sounds like you, but neither are you willing to forgo flexibility, then the Stellar Phono may well tick all your boxes.

FUN ON THE FLY

Across the front of the two-piece case runs a recessed groove that widens as it nears the right of the fascia to house a panel populated with LEDs. These indicate a variety of parameters, all user-configurable, with the selections displayed by LEDs located beside four white legends that cover the basics: Mute, Input, Gain and Loading [pictured, p57]. No physical controls are to be found on the fascia apart from the power/standby switch, which

RIGHT: Entirely discrete (FET-based) active stages include a +26dB MC headamp [top left] and LEDs used to bias the constant-current sources. The RIAA eq is fully balanced [centre] and fed from a linear PSU [lower right]

illuminates in blue with the PS Audio logo when the Stellar Phono is powered up.

Connectivity is comprehensive, the rear panel offering two sets of L/R outputs – one balanced via XLR sockets, and a second on conventional gold-plated RCA phonos. The inputs, meanwhile, comprise two sets of L/R phono sockets, one each for MM and MC cartridges. As for the phono stage parameters, these are all selectable via the remote control and, for the audiophile, this is where the fun really starts.

To begin with, while MM cartridges are accommodated at the standard 47kohm setting, the Stellar Phono also allows the user to change MC cartridge loading between 47, 60, 100 and 200ohm. Then there are six gain settings, designed to suit pick-ups from low-output MCs to high output MMs [see PM's Lab Report, p59]. For MM, settings of +44/50/56dB are provided while +60/66/72dB options are available for MC. Given that a change in cartridge loading often produces subtle changes in sound, the benefit of remote control is that you can make adjustments on the fly while

listening to music from the hot seat. What's more, the remote handset also permits switching between the MM and MC inputs. So if you're a vinylista with two decks, or have one deck with two arms, you can switch between them in real time.

TIME TO KILL

The final, and largest, button on the remote handset is marked 'Mute' which, unsurprisingly, kills the sound when pressed. This proves useful when cueing tracks mid-disc, as your ears won't be assaulted with a sudden and unwanted blast of sound should you lower the pick-up too far along the groove from the beginning of a piece of music. Or accidentally drop it with a thump...

In addition to the standard settings, there is a facility on the rear of the Stellar Phono to dial-up a custom MC load value between 1-1000ohm via two small, roughly calibrated trim pots (for left and right channels). While this extra flexibility is most welcome, it is difficult to reach the trim pots when the unit is sited in



a component rack. Also, to balance the loading on each channel accurately, one would need to employ a multimeter on the MC inputs. Perhaps PS Audio felt that rotaries on the unit's front would detract from the minimalist design aesthetic.

The turntable used for the review was a Michell GyroDec with Gyropower QC supply and SME Series IV tonearm. This was equipped in turn with a selection of cartridges, including an Audio-Technica AT-OC9 ML/II and EAT Jo N°5 [HFN Dec '18] – both MCs – and the Pro-Ject Pick-it S2 MM [HFN Aug '19]. The rest of the system comprised Naim NAC82/HiCap/NAP250 amplification driving a pair of ATC SCM40 Series II loudspeakers.

COMING CLEAN

The PS Audio Stellar Phono is a supremely transparent performer with a cool tonal balance. Frankly, the gains in clarity and detail compared with music heard via my NAC82 preamp's phono stage were little short of startling. In some ways the Stellar Phono was reminiscent of digital sources in its presentation, sounding unswervingly

clean and precise with little of the euphonic warmth that some phono stages are seemingly engineered to create.

With the AT-OC9 ML/II loaded at 100ohm, the Stellar Phono ensured the explosive opening of 'Kiss This Thing Goodbye' from Del Amitri's 1989 album *Waking Hours* [A&M Records, AMA9006]

'The explosive opening to the song rocked the room'

rocked the room, the band enjoying a presence that was palpable. Iain Harvie's stabbing interjections on his Les Paul guitar had real slam while even the piano, and the mandolin that picks its way above the heavy shuffling beat, enjoyed a precision and articulation I had not experienced before. As the song motored to its climax, countless sounds and textures buried deep in the dense mix were revealed to my ears for the first time.

When time came to experiment with the MC loading, switching to 60ohm thickened the sound of vocals and guitars at the expense of detail and the slightly stark top-end. The higher 200ohm setting

ABOVE: Sharing the same two-piece case as the other 'Stellars' the Phono is functionally stylish but also surprisingly heavy. LEDs indicate MM/MC, gain and loading with a red LED for the mute function (useful when cueing)

resulted in a sound similar to that at 100ohm albeit with a slightly airy and insubstantial quality, which reduced the scale of piano. Clearly the 100ohm loading was the sweetspot for my A-T.

GOING BALLISTIC

Despite the EAT Jo N°5's recommended loading of >20ohm the lowest 60ohm option afforded by the Stellar Phono served it just fine. On the track 'Telegraph Road' from Dire Straits' *Love Over Gold* [Vertigo 109159] the leading edges of plucked guitars, snare rim shots and piano were conveyed with astonishing speed and dexterity, particularly when it came to the rocking finale – so much so that I couldn't resist gunning my system to approach live levels! The Stellar Phono responded with ballistic speed, delivering all the instruments' transient attack. It was

this, along with its ability to retrieve exquisite levels of detail in the busiest of mixes that were the Stellar Phono's key strengths – seemingly irrespective of the

cartridge used or music played. If there was a downside it was that, despite its inherently low noise floor, the Stellar Phono does not disguise vinyl in poor condition. As a result, surface noise can be a little more apparent.

All of this comes to nought if a component cannot bind the various musical strands together to immerse the listener in the mood of a song. Chris Rea's *Road To Hell* [WEA WX317] opens with the singer pondering life while stuck in traffic and the sound of the rain and windscreen-wiper effects were so realistic that I too began to feel damp and despondent. But ↪



VINYL HERITAGE

Boulder Colorado nestles in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains, albeit at over 5000ft elevation, and is home to

PS Audio among other high-end audio brands. In 1975 when flares were cool, ELO ruled the airwaves and ABBA were recording 'Dancing Queen', the firm created its first product – a phono preamplifier [pictured above]. PS Audio (named after its founders Paul McGowan and Stan Warren) sold its phono preamp direct for \$59.95 and its success led to the company expanding into preamplifiers which it referred to as 'Linear Control Centres' and, by the late 1970s, into power amplifiers too. PS Audio claims to have been the first US company to introduce a dedicated line of external PSUs to power its preamps, much as Naim was doing in the UK. Today, and despite creating a stir with its digital offerings, PS Audio is arguably still best known for its range of AC mains regenerators from the flagship DirectStream Power Plant P20 with its 13 outlets [HFN Apr '19] to the Stellar PP3 [HFN Jan '20]. The phono preamp reviewed here is part of that same, comprehensive Stellar range and, some 44 years after the brand burst onto the scene, is touted to be the best it can make at any price.

PHONO PREAMPLIFIER



ABOVE: Separate MM and MC inputs will support two tonearms simultaneously while the MC input also includes continuously variable loading (1ohm-1kohm). RIAA eq'd outputs are offered on RCAs and balanced XLRs

there were thrills in store as the drums powered in to propel the music along with real snap, aided by a clear and highly delineated bass guitar. The character of Rea's bourbon-drizzled voice was also wonderfully conveyed, which only reinforced how great audio brings the music one loves to life.

TASTE OF HEAVEN

Vivaldi's 'Four Seasons' with the Academy of Ancient Music under Christopher Hogwood [L'Oiseau-Lyre 410 126-1] is an absolutely searing performance on authentic instruments. Stunningly recorded, it captures world class players at the peak of their powers. Right from the start, subtle ambient cues were laid bare – the creak of chairs, the sense of space in the Kingsway Hall – all creating a real sense of being in a live performance setting.

As the Academy began to play, not only was the rich tonal palette of this magnificent orchestra conveyed with remarkable clarity but there was a feeling of boundless extension at both ends of the frequency spectrum – without a

hint of harshness to be heard. Cellos enjoyed a wonderful woody warmth while violins and violas spiralled ever upwards in heavenly interplay. What's more, all of the instruments were positioned across a soundstage

LEFT: Plastic remote offers armchair control over MM/MC selection, six levels of gain, five loads (inc. variable) and muting



that extended far beyond the confines of my ATC loudspeakers. The PS Audio Stellar didn't miss a single inflexion in the playing or nuance in the interpretation. Quite simply, it sounded sublime, and the experience of hearing it so beautifully reproduced will stay with me long after the Stellar Phono has been returned.

The highly affordable Pro-Ject Pick-it S2 cartridge struggled to match the purity of either of the two moving-coils I had to hand, particularly as its top-end was simply less open and extended. Yet the essential musical message and emotion of the 'Four Seasons' performance remained intact and I was impressed not only by the detail on offer but by the fact that the stereo placement and imaging of instruments remained rock solid.

The Stellar Phono is a sizeable investment for sure. But when you consider that its flexibility will ensure any cartridges you might purchase in the future can be accommodated and optimised with ease, the outlay begins to look very reasonable. By way of 'future-proofing' a lifetime of top-flight musical pleasure, the PS Audio Stellar Phono is a winner. ⬇

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

PS Audio's Stellar Phono is just the ticket if information retrieval, speed and transparency are your priorities. It's not always kind to surface noise, but with a first-rate turntable can still bring you closer than most of its contemporaries to the thrill of a live performance. Indeed, it's grist to the mill for those who maintain that 40 years of 'digital' still falls short of a diamond dancing through a spiral groove of the black stuff.

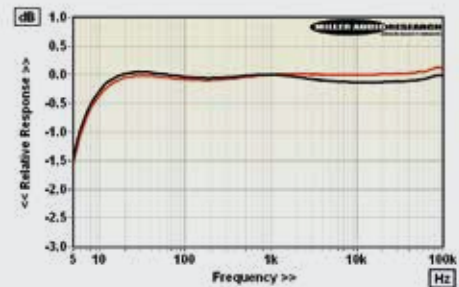
Sound Quality: 87%



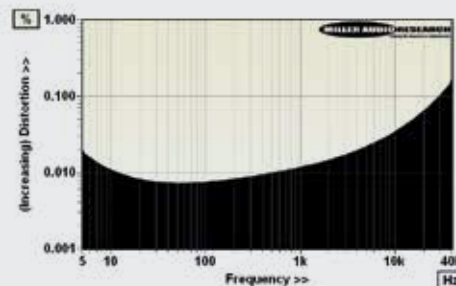
PS AUDIO STELLAR PHONO

Phono stages with multiple gain and/or loading options often trade versatility for ease-of-use, employing fiddly DIP switches to select between the various options. Not so here – full remote control over MM and MC gain and loading (ok – the variable MC loading is achieved via two analogue pots) is achievable via remote making 'tuning-on-the-fly' so much easier. PS Audio claims +44dB, +50dB and 56dB gain for its MM input and +60dB, +66dB and +72dB for MC, values that are closely matched on test at +43.9dB, +49.3dB and +54.8dB for MM and +59.9dB, +65.4dB and +70.9dB, respectively, for MC (all single-ended in/balanced out). These are well chosen steps, the lowest MM gain offering a 6.4mV sensitivity with the highest MC gain representing 0.29mV (286µV). Moreover, each step is engineered with a generous +25dB input overload margin, sufficient to accommodate the 'hottest' +18dB groove modulation (re. 11.2µm/300Hz), of 166mV, 86mV and 40mV (MM), and 27mV, 14mV and 6.5mV (MC), respectively.

The active/passive RIAA equalisation is also very flat and extended out to 100kHz, with two broad but mild -0.1dB dips either side of 1kHz and a subsonic filter amounting to -6dB/2Hz [black trace, Graph 1]. The RIAA-eq'd distortion [see Graph 2] is not vanishingly low, but with a minimum of 0.0055%/40Hz and a maximum of just 0.071%/20kHz (re. 0dBV) it is still a couple of orders of magnitude lower than the best MM/MCs. Noise is also just below the threshold of most vinyl systems, the 76-80dB A-wtd S/N ratio (MM/MC) more than adequate for the task. The 26V maximum (balanced) output is arguably overkill, but if the Stellar Phono had a volume control it could surely drive any partnering power amplifier directly... PM



ABOVE: RIAA-corrected frequency response over an extended 5Hz-100kHz at 0dBV via MM



ABOVE: Distortion extended frequency (5Hz-40kHz) via MM input re. 0dBV (1Vrms) output

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Input loading (MM/MC)	47kohm / 60ohm-1kohm
Input sensitivity (re. 0dBV)	6.4mV-286µV
Input overload (re. 1% THD)	166mV/86/40/27/14/6.5mV
Max. output (re. 1% THD) / Impedance	26.0V / 140-145ohm
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBV)	80.1dB / 76.0dB
Frequency resp. (20Hz-20kHz/100kHz)	-0.05dB to +0.0dB / +0.11dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, re. 0dBV)	0.0055-0.071%
Power consumption	28W (27W standby)
Dimensions (WHD) / Weight	430x83x330mm / 10kg