



# PS Audio Stellar phono stage

THE £2500 PHONO PREAMPLIFIER FROM PS AUDIO'S STELLAR RANGE SEEMS TO HAVE DIVIDED OPINION: KEVIN FISKE DECIDED TO PUT ASIDE THE ARGUMENTS, AND TAKE A LISTEN FOR HIMSELF

**Usually there's some kind of consensus of opinion about a product, but not so with PS Audio's Stellar phono stage: some have suggested it offers a level of performance way beyond its price, while other reviews have been – well, less than stellar. With my curiosity piqued, I asked PS Audio's UK distributor whether HIFICRITIC might be loaned an example to try.**

The Stellar is slim (just 8 cm thick), 43 cm wide and 33 cm deep, and while such dimensions might lead to expectations of light weight, it actually weighs a surprisingly hefty 11.4 kg. Unscrewing and lifting the lid reveals that most of that mass is in the press-formed steel case and the unit's toroidal transformer: the rest of the circuitry is on a single board, spanning the width of the case and half the depth. This accommodates the power supply, remote control logic, RIAA equalisation and gain stages – configured exclusively with discrete components apart from the control section. As is now typical for so many audio contemporary designs, much use is made of surface mounted devices.

Stellar designer Darren Myers – his name is screen-printed on the circuit board – says this creation is an expression of his personal sonic aesthetic. He confesses to be picky about how feedback is applied, liking amplifiers that have a consistent amount of loop gain vs. frequency, rather than feedback varying with frequency. This approach essentially ruled out hybrid or active RIAA equalisation, but then Myers prefers the sound of well-executed passive EQ.

His proprietary design minimises complex distortion and allows wide bandwidth without the use of high amounts of global feedback. The three gain stages are MOSFET and JFET-based, biased in pure class A. It is DC coupled from input to output and pulls a constant 26 Watts from the wall. The Stellar's claimed THD of 0.5V @ 1kHz < 0.01% increases to 1% @ 24V RMS. Output overload margin at 1kHz is > 22 dB.

Once the master power switch at the rear is toggled on, the Stellar is controlled entirely via its remote handset. The largest button on the handset is the mute. A smaller button toggles gain in six steps between 44 and 72dB. Others toggle between moving magnet and moving coil inputs, and 60,100, 200, 47k Ohm and custom loading, more of which in a moment.

On the rear of the Stellar, to the right as viewed from the front, is an IEC mains socket and 12V trigger in/out, while the rest of the back panel is occupied by balanced and single-ended signal outputs, plus separate moving magnet and moving coil single-ended inputs and a grounding post. Between the moving coil inputs are a pair of controls adjusting custom loading over a range of one to 1,000 Ohms. LEDs on the front of the Stellar indicate mute and the selected combination of input, gain and loading.

Our review sample arrived well run-in. We tried the Stellar with an Audio Note IO II (moving coil) cartridge, an Audio Technica 150 MLX (moving magnet), and Soundsmith Paua II (fixed coil).

The arm and turntable combination used was my own Audio Note Arm Three/TT Three. The listening process began with the Audio Note cartridge for no other reason than that it was already fitted and aligned. We used an Audio Note S8 step up transformer between the cartridge and the moving magnet inputs of the Stellar, lifting the IO II's native output voltage of 0.05mV to a more suitable 4mV. Later, changing to the Audio Technica, we were able to put the step-up transformer to one side and just use the Stellar's moving magnet input.