



The vinyl countdown

Can this bold phono stage challenge Cyrus' Phono Signature for the best sound at the price? **Ed Selley** takes it for a spin to find out

Musical Fidelity has undergone a reinvigoration since the brand's move to Austrian ownership last year, and we've seen several HFC badge-winning components during this time. The M6 Vinyl, however, was originally designed prior to the company's takeover and the multi-input phono stage can accommodate a wide range of both moving-magnet and moving-coil cartridges.

The specification is extremely comprehensive – even judged by the standards of similar designs at the price (see How It Compares) – and the phono stage circuitry is based around Musical Fidelity's own RIAA correction. The circuit is balanced and

can be output over either RCA or XLR connections. This is partnered with seven dedicated power supply circuits, each tailored to cater for specific parts of the phono stage's functionality while star grounding is employed to keep unwanted noise to an absolute minimum.

The M6 Vinyl has three inputs selectable from the front panel where MM/MC loading settings can be configured and stored for each. Interestingly, adjustments can be made to capacitance for moving-magnet cartridges while input resistance can be altered on moving-coils – but not capacitance. The gain for both settings is fixed except for a +6dB boost selectable via the front

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Musical Fidelity M6 Vinyl
ORIGIN
Austria
TYPE
MM/MC phono stage
WEIGHT
5.5kg
DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
440 x 100 x 385mm
FEATURES
• 3x MM/MC configurable inputs
• Adjustment for capacitance (MM) and resistance (MC)
• RCA and XLR outputs
DISTRIBUTOR
Henley Audio Ltd.
TELEPHONE
01235 511166
WEBSITE
henleyaudio.com

panel should you find yourself running out of headroom on your main amplifier. Any adjustment 'on the fly' is briefly muted. A selectable mute button and subsonic filter – to reduce the effect of warped LPs and turntable rumble – are also included.

If you are a tweaker with multiple cartridges or turntables this is a nicely thought-out phono stage, but perhaps not a perfect one. The three inputs share a common grounding post, which isn't as good as having dedicated posts for each. Additionally, the lack of adjustable gain means that high-output moving-coil cartridges aren't as well served as they could be, not sitting truly comfortably at either gain setting. The Musical Fidelity is also a touch on the large side for a phono stage and the full-width chassis requires a fair amount of rack space. Like its stablemates it's well made and looks handsome.

Sound quality

Connected to a Naim Supernait 2 integrated amplifier and Neat Momentum 4i floorstanding loudspeakers and taking a feed from a Michell GyroDec turntable fitted with SME M2-9 tonearm, the M6 Vinyl does enough right from the off to make it worthwhile making room for it in your setup. For starters, this is an impressively quiet phono stage and in normal use (without the 6dB

gain boost selected), there's no appreciable noise during idle.

Starting with the wonderfully talented Nagaoka MP-200 moving-magnet cartridge (HFC 434), the M6 Vinyl treads an interesting line between accuracy and imparting a little character of its own. Nick Drake's *Five Leaves Left* feels tonally accurate and the judgement of scale also comes across as entirely correct. The opening track of the flip-side, *Cello Song* is delivered with a heady combination of tonal richness and weight that draws you into the performance. The balance between Drake, his guitar and the cello is effortlessly natural and rewards all of

CONNECTIONS



- 1 Grounding post
- 2 3x stereo analogue RCA inputs
- 3 Stereo analogue RCA output
- 4 Stereo analogue XLR output

HOW IT COMPARES

If you are going to be using many different cartridges at once, the £1,495 Cyrus Phono Signature (HFC 408) still has the edge as it has four inputs (each with their own ground connection), more flexible setup and is still one of the quietest phono stages I've ever used. Both sound fabulous, but the M6 Vinyl is richer, more fun and much more forgiving of less than perfect recordings, although it can't match the incredible detail retrieval of the Cyrus. As a piece of reviewing hardware and a reference tool, the Cyrus is still the pick of the bunch, but for the simple enjoyment of music the Musical Fidelity often has the edge.

the individual elements the attention they need without short changing any of them in the process.

Also of note is the bass response and switching to the demented *Devil In Sports Casual* by Midfield General, the effect is startlingly good. All too often the hefty electronic synth line that underpins the track can overpower everything else, but here it is perfectly judged, felt as much as heard but kept under exceptional control with everything sounding as funky as it should.

This basic balance is not affected by the move to moving coil. The

It treads a fine line between accuracy and adding a little character of its own

sublimely talented Goldring Ethos cartridge (HFC 449) is given the gain it needs to show its own fabulously emotive qualities. The combination of it and the M6 Vinyl with Marina's *Soft To Be Strong* is a genuine hairs on the back of the neck moment. While it might be fair to argue that this is being achieved by a fractional lift to the upper midrange, I'm pretty certain that most listeners simply won't care. Where the M6 Vinyl consistently excels is this emotional hook. It's very rare to simply be a spectator to what it does because it consistently draws you into what is happening in the music. The reasonable 0.5mV output of the Goldring certainly helps here, but switching to the Rega Apheta 2 (HFC 425) with its 0.3mV output requires a +6dB gain boost, which impinges on the dynamic delivery slightly.

This phono stage knows how to have fun, though, and the wonderful *Rose Rouge* by St Germain illustrates this to brilliant effect with a head

nodding assurance as each bass note is delivered with commendable depth and speed. Complementing this are upper registers that deliver the rasping saxophone and double bass with effortless realism. The M6 Vinyl never forces the speed of anything you give it, but the same fundamental agility is present regardless of the tempo of the music being played.

Finally, the way that it handles less than stellar pressings is genuinely impressive. With *Resistance Is Futile* by Manic Street Preachers, the fabulous midrange and sweet and controlled top end combine to allow you to enjoy what is a very fine body of music, without being overly concerned by the slightly hard and thin presentation that normally results from this poor pressing.

Conclusion

The M6 Vinyl is a seriously talented arrival at this price point. We can argue as to whether it's the ultimate reference tool for the money, but any doubts over specific features can't ignore the sheer joy that it delivers to vinyl replay. If you're in the market for a flexible phono stage that will do justice to your vinyl hardware and a wide selection of music, look no further; this one fits the bill •

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Lively, rich and involving sound; specification; build
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Cartridge output needs careful consideration; increased noise in higher gain setting
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★
FEATURES ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** A flexible phono stage with simply fantastic sound

OVERALL

