

Two Great Phonostage Bargains

MUSICAL SURROUNDINGS PHONOMENA NOVA AND PARASOUND ZPHONO

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What do you say about a product to which you've already given a Golden Ear award when it is improved and its price is dropped? Musical Surroundings' original AC-powered Phomena cost \$600. Its author, the talented Michael Yee, later designed the BPS outboard battery power supply, also \$600, to free the audio circuitry from the vagaries of AC. The new Phomena Nova is a single-chassis Phomena that incorporates the BPS while reducing the price to \$999. An internal relay automatically disconnects AC once the battery is charged and reconnects it for recharging (a full charge lasts over three hours), but the unit can also be manually switched, and will even operate during recharging.

Despite its relatively low price, the wholly American-made Phomena Nova eschews op-amps in favor of all-discrete circuitry. According to Musical Surroundings' president Garth Leerer, the Nova is more than just a Phomena with a BPS inside; much of its circuit is new, derived directly from Yee's \$2800 SuperNova.

Ever since I reviewed the Phomena five years ago (Issue 134), it has been my reference owing to outstanding performance, with gain and loading options that allow for optimal matching to any pickup. Its sonic personality consists in a notable lack of same: a neutrality and freedom from coloration that I still judge state of the art. Some reviewers find it a bit colorless—an odd criticism, in my view—and lacking in really wide dynamics, but I prefer to take its Apollonian restraint and objectivity on their own terms, evidence of fidelity to the source, rather than to some imposed aesthetics of “good” sound.

Direct A/B comparisons with the original Phomena yielded the following impressions. The Nova exposes a slight roughness in the original and exhibits greater separation of lines and clarification of textures. When the going gets really tough in big, thickly scored, dynamic material, the newer model also appears less stressed, images more confidently, and reproduces instruments with a greater sense of air and space around them. In Cisco's forthcoming vinyl reissue of Bernstein's famous 1959

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recording of the Shostakovich Fifth—the one the composer himself preferred above all others—when the strings get really intense during the interlude in the last movement, they are a little less harsh, a little smoother. I also hear greater transparency and more exciting dynamics. Importantly, the Nova retains the original's neutral tonal balance but with a greater impression of liveliness. Mind you, highlighting any of these differences elevates them to greater importance than they show, even in direct A/B comparisons; they are most evident with demanding sources.

What's better than the Nova? If I felt like dropping four grand, I'd buy Jim White's magnificent Aesthetix Rhea [RHP's reference] in a heartbeat, and for thirty times the Nova's \$999 you can get the superb Boulder phonostage. In both instances you will get somewhat better reproduction. Yet this Nova remains, without apology or serious qualification, my new (affordable) reference—and very satisfyingly so.

Complaints? Only one: that large status-light. When green (battery mode), it's tolerable, but when red (AC) or, worse, blinking red (charging), it conjures up images of W.C. Fields's bulbous whiskey-soaked nose. Garth and Mike...is it too late to change this?

Upon spying Parasound's \$150 Zphono preamplifier on my shelf, an audiophile friend said, "Paul, if the thing turns on when you flip the switch and makes sounds when you cue an LP, what is there to complain about?" The Zphono is excellently built—as always *chez* Parasound—with mm/mc switching (mc-loading fixed at 100 ohms, an excellent compromise value), AC voltage selection, and an AC polarity switch to address potential hum—all, as noted, for \$150. As my buddy suggests, if it makes a sound, criticism seems positively churlish. Happily, it makes very nice sounds. My all-purpose demonstration disc, Bernstein's *Carmen*, was rendered with a large, well-dimensioned soundstage, with excellent front-to-back layering, the passage with brass against chorus presented with a convincing sense of space around instruments and singers. There is a wonderful bloom about the entire presentation, with remarkably good neutrality, dynamic range, and detail. Another difficult disc is the opening of the Mehta *Zarathustra* [London], where the Zphono managed to do a fine job of holding onto the 32Hz pedal point throughout the orchestral crescendos; I've heard more expensive units lose the organ under the orchestra. To be sure, the presentation is a little veiled, a little lacking in ultimate detail and definition; densely scored passages thicken a bit and can become slightly opaque; the

phonostage can sometimes seem "slow" (e.g., the *Sheffield Drum Record*); and there is a vague sense of things being held somewhat at arm's length. But shortcomings such as these are subtractive, as opposed to additive, and always the preferable compromise when designing for a price. After a few minutes of listening, you become used to its attractive sound and engrossed in the music.

With no experience of comparably priced phono preamps, I can't tell you how the Parasound compares to units by NAD, Pro-Ject, and others. Sonically I prefer the phonostage built into the McIntosh C46 preamplifier (more defined and transparent, also quieter). My favorite phono preamp costing less than the Nova is Graham Slee's Gram Amp 2SE: smoother, richer, quieter than the Zphono, but lacking mc capability (ditto the C46) and costing \$400. However, let's keep our eye on the ball: The Zphono costs \$150, is superbly built, and performs very well. You really *can't* complain. **TAS**

Specs & Pricing

MUSICAL SURROUNDINGS

PHONOMENA NOVA

Type: Class A dual-mono phonostage

Gain: 40–60dB, adjustable in 16 steps

Loading: 30 ohms to 100kOhms, adjustable in 128 steps

Dimensions: 10.125" x 10.125" x 3"

Weight: Five lbs.

Price: \$999

PARASOUND ZPHONO

Type: Op-amp-based phonostage

Gain: Adjustable for mc or mm

Loading: 100 ohms (mc), 47kOhms (mm)

Dimensions: 9.5" x 2" x 10"

Weight: Four lbs.

Price: \$150

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ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

SME Model 30 turntable; Sumiko

Celebration and Dynavector

17D II cartridges; Phonomena

phonostage; Sony XA777ES

SACD player, McIntosh MDA1000

D/A converter, MCD 1000

transport, and 861 universal

player; Pathos Classic One

integrated amp; Quad 99 and

303 preamps; McIntosh MC-275

Series IV amplifier; Kimber Select

and 8VS interconnects and

speaker cable

