

## Review of MFA Reference MM Phono Amplifier By David King

I should declare from the outset that I am a fan of Music First Audio hi fi equipment and so I viewed the prospect of trying out the new Reference MM Phono Amplifier with great anticipation. Whilst the MFA is described a Moving Magnet Phono Amplifier it is not really intended for use with moving magnet cartridges. The MM simply refers to the fact that it will accept the voltages (c.5mv) normally associated with moving magnet cartridges. In reality its partners are more likely to be a low output moving coil cartridge and high quality Step Up Transformer (SUT).

For this review I used it with a Denon DL-S1 MC cartridge (output 0.15mv) and Music First Classic SUT.

The recordings I selected were:

1. Poulenc - Gloria / French National Radio Orchestra & Chorus / Georges Pretre on HMV 1961
2. Holst, Handel & Bach / Cleveland Symphonic Winds / Frederick Fennel / Telarc 1978
3. My Fair Lady / Film Soundtrack Recording / CBS 1964
4. Gerry Mulligan Meets Scott Hamilton / Mobile Fidelity Soundlab 1986

There was no particular rationale for their selection apart from the fact that they were readily to hand and with the exception of the MOFI were all normal commercial recordings. I feel you sometimes learn more about the performance of equipment when playing commercial recordings that are less than perfect particularly in the way that it handles the imperfections, than you do by playing audiophile recordings of consistently high quality. I like to listen at concert hall levels in my music room so with vinyl replay low intrinsic circuit noise is essential. The first thing that was apparent with the MFA was that it was vanishingly quiet in use leaving the music to shine through unimpeded.

I was struck by the fact that the sound had a remarkable tonal accuracy, transparency and naturalness. Instruments existed in a real acoustic which gave a three dimensional effect to the sound. It opened up performances making them thoroughly involving. Dynamic contrasts were most impressive with the MFA able to move from the merest whisper of sound to huge crescendos of orchestra and chorus with total control. I found myself being pulled into the music and had to consciously force myself to step back in order to analyse what I was hearing.

The Telarc recording can sound a bit sharp and edgy on some systems. With the MFA woodwinds were smooth and silky, trombones and tubas had genuine rasp, presence and weight, likewise trumpets had precision and power. Cymbals shimmered. The soundstage was very large with real width depth and height. It was as impressive in very soft passages of music as it was when playing very loudly which is not always the case. On the Poulenc Gloria the choral sound was beautifully sweet and airy and the MFA showed a remarkable ability to cut through the densest of musical textures. Given the long reverberation of the church of St Etienne du Mont, Paris in which it was recorded this was no mean achievement. Rosanna Carteri's solo parts were beautifully presented.

The MFA was very strong in the midrange presence region giving crystal clarity and transparency without ever becoming hard or strident. This is a very old recording with some surface noise and some obvious tape editing but the MFA seemed be able to deal with the imperfections and set them aside. The MOFI recording sounded very pleasing and beautiful. The saxophones of Gerry Mulligan and Scott Hamilton had a real swing and presence and I felt that I could reach out and touch the players. Previously this record could sound a little harsh and the saxophones a bit too woody and stark. Not here. On the MFA they were presented in a highly detailed and smooth fashion. The My Fair Lady soundtrack recording also was handled impressively.

**The original recording is not as good as some and is showing its age now. Once again as with the Poulenc the MFA managed to overcome the obvious defects and somehow convey the essence of the music. All in all I found the MFA Reference MM Phono Stage a sonic gem and a complete delight. At nearly £10k it is expensive but if your pockets are deep enough and you have a good enough system in which to accommodate it this unit will give many hours of listening pleasure. It could be the last phono stage you will ever buy.**