

And Steven...?

At this point, we leave our comfort zone, the corner of the big, heavy classic-style hi-fi components and play unabashedly with small, lightweight modern devices - including digital technology

Here's the story: Manunta's distributor Carsten Hicking, deeply rooted in the modernity of music playback in the form of streamers, D/A converters and other modern devil stuff, called and said that Marco Manunta had built an obviously quite interesting phono stage. Lots of functionality and sound in compact dimensions for 1.545€ - I am clearly interested in something like that. Now, of course, the device works with all sorts of gear partners without any problems, a look at the other equipment program of the Italians promoted so exciting toys, that I had four cute things in neatly thick aluminum sheet wallet with 20 centimeters edge length in front of me. In the first line I was actually interested in the state-of-the-art (switching) power amplifier "Crosby" (1,065€), which despite its modest dimensions is capable of mobilizing three-digit continuous power per channel. Direct connection to the phono preamp "Nash" does not work because it does not have a volume control. Okay, then we add the D/A converter "Young MkIII" (1.190€), which firstly has a high-level input for connecting an external analogue source and the much-needed volume control. Still the fourth device out of the line, the additional power supply - no, not "Stills", but "Van Der Graaf MkII" for 775€, with which up to four devices from the series can be supplied with the finest power. Thus, the turret adds (yes, you can operate the devices one on top the other, but next to each other is the better solution) but then to an investment of four and a half large notes on, but there is no doubt also offered a lot. Let's first get in touch, because it's also our "core business", with the phono preamplifier "Nash". Nicely made, dark plexiglass front, a thick slip-on aluminum profile ensures the structural integrity of the case. The front is adorned with an inconspicuous button on the left, a knob on the right and a two-line light blue vacuum fluorescence display. Not exactly the best for older people to look at from distance, but in principle easy to read. The device wants to be supplied with a voltage of 15 volts. This comes either from the standard plug-in power supply or from the "Van der Graaf MK II" generator, which probably creates higher-quality operating conditions than the wall wart.

The device is both MM- and MC-compatible, on the tightly packed back there's a pair cinch sockets for each type. But the input-side connection options are still not enough, and two additional pairs of sockets allow additional high-level sources to be docked. Cinch socket pair number five finally forms the signal output. Bottom left, below the ground terminal, are the two potentiometers that are crucial for adapting MC cartridges. One of them allows the setting of the MC "additional gain" between 3 and 30 deciBels, the other one determines the input impedance, which can be varied between 10 Ohms and 1 kiloOhm. The thing with the gain runs as follows: in addition to the MC gain, the gain factor of the MM department joins. This can be set to 55, 60 or 65 deciBels. Putting things together, we come to a minimum total gain of 58 deciBels and 95 maximum for MCs. This is at least at the top very plentiful, and it's completely intended by the manufacturer: the purpose is to get the phono branch so loud that it equals the usual two Volts of various digital players of nowadays. Can you do that? In practice, this is gratifyingly unproblematic: even with high reinforcements, the whole works pleasantly low-noise. In MM mode, operation is similar: 65 deciBels maximum are more than usually required by most cartridges, but indeed the idea is quite right. A propos MM: this input, too, is extensively customizable. A set of DIP-switches can be used to set the input capacitance between 0 and 790 picofarads, even the input impedance can be switched between 47 and 15 kiloOhms.

So far for the manually selectable functions on the device, but there's more: by the menu, a subsonic filter can be engaged, the power management and display can be configured and the MM gain can be set. This can be done either with the encoder equipped with a push-button or with supplied remote control. Or, if that's not enough - via Bluetooth low-energy interface using an Android mobile device. I've tried, but I must confess that I have not managed to make a connection between

the Nash and a current tablet - the phono stage refuses. According to me. Incidentally, with the D/A converter/preamplifier "Young MkIII" the connection was easily possible. Let's have a look into the high-tech phono stage. As you would expect, this is pretty modern, meaning that the action is firmly in the hands of larger quantities of SMD components. Manunta must be particularly proud for the MC input stage, which must be very low noise because of the high overall gain. The structure consists of a large number of parallel-connected individual transistors, which then consumes a considerable amount of board area even with SMD construction. Of course, a microcontroller has the controlling handle firmly in hand, there are a lot of electronic or electromechanical (say: relay) switching elements that switch the various configurable functions. Definitely not a circuit board that is sometimes designed between a door and a hinge.

Object number two of our desire, the "Crosby" power amplifier, is relatively simple by comparison. At least from the beginning, there is nothing to use, only four status LEDs can be signaled through the dark windows if required. There is more going on the back, there are even balanced and unbalanced inputs. This makes sense, because the D/A converter/preamplifier can deliver a balanced signal. The small caliber can even operate in bridge mode. The already quite impressive output power in stereo mode can be raised to 180 Watts on 8 Ohms - so it can be that you need something like that. In any case, the "Crosby" is a switching amplifier of the unproblematic kind. Takeaway remainders can be minimally refined in their output signal, it is stable, low-distortion and quiet. A look under the lid reveals a presumably purchased module on which the amplifier itself and the likewise switching power supply can be found. Manunta has contributed the input board, which takes care of the RCA and XLR connections and provides the phase rotation for bridge operation.

It's a bit of a hustle and bustle of the whole "Rockstar" series, but here the digital specialist "Young MkIII" does not play the first fiddle. Nevertheless, we don't want to leave its abilities apart from source selection and volume control unmentioned. For the friends of digital sources, he provides digital inputs in all possible formats, he masters the processing of both PCM and DSD material, and MQA as well. And Bluetooth, as mentioned above. The operating concept is similar to that of the Nash, the elements are the same. However, there is still a whole series of menu items more - you can take this to heart, to be sure, at this point should be enough. The Young MkIII, as well as the Nash, can be operated with a higher quality power supply. And I definitely recommend investing in the device called "Van Der Graaf MkII". The sound gain in both cases is so great that it easily justifies the investment. The dynamic gain is absolutely amazing, it also sounds much smoother with the external generator. In fact, I would advise the manufacturer to add a little bit to the quality of its standard power supplies, because obviously there is a lot left on the track here. The device provides two outputs twice each: either a single voltage switchable between 9 and 15 volts or, via four-pin XLR sockets, a double voltage for analog signal processing (you can guess which device is the customer for it) and once five Volts for digital. All outputs can be individually switched by push button on the front, the system remote control is so smart that it can switch the respective power supply outputs together with the corresponding devices. Also here we have looked in: the raw supply does not use the obligatory thick transformer, but a switching power supply of the nobler kind. The output of raw supply then gets discretely constructed regulators. The effort made here is undoubtful, it explains both the significant sound improvements through the power supply and the tight selling price.

For the seasoned high-end fan the handling of the Manunta turret is a rather unfamiliar thing, you have to get used to it. I also clamped the Lyra Atlas to the back of the Nash and was quite taken with the simple setup. The correct terminating resistor can be easily heard by turning the corresponding potentiometer thanks to immediate acoustic feedback, which only takes a few seconds. The same applies to the amplification: if any digital source played in volume, then you only have to turn the back of the amplification knob until it sounds similarly loud at Phono. Finished. Almost boring and simple, and far from the almost cultic actions one usually treats until the pickup adjustment is made. The first sound impression was allowed to deliver the outrageously well-produced flute rock album "Reap the Storm" of the Dresden band Wucan. And that impression

was there. Singer Francis Tobolski screams as uninhibitedly as she can, the rhythm section delivers an absolutely convincing popping and massive undercarriage. The phono stage plays at the level of the outstanding Musical Fidelity MX VYNL, and that means something. Almost as impressive, I think the cute little amp, which can not seriously "bite" against an Accuphase A-47, but pulls out of the affair most respectable. It sounds wiry, manoeuvrable, extremely quiet and with almost perfect high-frequency drawing - that's more than fine at this price. I hear the seasoned high-end fans already say "secondary system", but it is not necessarily like that: the Manuntas can in many cases be a real alternative to "full-blown" components. The only question left is why Steven Stills did not make it into the device designations.

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