

M2tech Pre Phono Nash

"... A preamplifier of extraordinary versatility ..."

The analog sector has always fascinated us: we have always been interested in this kind of music playback, buying or making us lend all sorts of phono preamps and phono pickups; and, of course, also arms and turntables, probably also due to the fact of having a "mechanical culture" and by virtue of this being able to intervene in the "practical" setting of the analog source.

I recently replaced my reel-to-reel deck with another Revox, having fun listening to reels that I had recorded when I still was young. There is to be amazed by the longevity of some tapes (not all of them, in truth, since some Ampex 20-20 have deteriorated by losing part of the magnetic layer ...) which prove again their brilliance (without Dolby, DBX or whatever noise reduction system...): listening today to some recordings made over forty years ago by capturing the Radio France signal from Corsica that transmitted with excellent quality, always gives pleasant sensations, you also want to remember of a time that is no longer ...

A technology like the analog one, several decades "old" doesn't seem to have the possibility of any important progress; and instead it is precisely from the birth of the CD that arms and turntables manufacturers have given themselves a move and started researching with more seriousness possible evolutions in the playback machines of vinyl records, producing results which far exceeded the analog machines that superficially seemed had reached the maximum development. Hand in hand was the progress of the electronic part, or phono preamps: a modern unit like this Nash allows for performance that a couple of decades ago were the prerogative of products which cost three times as much...

The Product

I know Marco Manunta, the owner of M2Tech, since a long time, having always appreciated his human frankness as well as his undeniable qualities of designer. I got to audition, both at various trade fairs and at home (with a little more reliability...) a large number of M2Tech products, among which the most successful ones seemed to me the various converters of the Young series, declined in various versions and with various possibilities. Only one model did not totally satisfy me: the top converter, the Vaughan, which in my opinion did not provide a reproduction equipped of a naturalness commensurate with the high price list but it was a unique case, and according to my musical taste anyway...

Mr. Manunta exhibited that "Leonardo's curiosity" that drove him to design this phono preamplifier introducing some features that, in my humble opinion, can really provide a performance difference compared to competitors.

Let's take a closer look at the extraordinary versatility offered by this preamplifier: the cabinet will not give any placement problem, given the size of about 20x20 cm and a reduced weight of approx 2 kg; the front panel has the on/off key and a multi-function knob with pushbutton capability as well: the first touch allows the choice between the pair of MM inputs and the MC one, separated in the rear panel, an extended touch lets you enter the setting menu which offers a considerable amount of possibilities, of which we list only the most important.

The gain can be selected with the front panel knob between three 'discrete' values, or 55, 60 and 65 dB, quantities that would already appear sufficient for the vast majority of the pickups around: but here is the real innovation of the Nash, that offers the additional possibility of increasing gain up to another 30 dB by a knob on the rear panel! The other small knob is instead the gem that makes Nash a machine of unique versatility: the continuous loading impedance setting for MC pickups! How many times have we found ourselves setting our own beloved pickups in a less-than-optimal way, coming to the conclusion that 100 Ohms were too many and 50 too few ... With this innovation, the possibility of regulation becomes universal thus being able to really reach optimization of the load "seen" by the pickup!

The MM load is also adjustable, in this case by means of a series of dip switches on the rear panel. Then there are several other possibilities among which I point out the useful presence of a rumble filter (it was called this way back in my youth...) that seems to be not too invasive. All these operational possibilities are illustrated on a clear OLED display on the front panel and most of them are settable either using the supplied remote control and via an Android app (recently also available for Apple operating systems) which talks to the Nash via Bluetooth.

There is also a database (continuously updated) which includes the load data for over three hundred heads: in the case you don't find your own, the load will have to be set manually (as indeed happens in all the phono preamps of the world ...); you can advise the absence from the preset list directly to M2Tech which will insert it: better than this...

On the back we find two line inputs that act as a duplicator thus exploiting the possibility to 'cousin' Young MkIII (the firm's converter) to operate also as a preamplifier, thus offering the possibility to connect other sources.

Sonic Analysis

I was smart by ignoring (for now) to return the Kiseki Blue head which made me so company in the Nash trial to the Importer, alternating it to my Allnic Silver Arrow. Nash's listening took place with the comparison direct and in near real time with our Krell KPE Reference which has been in the room for a long time and I will dedicate to it sooner or later a review for the sector 'Vintage', although defining in this way a product out of production in 2007 there seems a little risky, albeit the birth dates back to 1992...

As mentioned, the transducers pre-amplified by the Nash were a Kiseki Blue installed on its arm Origin Live Silver and an Allnic Silver Arrow mounted on the 12" Scheu Classic MkII, a high class pickup which is maybe a little overpriced by a commercial point of view for the Nash.

After several combinations the configuration which seemed to me the best was a 'base' gain of 60 dB (more than this leads to the risk of saturation, taking into account the further finely adjustable gain...) with an indicative load of about 200 ohms. It is good say 'orientative' because, as mentioned, the latter it is continuously adjustable and is good to reiterate the comfort (and functionality) of this feature that allows us to establish by ear (or better: according to one's ear) what could be the best compromise to put at ease our own pickup.

A comprehensive comparison against the Krell that, I want highlight it, was discontinued over ten years ago with a price, at the time, of about 3500 Euros (about twice our Nash ...) highlights a pool of characteristics that seem to be somewhat similar to those of the aforementioned American preamplifier: the scenic reconstruction that at times seems to be overlapping and at times seems even to make the Italian preamp prevail, thanks to a greater depth that seems to reach the stage fictional...

The location of the artists present in Kind Of Blue by Miles Davis is exemplary: the piano of Evans seems to move a little further to the left compared to the "captivity" in the left speaker which the sound engineer had forced him to do; the tenor of Coltrane is statuary, immanent and imposing in its lucidity well behind the left speaker and appears at a height that rightly it seems to be superior respect to the piano. When Adderley's contralto occurs, one remains astonished of how, also in this case, the instrument can be released from the constriction of the right speaker, Cannonball remaining discreetly identifiable behind the speaker itself. A first-class service, ultimately and, as mentioned, comparable to objects of double or triple cost (as can be often read in some specialized magazines...).

As for the tonal balance, I must highlight the Italian preamplifier's great performance that is missing (inevitably...) a little more detail resolution compared to the Krell: Jimmy Cobb's cymbals are a little less argentine and Chamber's double-bass is a tad less solid than it is listenable with the Krell. For instance, the comparison of this masterpiece with the decoded DSD counterpart from Playback Designs MPD3 is embarrassing, for the latter ...

Listening to the piano by Dave Brubeck in Time Out highlights excellent overall performance, especially if we consider the price this machine is offered: only at times the keys presented on the other preamp would seem to be a little more sculpted and defined, highlighting that “quid pluris” of further detail...

The dynamics offered by Nash is very respectable: with such levels of gain I imagine that even pickups with much lower output voltage than those available for the review would have been able to provide an excellent performance, made possible by another excellent feature offered by this phono preamp: the extraordinary low background noise. In absence of signal, even paroxysmal levels of the volume didn't give evidence of any kind of hum or hiss, clear confirmation of a intelligent layout design of the unit. I'd be curious about also trying the dedicated power supply Van der Graaf MkII which, although the expense increases by 50% (955 Euros the price list) promises performance much higher than those offered from the standard 'telephone' power supply.

Ultimately, listening with this beautiful M2Tech phono preamplifier does nothing but confirm the path digital still has to do in its evolution to be able to get closer to vinyl playback performance. I refer above all to the pleasantness and naturalness of listening that only good analog machines can offer. It is no coincidence that when only the vinyl existed, we were used to listen to an entire disc; the advent of the CD (and remote control) did so that listening to an entire diskette was not so obvious. The current prevail of the music in file (perhaps with help by some remote playback management system app) has meant that sometimes you don't even listen to a single song, hopping so misguided by a music genre to the other, therefore coming to listen to the system and not the music. Such a pity...

Conclusions

Considering the basic performances (good level) offered and the extraordinary versatility of this phono preamplifier I can't but confirm the excellent value-for-money ratio, also recalling the universality of use of the unit.

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