

Aurorasound VIDA Prima

The most affordable product from one of Japan's renowned phono stage specialists, its quirky retro looks won't be to every Western taste – but its musical potential will
 Review: **Nick Tate** Lab: **Paul Miller**

In Japan, long-playing vinyl records have never really gone away – they just went underground, becoming cool artefacts that sat defiantly away from the mainstream music market. As the country churned out millions of shiny new Compact Disc players in the 1980s and '90s, the humble LP stood its ground, cherished by record collectors who thought CD to be the replacement for pre-recorded Compact Cassette, rather than vinyl.

Even in the mid '90s, Japanese subsidiaries of major Western labels like EMI and Blue Note continued to release new records, while UK music retailers couldn't kill off the black plastic fast enough. Japanese vinyl 'otaku' – record collectors – had a dedication that arguably surpassed any others in the world. As foreign manufacturers were dropping turntables from their product lineups, Japanese brands like Technics continued to sell theirs well into the new millennium.

HOMAGE TO THE PAST?

This sense of specialness, of otherness, of breaking away from the fray, is a big part of the Japanese analogue scene. In a way, it explains why Aurorasound's products don't look anything like those of the country's vast consumer electronics giants. While the latter are often gaudy and shiny, with lots of bells and whistles, the former are wilfully quirky and rather retro in a timeless sort of way. Stylistically the brand's phono stages could pay homage to the '50s, '60s or '70s – one is never quite sure.

Aurorasound's brand aesthetic signals that vinyl isn't part of the rat race, and founder Shinobu Karaki knows this very well, having made a living catering for this niche market for many years [see boxout, p65]. His company is now a respected specialist hi-fi brand in his home market, and the VIDA Prima 'Phono Equaliser

RIGHT: Active/passive RIAA network [cluster in right-hand corner] is based around low-noise op-amps from Linear Technology and a dual-channel op-amp from Burr-Brown driving the output. The remainder is largely its PSU

Amplifier' is his most affordable product, selling in the UK for £1000.

It's dramatically pared down compared to the impressive mid-market VIDA [HFN Jul '13] even though the Prima's dark wood case and plain, unadorned aluminium fascia with its large orange-yellow mute button are clearly fashioned after its bigger brother. In the VIDA Prima's defence, it is surprisingly well made and finished, considering its relatively modest price. The 2.2kg, 250x69x246mm (whd) casework is sturdy and the rear panel rugged, as are the gold-plated connectors. These include single-ended RCA phono inputs and outputs and a ground terminal. There are also two small toggle switches, one for load impedance that offers improved compatibility with MC cartridges having a

sub-15ohm coil impedance (MC-Low) or a >15ohm impedance (MC-High). The two gain options are rated at +40dB for MM pick-ups and +64dB for MCs.

SILKY RESPONSE

Look inside the case and you'll see that things are very cleanly laid out. It's basically a single circuit-board with short and broadly symmetrical signal paths. The core RIAA equalisation is achieved through a part-active/part-passive network – using negative feedback for low frequency compensation and a capacitor/resistor network for the treble. Karaki-san says this combination yields wider headroom and lower distortion [see PM's Lab Report, p65].

High quality components are used, including Linear Technology and Texas



Instruments regulators/op-amps along with WIMA film capacitors and high precision resistors. The power supply uses a small RS toroidal transformer and sports Schottky barrier diodes, FineMet beads and – says Aurorasound – high quality smoothing capacitors. The fascia switchgear has a silky action, especially that big front panel mute button which was enormously handy when changing records and cleaning the stylus. Those rear switches are fiddly to use but you're unlikely to be changing them much, and they do seem to be quality items.

DIGGING DEEP

Most 'affordable' phono stages are decent enough sounding, even if they don't really dig deep into what's at the bottom of the record groove. The VIDA Prima does better, however, with a particularly smooth tone and an open and detailed nature that's a serious step up from a budget design. Typically, it delivers wide soundstages that are well proportioned front-to-back and, alongside its jaunty rhythmic gait, allows the music to come alive.

Although its grip is not the world's most vice-like, it still keeps a firm hand on the stops and starts of the music, and endeavours to deliver them in a pleasingly believable way. At the same time it has a calm and easy feel, so never makes things

sound forced. Last but not least, it's a low-noise design that turns in fine sound whether you're running a moving-magnet cartridge or a moving-coil. During the review period I used a range of pick-ups on my Michell GyroDec/Rega RB301 turntable/arm combination, majoring on an Audio-Technica VM530EN MM and an AT33PTG/II MC, both of which are 'medium output' in their respective categories.

The VIDA Prima has a pleasant tonality that veers ever so slightly towards sweetness. Whereas some solid-state phono stages can sound just a little too 'tinselly' for their own good, injecting a rather brittle chromium-plated sheen to the music, this little box steers clear.

Rather, it gives a pretty matter-of-fact reading of the recording it's tasked to play, which is why the post-punk of The Jam's 'Strange Town' [Setting Sons; Polydor PD-1-6249] comes over as the slightly grey, lifeless and dour recording that it is, while Randy Crawford's soulful early '80s classic 'You Might Need Somebody' [Secret Combination; Warner Bros Records BSK 3541] is the exact opposite.

So the VIDA Prima is usefully transparent – being revealing of the less wonderful

ABOVE: Traditional 'metal box in wooden sleeve' industrial design is a hallmark of this artisan brand. Fascia is dominated by a huge, illuminated mute button – perfect before cueing or switching connections at the rear

recordings without being too unforgiving, while letting the better ones shine. There's a welcome even-handedness and insight here, blended with a subtle smoothness. It's as if someone has slipped a few

grains of sugar into your green tea, so you're not quite sure if it's been sweetened but it tastes nice all the same!

Its open and detailed sound goes a lot deeper into recordings than you might expect given its

'It's like slipping a few grains of sugar into your green tea'

price. Rush's 'The Camera Eye' [Moving Pictures; Mercury 6337 160] was shown to have a dry and clinical sound – very much the fashion in 'serious' rock recordings back in the early '80s – with oodles of detail courtesy of its sophisticated multi-track production. This little box seemed to delight in delving in and having a good look around, successfully capturing the ambient feel of this track.

BEHIND THE SCENES

The realistic texture of the synthesisers, for example, was a joy to hear, as was the crispness of the lead guitar and the sinewy thwack of the snare drum. Indeed, the VIDA Prima is better at communicating this sort of information than most phono stages at this price level, and this pays dividends with a really good recording. With the Rush LP there was a sense that it had been 'unlocked', and the listener had been allowed behind the scenes access. Everything from the tautness of the bass guitar to the smooth swish of the ride cymbal was a sonic pleasure.

This album also showcased the VIDA Prima's fine soundstaging, but things →

CAREER CHANGE

After 28 years of working as a manager for the Japanese subsidiary of Texas Instruments – as well as playing and teaching guitar – VIDA's president, Shinobu Karaki, took early retirement to make phono stages for a living. He launched Aurorasound in 2010 'to make my hobby my business', adding that 'this is what we call self-actualisation'. He says that DACs 'cannot make people happy or make money, because of the short life cycle'. Instead, he believes that, 'most people believe vinyl has the better sound'. The philosophy of his company is to, 'combine good old technology with new technology to make unique products for reproducing music'. He says that the VIDA, or 'Vinyl Disk Amplifier', came out at the right time for the vinyl revival. 'The VIDA Prima is for newcomers to analogue, perhaps who have come from computer audio. They know serious sound, and want to get into vinyl as the next step up the hi-fi ladder.'

PHONO PREAMPLIFIER

AURORASOUND VIDA PRIMA



ABOVE: Everything you need for a no-nonsense vinyl system – single inputs and outputs on RCAs with switchable gain for MM and MC pick-ups and a choice of loading for MCs with low and high coil impedances. No DIP switches here!

really flew with a less over-produced, classic jazz recording from the mid '60s. Lou Donaldson's 'Alligator Bogaloo' [Alligator Bogaloo; Blue Note 7842631] is typically post-bop with a modern jazz feel, but traditional production values include its pair of crossed microphones and tape recorder. Here the VIDA Prima set up some really powerful stereo imaging inside the recorded acoustic, giving a bold 'out of the box' feel to the various instrumentalists on stage.

TACTILE PLEASURES

While no match for true high-end solid-state or tube designs, the presentation here still sounded more expansive than you might expect. The VIDA Prima never failed to serve up a big and visceral recorded acoustic with plenty of air and space inside. Everything was carefully positioned, from the brass section and the Hammond organ to the drums and the double-bass.

Each was smartly delineated from the other, and you could clearly discern the space between them. Things had a pleasingly tactile quality, a sense of 'being there' right in the middle of the action.

The VIDA Prima's ability to nail a rhythm also never failed to impress. It's not one of those showy performers that are all about 'pace, rhythm and timing', yet it still manages to slot everything together really nicely. As The Human League's 'The Things That Dreams Are Made Of' [Dare; Virgin V2192] showed, it has an easy yet intricate style.

This early '80s synth pop track can sound a little deadpan and mechanical, but here its beats were beautifully syncopated with the lead vocals, and this gave the song

a true sense of purpose. The VIDA Prima doesn't regiment everything into a metronomic rhythm with the result that you hear a false sense of speed and drive. Instead, it is supple and responsive without being overly controlled, and the overall effect is to bring a song to life.

So while this phono preamp may not be the grandest or punchiest of the breed, it still convincingly tracks the music's small accents and inflections. Whether I used MM or MC pick-ups, the VIDA Prima seemed particularly adept at simply stepping aside and letting me get on with enjoying the music.

And because it has such good manners – with a conspicuous lack of noise or hum – there's little sense of strain, regardless of the gain selected (the moving-magnet having only a slight advantage over the moving-coil input here). Either way, the VIDA Prima's insight, grip and evenness means that whatever front-end you use or recording you play, the music will be offered up with a spirit of joyfulness. ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

Once you look past the curious styling of Aurorasound's VIDA Prima, you'll not be able to stop yourself enjoying its sound. This quirky phono stage is a more exotic performer than most price rivals, with a sophisticated yet agile character that never intrudes on the music being played. As such, it's a pleasure to audition across a very wide range of vinyl. Full of eastern promise – so hear it if you possibly can.

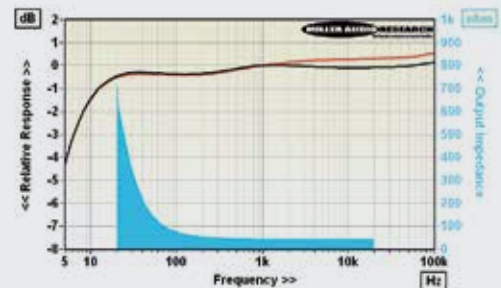
Sound Quality: 80%

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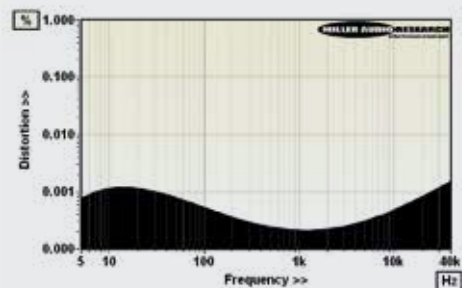
Similar in name only to the original VIDA [HFN Jul '13], the VIDA Prima employs a far simpler, part-active (low frequency)/part-passive (high frequency) RIAA network. The headline differences in performance between the two are as follows: the costlier Vida offers superior input overload margins, a higher output and lower noise via MC, while the VIDA Prima trades this for a wider MM S/N ratio, a much flatter and extended HF response and lower overall distortion. Talking of distortion, this is indeed exceptionally low at ~0.0002% through the midrange, increasing slightly to ~0.001% at the bass/treble frequency extremes [Graph 2, below]. In practice this is of academic interest only as the typical pick-up's distortion will be 1000x higher (re. 5cm/sec).

Its equalised response is also comfortably beyond that of any pick-up, albeit very slightly 'flatter' on the left than right channel, at ±0.4dB from 100Hz-100kHz and with a subsonic filter of -0.5dB/20Hz down to -6dB/4Hz [see Graph 1, below]. The output impedance is usefully low at 45ohm through mid and treble, increasing to 100ohm/75Hz and 715ohm/20Hz [blue infill, Graph 1]. In its MM setting, the VIDA Prima offers +40.5dB gain (47kohm loading) and a generous 90.5dB A-wtd S/N ratio.

So this is a very quiet MM stage with an input overload margin of 89mV – this represents a headroom of +25dB to accommodate the wildest of vinyl grooves (re. 5mV at 1kHz/5cm/sec). The MC input includes an additional +23.9dB, realising a total gain of +64.4dB, but the A-wtd S/N ratio of 71.3dB is slightly reduced (re. 500µV) and the 5.6mV overload margin is less generous. With a headroom of +21dB (or +19.4dB re. its 0.6mV sensitivity), the VIDA Prima's MC input is best suited to medium- rather than high- or low-output MCs. PM



ABOVE: RIAA-corrected freq. response (L/R, black/red; 5Hz-100kHz) versus output impedance (cyan trace)



ABOVE: Distortion versus extended frequency (5Hz-40kHz) via MM input, re. 0dBV output

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Input loading (MM/MC)	47kohm / 75ohm & 900ohm
Input sensitivity (re. 0dBV balanced out)	9.39mV / 603µV
Input overload (re. 1% THD)	89mV / 5.6mV
Max. output (re. 1% THD) / Impedance	9.0V / 45-713ohm
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBV balanced out)	90.5dB / 71.3dB
Frequency resp. (20Hz-20kHz/100kHz)	-0.48dB to -0.07dB / +0.12dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, re. 0dBV)	0.00021-0.0011%
Power consumption	4W
Dimensions (WHD) / Weight	250x69x246mm / 2.3kg