

Aurorasound VIDA MkII

Aurorasound's VIDA (Vinyl Disk Amplifier), launched in 2011, has marked its first decade with a number of revisions to merit MkII status. How does it stack up in 2022?

Review: Ken Kessler Lab: Paul Miller

Small Japanese specialist brands always fascinate me, due in part to my delight that they can co-exist with the Sony- and Panasonic-sized manufacturers. While every nation has its bijou marques, there's an uncanny aura to the likes of 47Lab, Shindo, Air Tight and Kondo, plus countless MC cartridge makers, that differentiates them from equally exotic producers from the UK, USA, Italy, Germany and beyond. Aurorasound could also only be Japanese, its VIDA MkII, an evolution of the VIDA [HFN Jul '13], ticking every box.

As self-contained as the standard £3659 version of the VIDA MkII is – it provides simple high/low load switching on both MC inputs, with low recommended for cartridges below 100ohm and high for those above 100ohm – there are options to reinforce the appeal to enthusiasts. On the surface, then, this is a comprehensively equipped two-chassis phono stage which eschews functional minimalism while avoiding clutter to create a super-clean fascia. Yet there's more to its capabilities, being a unit able to handle MM and MC cartridges in both inputs, and thus support two decks or arms.

HIT THE LOAD, JACK

The vast majority of VIDA preamps are sold with this standard MC loading but our sample was fitted with the optional VI6 six-way load switch on both MC inputs, which adds £369 and provides settings of 30, 50, 75, 100, 150 and 470ohm. This should satisfy the most fastidious of audiophiles as I find most MCs do not require to be 'dialed in' to the nearest ohm. Not fitted to our review sample, however, are the balanced output (XLR) option at £549 nor the £459 SPC umbilical PSU cable with proprietary screening.

Externally little has altered, the MkII designation referring to the exchange of

the original Aurora Amp module-1 for the Amp module-2 Rev. 3 [the gold PCB in our inside pic, below]. This modularity extends to the circa-£10,000 VIDA Supreme, which provides the option of plugging in various cards that allow different MM or MC inputs via active circuitry or step-up transformers, EQ curves, inverse RIAA, and other settings. Also available below the VIDA MkII is the simpler £1000 VIDA Prima [HFN Mar '19], this phono stage offering just high and low adjustments for MCs.

Otherwise Aurorasound has fundamentally revised the PCB layout and optimised signal flow with a new mainboard [compare inside shots here and HFN Jul '13] with a claimed improvement of 6dB in left/right channel separation. The degauss control has been moved from the front panel to the back, the two pilot

LEDs on the fascia are reduced to one, and the external power supply has been improved. Furthermore the chassis has been reinforced to reduce RFI and EMI.

PRECISION ENGINEERING

It occurred to me that this could be my dream phono stage (with the XLR output option, that is). The front panel provides everything needed on a quotidian basis, with the illuminated mute button standing proud in the upper lefthand corner. Across the bottom, left to right, are delightfully precise toggle switches as only the Japanese seem to be able to manufacture, for stereo/mono, direct or via a subsonic filter (useful if you have a badly warped but playable LP), the high/low MC switch, the MM/MC selector, and the toggle for Phono 1 and Phono 2 inputs.



RIGHT: The dual-mono VIDA MkII comprises three building blocks – a switchable op-amp based gain stage [far right], passive LCR RIAA network [centre] and custom output stage with onboard regulation [gold-plated PCBs, near left]



LEFT: The wooden sleeve is a nod to hi-fi electronics of yesteryear while the light alloy fascia is dominated by an illuminated mute button. Toggles offer stereo/mono, a subsonic filter, high/low MC load switching [see p67] and independent dual MM/MC input selection

Around the back are RCAs for output and two decks, two separate earthing posts, a three-pin connector that takes the feed from the external power supply, the aforementioned degausser, and the rotary for switching MC cartridge loads. I'm of two minds about degaussing, which demagnetises MC cartridges and which Aurorasound recommends once every six months, but as it can do no harm, and takes 30 seconds, it's no hardship to employ it.

While the VIDA MkII has a classy elegance, its matte silver fascia offset by a real wood enclosure, it's also a bit of a multi-coloured light show: red on the power supply rocker, orange for the big, square mute button and lavender for the tiny LED below the Aurorasound logo.

LA VIDA LOCA

Although predisposed toward this phono stage because I love obscure Japanese

high-end hi-fi, it was the name that did it. One of my favourite T-Bone Walker tracks is 'Vida Lee', so naturally I chose that to kick off my listening, specifically the version found on the various artists compilation *Legendary Master Series Vol. 1 Urban Blues – Blues Uptown* [Imperial LM-94002]. This stunning collection from 1968 was inspired by members of Canned Heat, and it's a doozy. It also enabled me to test the benefits of the VIDA MkII having a mono button, whether or not one has gone to the lengths of also

acquiring a mono cartridge. Walker was all about slithery guitar playing and the kind of vocals that could make 'Old McDonald Had A Farm' sound salacious. What the VIDA MkII somehow extracted from this track – which I used to play repeatedly when my blues library consisted of a mere dozen LPs – was plump, rich, honking sax which was enough

to distract me from the sound of his big hollow-bodied Gibson. It wasn't just the fast runs which signified Walker's playing – the way he strummed those chords produced a sound complex enough to keep wordsmiths reaching for the thesaurus. Resonance, air, some rattles... any Gibson aficionado would be able to tell you which ES-model he was playing (without cheating and looking at the recording date of 1952).

Inspired by members of Canned Heat, it's a doozy

MOOD MUSIC

Back to the sax. This arrives right after the opening line, a mere two seconds in, but it establishes a mood that suggests a darkened bar, in the wee hours, on the other side of town from Ol' Blue Eyes. The VIDA MkII was living up to its namesake, especially the realistic, almost tactile textures of that smoky voice.

From the same LP came Fats Domino's 'Don't Lie To Me', recorded before he went gold with 'Blueberry Hill'. Here the main sound was rollicking New Orleans barrelhouse piano, again dependent on the reproduction of certain resonances. This immediately reminded me of Dave Wilson – Wilson Audio's founder – and his *Ragtime Razzmatazz* LPs, and discussing with Dave what was needed to make that sound, the way worn-down hammers would hit with

SHINOBU KARAKI

Yokohama-based Aurorasound was founded by Shinobu Karaki in 2010. Previously he'd worked as an engineer for Texas Instruments in Japan from 1980-2009 but took early retirement to pursue his own interest in audio. The first product was a line stage called the CADA which incorporated a DAC and rare triodes. Soon after, he developed the VIDA (Vinyl Disk Amplifier) employing LCR (inductor/capacitor/resistor) equalisation, sourcing the inductors from Lundahl in Sweden.

Says Guy Sergeant of UK distributor, Pure Sound, 'Karaki is also something of a fan of specialised and somewhat obscure transistors that, in many cases, were made specifically for audio use. Indeed, he acquires and hoards quantities of his favourites in the way others might do with particular valves. Karaki is also part of a fairly niche society of mostly Japanese audiophiles who, via a Facebook group, share their love of cartridges such as [founder of ADC] Peter Pritchard-designed General Electric variable reluctance designs'.

Aurorasound now manufactures the three VIDA phono stages [HFN Mar 19], the SP03L MC step-up transformer, HEADA headphone amp [HFN May '15], PREDA [HFN Nov '14] and PREDA-III solid-state preamplifiers, the PADA-EL34 triode stereo power amplifier and the PADA-300B monoblock, plus other accessories.



ABOVE: Outboard PSU connects to the VIDA MkII via a short umbilical [see rear pic, p67]

PHONO PREAMPLIFIER



ABOVE: The MkII still offers two front-switched MM/MC phono inputs, but brings the degauss function to the rear. Variable 30-470ohm (low) MC loading option is extra

a specific timbre. Fats' performance may have been 70 years gone, and without the benefit of stereo, but it still filled the space in front of me.

With both T-Bone's and Fats' voices tilted toward the richer end of the spectrum, the contrast of Carole King's vocals on *Tapestry* [Mobile Fidelity UD1S 2-030 One-Step] let me wallow in the honeyed midband and at the same time experience spatial recreation. The piano provided an alternative sonic sensation, again suggesting that keen-eared musicians might even be able to identify the make and model.

While the near-excessive warmth favours my biases – anything that sounds like valves, even if solid-state, gets my thumbs up – I can expect some might find it overbearing with certain MC cartridges, especially into an all-valve system, which is what I was enjoying. With Carole King's 'I Feel The Earth Move' and the change in tempo, the nature of the piano bordered on pounding rock 'n' roll, harder hitting than Fats' track. Here the VIDA MkII produced transient attack and crisp edges which counter-balanced the possibly-too-warm overall nature.

CLASSIC FLAVOUR

Note that this was consistent from cartridge to cartridge, and these included a couple of flavours of Ortofon 2Ms for moving-magnet duties, and both classic and modern MCs of varying impedances. If a pattern was emerging, and with an ear to the kind of neutrality which is a virtue for those who favour solid-state, digital, and anything else that isn't a 300B or 845, it's that the VIDA MkII has all the speed and slam, across the frequency spectrum, to disarm any whose initial impression is coloured by the warmth. I'm trying hard not to confuse you... or myself,

for this phono stage will never be mistaken for some all-valve design like the astounding EAT E-Glo.

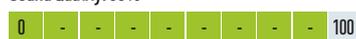
Instead, my findings are based on comparing it with other solid-state phono amps, all of which sounded cooler and more forensic. With Little Feat's 'Willin' from *Sailin' Shoes* [Mobile Fidelity MFSL 1-307], the VIDA MkII had no difficulty separating the myriad layers of sound, subtle little licks from acoustic guitars, pedal steel far right, dry percussion, and those harmonies on the line 'Weeds, whites and wine'. You're gonna fight hard not to shed a tear about the loss of Lowell George.

That pedal steel provided an illustration of the clarity this phono stage can yield and do so without ever sounding brittle. Mainly it's down to the unit's transparency, which some might find is often clouded by warmth, but Aurorasound has found a near-perfect balance. If there's any criticism I can make about the VIDA MkII it's that it also tends toward the polite. But in this mean old world, that's a virtue. ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

Aurorasound's VIDA MkII might be classified as a cult product due to its esoteric origins, but it is nothing of the sort. This delicious little phono amp is ergonomically ideal, comprehensively equipped, beautifully made and – as our review reveals – is as sweet-sounding as deserved of the finest analogue systems. Fresh out of the box, it caressed everything from budget MMs to £5k-plus MCs. It's a delight!

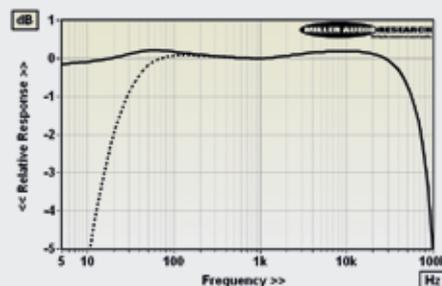
Sound Quality: 85%



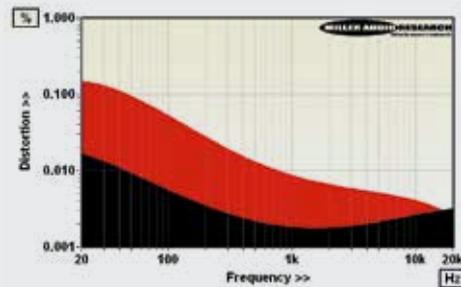
AURORASOUND VIDA MKII

While passive RIAA networks are often employed for their perceived subjective advantage, conventional RC stages soak up a lot of gain (~20dB at 1kHz) and present a variable load for the input/buffer preamp. Bridged T-network LCR filters can be designed for a constant input impedance without sacrificing as much gain, but optimising the inductor value (against its series resistance) is a trade-off, especially in the low-pass arm of the network. Aurorasound's latest circuit offers about 2dB extra MM gain vs. the VIDA MkI (+40.5dB vs. +38.4dB) with a +1dB 'boost' for MCs (+65.1dB vs. +64.2dB) at the expense of slightly reduced input overload margins – 128mV vs. 163mV (MM) and 7.0mV vs. 8.6mV (MC). The MM margin is still more than sufficient, offering +28dB headroom for a 5mV/1kHz (5cm/sec) rated pick-up, this coupled with a worthy 82dB A-wtd S/N ratio. The MC input has a good 76dB S/N but is arguably less well suited to very low output types where a 70dB+ gain is required, or very high output MCs where the +22.9dB input margin (re. 500µV) may be insufficient.

Distortion is reduced to 0.0015% through the midrange in the MkII although low frequency THD is slightly higher at 0.017% [see Graph 2, below] – all these figures being two or three orders of magnitude lower than that from a 'real world' pick-up. The equalised response shows a mild +0.2dB lift through the bass (~60Hz) and treble (~10kHz) and boasts slightly greater extension over the MkI, reaching +0.11dB/20kHz and -5.3dB/100kHz. The low bass extension of its DC-coupled output stage is extreme, just -0.6dB/1Hz, while the AC-coupled subsonic filter shows an improved -10dB/5Hz attenuation [see Graph 1, below]. Finally, the MkI's high 1.1kohm output impedance has been slightly reduced to 850ohm in the MkII. **PM**



ABOVE: RIAA-corrected MM frequency response from 5Hz-100kHz re. 0dBV (subsonic filter dashed)



ABOVE: Distortion versus frequency re. 0dBV from 20Hz-20kHz (MM, black; MC, red)

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Input loading (MM/MC)	47kohm/100pF / 30-470ohm/1kohm
Input sensitivity (re. 0dBV)	9.42mV / 554µV (MM/MC)
Input overload (re. 1% THD)	128mV / 7.0mV (MM/MC)
Max. output (re. 1% THD) / Imp.	13.5V / 850ohm
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBV)	81.9dB / 76.0dB (MM/MC)
Freq. resp. (20Hz-20kHz/100kHz)	-0.0dB to +0.20dB / -5.25dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, re. 0dBV)	0.0015-0.017% (MM)
Power consumption	8W
Dimensions (WHD) / Weight	260x100x250mm / 2.8kg (1.4kg, PSU)