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hardware review

AVID Pellar II phono delivers gains all round

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AVID Pellar II phono stage

It was two years ago that I last reviewed an AVID product – one of their integrated amplifiers, which so impressed me that when they announced they were launching updated versions of their Pellar and Pulsus phono stages, I put in a request for a review sample straight away. The announcement of the revised Pulsus and Pellar came shortly after the introduction of the flagship Velsonic model and indeed there are elements of the Pellar II that borrow work done while AVID was developing the Velsonic. But more of that shortly.

If you don't know AVID, it was founded in 1995 by CEO Conrad Mas who set out initially to make "a genuinely flawless turntable". Their first model was the Acutus in 1999 and it was not until 2010 that they produced their first electronics product, the Pulsare phono stage, followed by the original Pellar in 2012. Today, they also offer a range of speakers but, as Conrad told me two years ago, they "avoid the digital world and digital components that could compromise the purity of the analogue signal", so no CD players, DACs or streamers. They manufacture and assemble their products by hand in their Cambridge factory

The Pellar II phono stage retails at £1,450 and is based on the original Pellar and while the Pellar II uses the same physical board layout as the original, it has benefited from key component upgrades.

While AVID was developing the Velsonic phono stage, they discovered a new capacitor that sounds significantly better with what Conrad calls a "more open and rounded sound". They were so impressed with the new capacitors and the improvement they made to sound quality that they are used throughout the Pellar II circuitry and have been rolled out across all of AVID's amplifiers and phono stages.

But that's not all. There have been other significant improvements in the Pellar II. It has greater storage capacity in the power supply, which Conrad says has "given it a lot more oomph in the bottom end and has opened out the sound". The other obvious change is that the Pellar II has a bigger case and a larger on/off switch on the front panel. It also features the company's sculpted 'A' logo to tie it in visually with their other products.

Those changes apart, Conrad also told me that in phono stages they pay particular

attention to getting the RIAA equalisation circuitry correct. Keeping noise to a minimum was their other major goal and to that end they have used a shielded case and oversized ground planes. Conrad believes that the most important thing in cables is the screening, earth and return as it allows the signal to be conducted in a more effective way. So their amplifiers and phono stages use oversized ground planes so that "a lot of noise can be conducted out of the system without getting bottlenecked inside".

He also says that as phono stages use high gain, they are sensitive to component type and their "physicality", so he will not use surface-mount components and follows "military spec" guidelines, where components legs go through a hole in the board, are bent in line with the track and securely soldered in place. That, he says, gives a good mechanical fixing and a good electrical joint, which helps with reliability and longevity.

Load 'em up

One unusual feature of the Pellar II is that while it uses DIP switches to select the desired gain level (48dB, 60dB or 70dB), Conrad avoided using them for cartridge loading as he believes they act essentially as resistors and can have a negative effect on sound quality. So loading is provided by inserting RCA plugs into the two loading sockets above the input sockets on the rear panel. A set of 500 ohm loading plugs is provided as standard, but AVID is more than happy to supply owners with any value they feel they need. He believes though that 500 ohm should suit the majority of moving coil cartridges which is somewhat at odds with the 100 ohms specified in most cases.

He adds that while DIP switches are used on the next model up, the Pulsus II, the substantial improvements brought by using an external power supply more than make up for any shortcomings in using DIP switches for loading and their inclusion makes it easy to select

the right load for any cartridge. On the flagship Velsonic, they use relays instead, as they have a lower impedance than the PCB track and so “the signal doesn’t even know they are there”.

Proof of the pudding

So much for the theory and design philosophies, what counts is how it sounds and to check that out I used the Pellar II in two different systems. The first was using a J. Sikora Aspire turntable with Aidas Durawood Bee cartridge through the excellent Audio Note Meishu Tonmeister tube integrated amp and a pair of Fyne Audio Vintage 10 speakers with Supertrax super-tweeters and REL S/550 subwoofer. Mains block and cables were from MusicWorks. I knew this system would show me what the Pellar II could do, but I also used it in a more modestly-priced system, which is more appropriate to the Pellar II’s price point – namely a Vertere DG-X turntable with Vertere Mystique MC cartridge, Trilogy 921 integrated amp and Oephi Transcendence T2 standmount speakers.

In the context of the Vertere/Trilogy/Oephi system, kindly put at my disposal by Home Media in Maidstone, I also had another well-respected phono stage at a very similar price on hand to check where the Pellar II sits in the wider market.

Loading-wise, I felt the best sound with the Aidas cartridge was obtained with 100 ohms loading, while the Vertere Mystique was very happy with 500 ohms. Conrad also told me he believes that the best sound is often achieved using the highest (70dB) gain setting, even if that is not strictly necessary, and I must say that after a brief listen, I agree with him. Using high gain gives the sound more life, energy, dynamics and musical engagement and I recommend anyone to try it and see.

When Conrad dropped the Pellar II off with me, he also let me have the old model, the original Pellar, so I could hear how the II improves on it. That I assessed in the J Sikora/Audio Note system and to check it out, I kicked off with the track Fame Will Eat the Soul from Van Morrison’s *Three Chords and the Truth* album. On the Pellar II, there was no doubt the bass

line was deeper, tighter and more tuneful than on the original Pellar. Vocals were cleaner and more expressive and delicate details and nuances in the cymbal and snare were much better conveyed. The Hammond organ was also better voiced, easier to follow and the momentum and rhythmic swagger of the track was much better conveyed on the MkII. This was not a small difference, it was a truly significant and worthwhile one.

Next I played Minute by Minute from guitarist Larry Carlton's superb *Discovery* album. Here, the deep, insistent bass line that drives the track along was much tighter and articulate on the Pellar II, while drumkit was tighter and punchier with more heft on kick drum, while cymbals were more delicate and detailed. The dynamic ebb and flow of this track was much better on the Pellar II and subtleties and nuances in Carlton's guitar play emerged that were not so well revealed by the original Pellar.

No question then, the Pellar II is a huge improvement over the original in terms of musical coherence, dynamics, rhythmic integrity and bass depth and tightness.

A great mover

To start my assessment of the Pellar II in its own right, in the Vertere-based system, I played March of the Jazz Angels by Larry Carlton again. This track has a killer bass line and dynamics, the Pellar II conveyed the weight, agility and rhythmic twists and turns of that bass line really well. It underpins the track and drives it along and kept it under control at all times. The punchy kick drum that gives it an added crack here and there was also nicely handled and all the while Carlton's acoustic guitar was well voiced and focused and the Pellar II let me appreciate exactly how each note was played. A truly impressive performance.

Switching to some vocals, I chose Red Lights in the Rain from Canadian singer/songwriter/guitarist Stephen Fearing. The Pellar II captured the unique style of his vocals well, keeping them open and avoiding any sibilance when he sang louder. His wonderful custom Manzer Cowpoke guitar was open, clean with good leading-edge attack, while the Pellar II also captured the full-bodied sound of the instrument that is captured so well on the recording.

Spinning up a current favourite of mine, *Conversations with Christian McBride* and his cover of the Isley Brothers' It's Your Thing with guest vocalist Dee Dee Bridgewater, I was impressed again by the sheer dynamics, fluidity and detail of the Pellar II. It conveyed not only the weight of McBride's bass but also his skill as a musician, keeping pace when his fingers really flew and letting you hear when he slaps the double bass's body and when the strings resonate against the fretboard. Dee Dee Bridgewater's extraordinary vocals were also conveyed with great character, openness and fun. The track really moved well and the Pellar II made it musically engaging, which it certainly should be.

The final album to mention was *Stream* from pianist/composer Fergus McCreadie. On the track Sun Pillars, the Pellar II captured his unique sound well and let me appreciate his nimble-fingered play, while conveying the upper and lower registers of the piano well. The superb bass line was also well handled and was agile and fluid, while the subtleties of the amazing drummer in the trio and his gentle, delicate touches on cymbals and snare were nicely painted. Neither did the Pellar II skimp when it came to the dynamics of the drum kit.

No doubt, no-brainer

There is no doubt in my mind that at its asking price of £1,450, the Pellar II phono stage from AVID is a bit of a bargain. Its sound is detailed, dynamic, fast and musically engaging, conveying the subtleties of each musician or vocalist's contributions to the whole and making the music make sense. It is a huge improvement over its predecessor, the original Pellar, but stands on its own merits as extremely good value and a strong performer in the market against its competitors.

Pros

Clear sonic upgrade over the original Pellar — tighter bass, cleaner vocals, more detail
New capacitors and beefed-up power supply give a more open, weightier sound
Careful RIAA design, shielded case, oversized ground planes, hand-soldered parts for low noise and reliability
RCA-plug cartridge loading; custom values available
Impresses in both high-end and mid-tier systems
Dynamic, engaging, rhythmically strong across genres
Strong value

Cons

RCA-plug loading is less convenient than DIP switches for quick changes
Standard 500-ohm loading plugs may not suit every cartridge
Same board layout as the original — an evolution, not a redesign
No digital features (by design, but limits flexibility)

Specifications

Type: solid-state MM/MC phono
Phono inputs: RCA
Analogue outputs: single ended RCA
Input impedance: 47kohm – custom via loading plugs
Input capacitance: 100pF
Gain: 48/60/70dB
Output level: not specified
Signal to noise ratio: MM: < -81dB, MC: < -61dB
Size HxWxD: 70x160x253mm
Weight: 1.9kg
Warranty: 2 years (5 years with registration)