

Review of PS Audio Stellar Phono Preamp

by Dave Hjortland

PS Audio is a 46-year-old mid to high-end audio firm based in Boulder, Colorado. Its head and co-founder, Paul McGowan, is something of an internet presence (try searching on his name on YouTube) holding forth on a number of often interesting audio-related topics. The company is known for producing high-quality audio gear for relatively reasonable prices.

Last Fall PS Audio announced that they were going factory direct sale only, discontinuing selling through their dealer network. While this may result in some slight inconvenience to interested audiophiles, they are doing it right, offering same-day, paid shipping, a 30 day no-questions asked return policy, and even a trade-in program for old, non-PS Audio gear.

In the January issue of *Stereophile* Michael Fremer reviewed the new PS Audio Stellar phono preamp. Fremer praised the unit for its value for the dollar, being extremely pleasant to listen to, and concluded with, "I recommend a listen to the Stellar to *anyone* in the market for a new phono preamp, regardless of price." (I refer you to that review for a far more thorough and professional review than I can provide:

<https://www.stereophile.com/content/ps-audio-stellar-phono-phono-preamplifier.>)

Its primary designer, Darren Myers, was good enough to do a Zoom interview with our club last May 6th, and links for it are on the club's website. It is worth the time spent viewing. I found Myers' comments on the development of the Stellar Phono Preamp to be especially interesting.

I needed a phono preamp, and with the provisions of their direct sale program I figured I couldn't go wrong. Long story short, I didn't.

I ordered by phone, was impressed with the staff I spoke with, and the Stellar arrived promptly afterward. Out of the box my first impressions were favorable. It is unexpectedly hefty for its size, weighing in at 21.5 lbs. Fit and finish are very good. The Owner's Manual is well-written, informative, and quite complete. The unit handles both MM and MC carts, and switching between the two could allow the user to run two tonearms or two turntables. Dials on the rear allow for custom loading of MC carts. Inputs are RCA-type, outputs are RCA or balanced. A good after-market power cord is recommended, which I found to be very worthwhile in my systems. I also use vibration-damping footers under the unit.

In his review, analogue champion Fremer mentions concerns about the unit's sensitivity to grounding, ultralow capacitance cable, and RF and other types of interference. A prospective buyer should be aware of these concerns, but I have to say that I encountered

no issues like that whatsoever. I use mid-grade Nordost cabling, plugged it in, and after spending a short while getting to know the unit and its remote, was good to go. The unit does take a little getting used to. All controls (except the main power switch and MC loading dials on the rear) are managed through its remote, however, and one quickly gets comfortable with it.

At this point in time I've put a good number of audio miles on the Stellar and have used/experienced it in two very different systems (in my Minnesota home and in Sun City). I have used it playing a variety of popular, jazz, and classical discs. (I won't bore you with a detailed rundown of each one and its virtues.) Sound is layered and all there. Instruments and voices are well-defined and placed nicely in space, which is to say that soundstage and depth are presented very well and not over-emphasized. The sound goes "outside the box" when the recording permits it. The critical midrange frequencies especially are nuanced, transparent, and very "solid." The upper and lower ranges are extended and all there as well, though perhaps not quite as tactile as the midrange.

Listening is indeed pleasant through the Stellar. In the owner's manual, designer Myers says that the circuits, "were designed to be innately transparent and present the music with correct tonal balance," and that the unit, "always presents the music in the correct light." This seems rather lofty rhetoric, especially as he also states that he developed the sound "After hundreds of hours of listening with many different cartridges and systems," in other words, using his own ears and preferences, which strikes me as being a rather subjective process. If there was only one ideal, "absolute sound," we would not have hundreds of companies producing gear that appeals to different audiophiles with different tastes.

That said, I found the sound of my two systems with the Stellar in place to be extremely pleasing, impressive without being overbearing or emphasizing any particular range of frequencies (though see comments about the midrange above). It is engaging from turn on to shut down, and never fails to draw you into your music.

With only one possible exception (in my experience) you will not obtain better sound anywhere near this price point. That one *possible* exception is the Parasound JC3+. It comes in for \$500 more than the Stellar, but is a John Curl design that has been one of the lowest-price active phono preamps in the Stereophile Class A ranking for the last few years. I owned its predecessor, the JC3, for a couple years, and just before acquiring the Stellar I had a 3+ in my system on loan for a few days. It is hard to fault, presenting a top-to-bottom balanced, detailed and engaging sound. Compared to the Stellar, its presentation seemed a bit more dry and therefore a bit less involving, though some audiophiles might well consider this to be more "accurate."

The Stellar is obviously not the last word in phono preamps. Would I trade my Stellar for a new Boulder 2108, 2-box unit with an eye-watering MSRP of \$52,000 (and cover feature of

the August **Stereophile**)? Of course, in a heartbeat. For audiophiles with far greater budgets than most of us, other options that approach or surpass the sound and abilities of the Stellar abound, BUT rivals start becoming available around \$10-12,000, and definite step ups in sound run higher than that. For my part, I think the Stellar is going to be in my system for a good long time...

I fearlessly predict that the Stellar Phono Pre will attain a Class A ranking from Stereophile next time its "Recommended Components" listings are published. I must absolutely concur with Framer's comments about the Stellar's performance, and urge anyone who is thinking of a phono pre to seriously consider it. Its price is \$2500 – not chump change by any means, but for what it is and the sound quality it provides, it has to be considered one of audio's major bargains.