

Aurorasound VIDA

Styling that reflects an older Japanese tradition conceals up-to-the-minute electronics in this flexible two-box high resolution phono stage from the pen of Shinobu Karaki
 Review: **Nick Tate** Lab: **Paul Miller**

Not all of the Japanese hi-fi manufacturers are vast corporates along the lines of Sony or Matsushita. Japan actually has a fair smattering of small specialist companies making quirky but interesting products aimed at the discerning few who can afford them. Aurorasound is one such example.

After 28 years of working for the Japanese subsidiary of Texas Instruments – as well as playing and teaching music – Shinobu Karaki is now designing phono stages for a living. His new Vinyl Disk Amplifier (VIDA) joins a thriving market for analogue-related products in his homeland, one that was among the very first countries to enjoy a vinyl revival.

OLD AND NEW WORLDS MEET

Superficially, the VIDA appears quaintly old-world: its late '60s styling isn't out of place next to, say, a similarly 'period' looking Leben tube amp. Yet peer inside its case and you'll see circuitry that's as modern as the latest Mitsubishi motor car. Precise wiring flows around a board stuffed with discrete componentry, which the manufacturer describes as 'carefully selected'.

And there's more intrigue, as you'll spy small, specially made Lundahl chokes (inductors or 'filter coils', as the company calls them) on the circuitboard. These play a key part in the overall design, permitting the use of an innovative LCR RIAA equalisation network. This makes what Karaki san calls 'the world's first LCR phono stage using discrete semiconductors,' no less.

Naturally it sports switchable moving-coil and moving-magnetic input sensitivity, complete with a high/low impedance selector on the front panel. There is also a rather large, orange backlit mute switch which

RIGHT: The VIDA comprises three building blocks – a switchable MM/MC gain stage followed by a wholly passive LCR RIAA network and then a final op-amp based output stage

proved extremely handy. Other useful facilities include a stereo-mono selector and subsonic filter. Aurorasound says that each switch uses a sealed small-size signal relay for high reliability and stability, and rhodium-plated RCA terminals are employed for low signal loss. Signal paths are short. Interestingly, there's also a cartridge degauss function, which owners of older pick-ups might find useful.

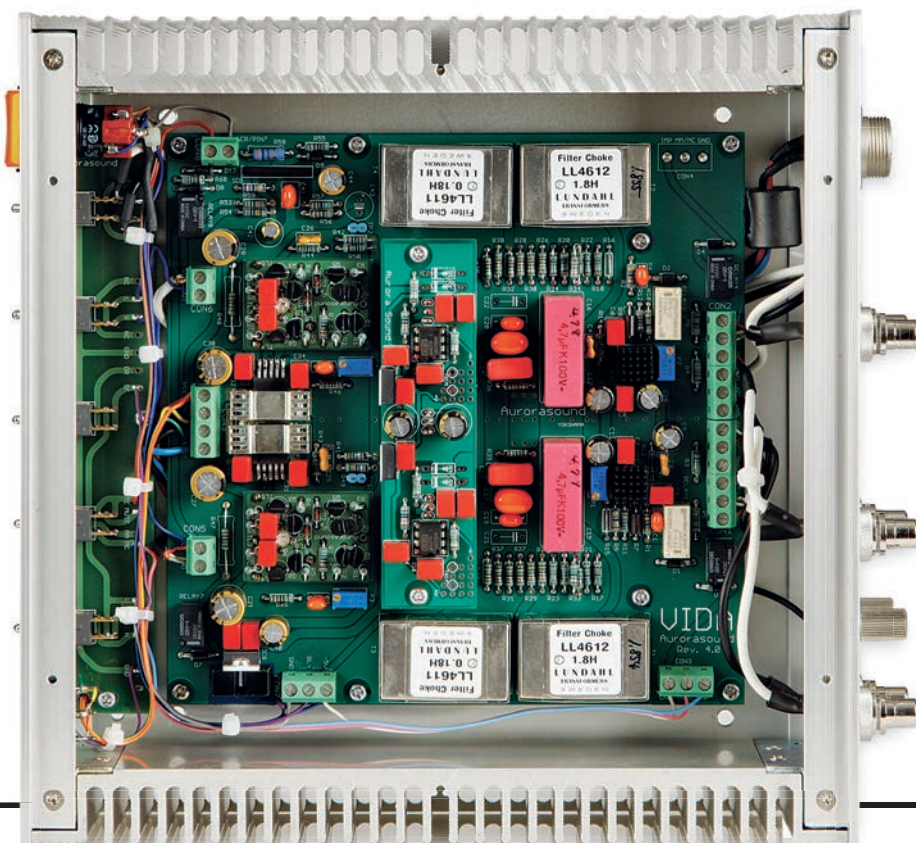
The VIDA package actually consists of two boxes – the main unit which comes in a wood sleeved case, and a separate power supply which is housed in a smaller all-aluminium box. Inside the latter is a toroidal transformer and Schottky barrier diode. Both units are very well finished, especially the main box, but prospective purchasers might question why they're stylistically so different. The main unit looks like something from another age, whereas

the power supply could be styled for the latest Chord DAC. An odd visual combination indeed!

NEUTRALITY AND NUANCES

Before auditioning, the Aurorasound was given a thorough run-in period in my reference system: a Michell GyroDec turntable, SME Series V tonearm and Lyra Delos and van den Hul Frog moving-coil cartridges, with a Goldring 2500 used to assess MM performance. Amplification is courtesy of Sugden IA4 solid-state and Canor TP134 valve integrateds, with Sendor D7 loudspeakers.

All too many phono stages veer to one extreme or another – they're either forensic to the *n*th degree, shining a laser light on the deepest recesses of the mix while losing the musical plot along the way, or they suffocate you on a diet of saccharine and flood the recording in sepia-tinged warmth. The Aurorasound





does neither, preferring instead to let the original recording engineer and/or producer decide the end result. What it gives then, is a very neutral, nuanced view of the musical performance.

Whereas so many phono stages manage to make everything sound as if it has been recorded in the same studio the VIDA does nothing of the sort. It lets each respective disc's flavour flood out, while resolutely refusing to draw attention to itself, being remarkably devoid of noise or grain. Feed it with a modern techno recording like 'Hazme Sonar' by Morenas, from *Ambient House, The Collection*, [DFC, BCM 422LP] for example, and the track's electronics swell around the soundstage with voluptuous depth and width.

The size of the recorded acoustic is exceptional, making rival (and highly regarded) designs feel positively shut in. Yet it doesn't do that old tube phono stage trick of sounding euphonic to achieve this end. Rather, the VIDA pulls the listener into a highly immersive but neutral rendition of the music which is almost as deep as it is wide, setting up bold images in all three dimensions.

Another impressive facet is its tonality, which doesn't resemble tube phono stages yet is eerily different from most transistor ones too. There's none of that cloying, honeyed warmth of the former, yet you don't get that chromium-plated upper midband that afflicts lesser solid-state designs. Instead, the product goes its own 'third' way, and shows itself to be remarkably neutral. Drop the needle on Chick Corea's 'Return To Forever' [ECM 1022 ST], and the VIDA forges a direct link between the groove and your auditory ossicles, supplying a vivid rendition of this classic jazz waxing.

NOTHING LOST

Although the midband is squeaky-clean, you would never call it sterile. Instead, the VIDA sounds natural and even, and this feeds down to a tight, taut bass whose power is perfectly judged. It can rumble with the best should the need arise, but it never seems to overwhelm. In the treble it comes across as bright, open and spacious, yet totally devoid of grain

'Electric piano on the Corea track drips with rich harmonics'

ABOVE: A handy mute button dominates the fascia, next to cartridge degauss, stereo/mono, subsonic filter, MC/MM and MC load switches

and splash. The cymbal work on the Chick Corea track was a revelation: you could really hear the drummer's subtle phrasing, yet tonally it had a lovely, sophisticated feel.

Last but certainly not least, the VIDA's sound is 'all of a piece' – with no sense of the music's rhythm being lost in translation. 'Girlfriend In A Coma',

from The Smiths' *Strangeways Here We Come* [Rough Trade Rough 106], showed that, once again, that its lovely glass-clear midband is the root of all that's good in this phono stage. It

offers startling insight into a recording which can sound opaque, fuzzy and two-dimensional through lesser gear.

Happily though, both high and low frequencies follow suit and beat in perfect time with the midband, and the result is a wonderfully cohesive, unforced

JAPAN'S VINYL PASSION

Japan is a country full of paradoxes, and its relationship with the vinyl LP is one of them. On one hand, it is one of the most forward looking, technology-obsessed nations on the planet – its post-war economic boom was underwritten by the rise of solid-state electronics and microprocessors. Yet it's also an immense respecter of tradition, and loves precision artisan manufacturing. When CD arrived, it was the world's first adopter, yet the size of the country and its audiophile market was such that vinyl never really went away. By the early '90s, the huge popularity of jazz, and the dissatisfaction of some with CD's sound, was likely the reason for vinyl's resurgence. First, BlueNote Japan and Impulse started re-pressing classics, and then a whole swathe of reissues followed, from The Beatles to Led Zeppelin. By 1995 vinyl was back in fashion – if for audiophile consumption only. Phono cartridge makers from Audio-Technica and Denon to Lyra and Koetsu began to reap the rewards, and they haven't looked back since.



ABOVE: While the main unit gets a retro look, the PSU could come from any 2013 product. It's well made though, with a big toroid inside

PHONO STAGE



ABOVE: The low noise enjoyed by the VIDA phono stage is achieved, in part, by use of an outboard PSU. Separate MM and MC input RCAs are selected on the front panel. The single-ended outputs, also on RCAs, are fixed rather than volume-driven

and enjoyable listen. The VIDA is tonally well lit, but doesn't get its speed from any artificial edge.

Put this altogether and the result is magnificent; the Fender Rhodes electric piano on the Chick Corea track drips with rich harmonics just as it should, while saxophones on The Crusaders' 'My Lady' from *Street Life* [MCA MCF3008], are as raw and reedy as you'll ever hear them at home. But cue up a well preserved classical long-player and you'll be in for an out-of-listening room experience you won't forget too soon. That spectacular depth and space, allied to the purity of tone that the Aurorasound displays and its utter absence of noise, is transfixing – Handel's *Messiah* by the Dunedin Consort and Players [Linn CKH3 12] sounded real enough to make me forgive my well-worn copy its last snap, crackle and pop.

SWITCHING TO MM

With the Goldring 2500 MM cartridge slotted in, results remained consistent with the low output findings, *ie*, the unit sparkled with detail and fizzed with energy, while staying as couth as this more modest pick-up permitted. That same stadium-sized soundstage again impressed, although the Goldring cartridge's limitations meant the effect wasn't quite as profound.

Still, cueing up a 45rpm twelve-incher of Gary's Gang's 'Keep On Dancing' [SAM Records 23-10885] saw the VIDA inciting me to do precisely that... The command it showed of the track's synthesised basslines was remarkable, following its every undulation down to seemingly subterranean levels, and matching weight with subtlety.

A product as well honed as this is hard to fault, and any such comments can sound churlish so the following is more of an observation. Great high-end products are designed without compromise – no consideration is paid to any inadequacies in the recording and replay chains in which they find themselves. And so anyone wishing to purchase a phono stage that flatters or deceives should look elsewhere.

This won't have your mediocre turntable or rotten mid-price pressing singing like it was at its own 21st birthday party. Rather, the Aurorasound is unromantic and doesn't suffer foolishness gladly – so you're going to need a highly capable vinyl front end. Even thus equipped, bear in mind that the VIDA's well-lit treble favours immaculate vinyl surfaces.

The Aurorasound VIDA is one of vinyl's little wonders, then. Looking like something from another age, it gives no visual clue about the design and engineering calibre internally. It simply confirms vinyl as the amazingly capable medium that it is. ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

This quintessentially Japanese slice of analogue exotica is artfully engineered to give a coruscatingly incisive and detailed sound, yet one that's genuinely musical too. Impressively devoid of noise, it provides a wide open window onto the vinyl groove yet it never sounds coldly forensic or overly romantic. The VIDA should win many friends here, as it already has in Japan.

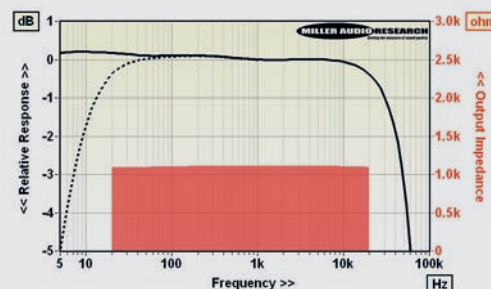
Sound Quality: 83%



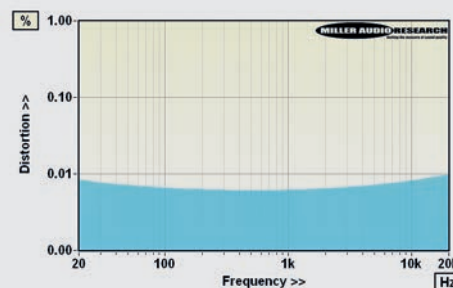
AURORASOUND VIDA

Bearing in mind the extra gain required to accommodate a passive RIAA network, especially for MC pick-ups, Aurorasound has achieved a creditable combination of good sensitivity and very low noise. In its MM setting, the VIDA offers +38.4dB gain (47kohm/250pF loading) which is equivalent to a 416mV output for a 'standard' 5mV MM signal input. This is a few dB below other MM phono stages but more than sufficient to drive any modern preamp and comes complete with a generous input overload margin of 160mV and an A-wtd S/N ratio of 80dB. The MC input includes an additional +25.8dB of gain in the pre-RIAA input stage, realising a total gain of +64.2dB. An MC with an output of 0.61mV will raise 1V from the VIDA, suggesting that even low output MCs may be used to good effect. The 76dB A-wtd S/N ratio is very good but the 9mV overload margin is less generous – relatively – than that for the MM stage, precluding the use of higher output MCs.

Distortion is impressively low at <0.01% from 20Hz-20kHz, the minimum of 0.005% appearing through the midrange at 1V output [see Graph 2, below]. No pick-up cartridge will match this, so the VIDA is essentially 'transparent' from the perspective of THD. Its equalised response is also very neutral – just +0.2dB/20Hz to -0.4dB/20kHz with a sensible ultrasonic roll-off reaching -15dB/100kHz. The low bass extension of its DC-coupled output stage is extreme, showing a mild subsonic lift of +0.2dB from 5Hz-20Hz while the subsonic filter is useful for record warps only with a mild attenuation of -5dB/5Hz [see Graph 1, below]. Only the high 1.1kohm output impedance is disappointing. Readers may view a QC Suite test report for Aurorasound's VIDA phono amp by navigating to www.hifinews.co.uk and clicking on the red 'Download' button. PM



ABOVE: RIAA corrected freq. resp. from 5Hz-100kHz (black, subsonic filter dashed) with o/p imp (red)



ABOVE: Distortion versus frequency from 20Hz-20kHz at 1V output. Typically <0.01% through audio range

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Input loading (MM / MC)	47kohm/250pF / 42ohm (High)
Input sensitivity (re. 0dBV, MM/MC)	12.1mV / 614µV
Input overload (re. 1% THD, MM/MC)	163mV / 8.6mV
Maximum output (re. 1% THD)	13V (1.1kohm o/p impedance)
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBV, MM/MC)	80.0dB / 76.3dB
Frequency response (20Hz-20kHz)	+0.21dB to -0.42dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, re. 0dBV)	0.006-0.01%
Power consumption	9W
Dimensions (WHD)	260x100x250mm