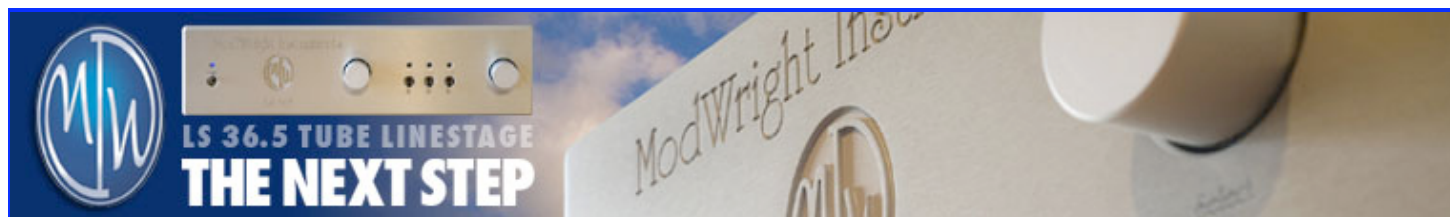


CONSTANTINE SOO'S
dagOGO Review
 A UNIQUE AUDIOPHILE EXPERIENCE

Dagogo Sponsors



70 miles from nowhere, **Audio DIY** in the Heartland

Musical Surroundings Nova Phonomena

Phono Pre-amplifier

Bill Epstein
 March, 2008



"That evening, Polyphemus herded his flock of sheep and goats into his cave and, for safekeeping, rolled a huge boulder across the entrance, not knowing the Greeks were inside. On seeing the one-eyed giant.

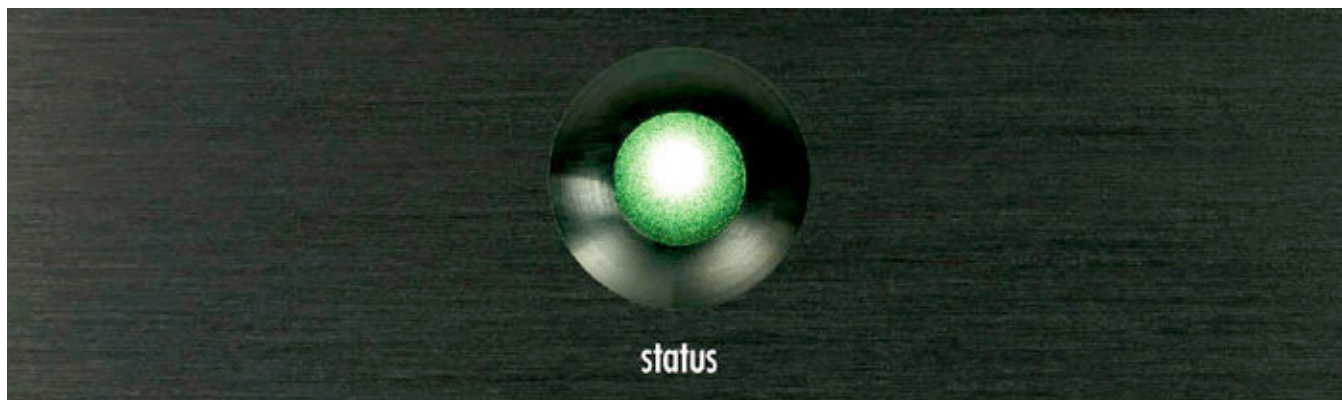
Odysseus and his men gasped in disbelief, giving away their hiding place. Polyphemus rushed forward and killed two of the men, then devouring them both for his dinner, he then fell fast asleep. Odysseus relished the thought of killing Polyphemus, but knowing full well he and his men could never remove the boulder from the cave entrance, conceived a plan on how to escape. On waking the next morning Polyphemus caught two more of Odysseus' men, and ate them both for breakfast. He then rolled back the boulder, allowing just enough room for his flock to get out, then rolling the huge rock back into place, leaving the Greeks inside ready for his next meal."

When not playing music, this Polyphemus is either staring with or blinking its big red eye. When staring, the two discrete channels of NIMH batteries are fully charged. Blinking means the batteries are charging. The Nova Phonomena will play in either case but when enough charge is present, touching the eye (you don't need a sharpened tree trunk) will change its color from red to green and the charging circuit is disconnected, leaving the unit solely on battery power. The batteries contain enough charge to power a full evening of music and last well into the next day.

The all-discrete transistor circuit is based on that of designer Michael Yee's more-expensive Super-Nova phono stage. Its small case is easily placed right next to the turntable, which I did with no problems with RF or AC line interference. This is owing to the DC battery-charging transformer being of the "wall wart" type.

Reading the quotation from the *Odyssey*, you might think I was put off by that Big Red Round Eye, and you'd be right. I'm more for the cool, less obtrusive blue or green LED type. I was also less than thrilled with the coarse metal surface of the case. I judge it to be about 400 grit, which is enough to remove the dead skin cells on your fingertips every time you handle the box and deposit them on the surface, which then resists cleaning. Unsightly. This would be a small thing except that, to take advantage of the incredible loading and gain flexibility of this phono stage, it's necessary to handle the box quite often. Now that I have my complaints out of the way, time to check out those controls.

A phono cartridge is a transformer, whether moving-magnet or moving-coil, it uses wire windings to convert the vibrations of the stylus to a musical signal. Consequently, the loading, the resistance of the coils, is extremely important to its performance, especially for moving-coil cartridges.



Moving-coil designs have input loadings that vary by design from roughly 50 to over a thousand ohms. Most moving-coil phono stages under \$1000 have just one input load, 1000 ohms, often said to be the "ideal". That's just not true. Matching the load to the cartridge, or, more to the point, mismatching, is clearly audible. The differences are on a par with the physical alignment of the phono cartridge interface with the record surface. Small incremental changes result in the bloom or collapse of the soundstage, level of bass and transient attacks, the overall tone and texture of the music and finding that fine line between sufficient detail and treble over-emphasis.

The ability to control input loading over a wide range allows one to choose the "correct" loading for a particular cartridge and be done with it, or use the flexibility as a tool to tailor the musical signal to one's taste. The Nova Phonomena has an incredible 17 different loading positions from 30 to 100,000 ohms in a

roughly logarithmic progression. Set by DIP switches on the rear panel, there are sets for each channel.

There are a second set of switches, again, one set for each channel to adjust the gain of the unit. These switches give 13 different settings from 40 to 60 decibels in a *reverse* logarithmic progression that become finer as the gain is increased. Once again, depending on the electrical output of ones cartridge, and the input sensitivity of the subsequent amplification, the gain may be set and forgotten about. The truly obsessive audiophile, could, if so desired, have different gain settings for left and right channels. This O-C person could compensate for room nodes and tailor the bass output of one channel, for example, to better balance the speakers to the room. Did I try it? Of course. If I wasn't a little crazy I wouldn't be a reviewer.

Further, if one has speakers and amplifiers of varying sensitivity, the opportunity to adjust the gain to the overall system is a wonderful thing. Even better, the output may be used to compensate for the compression, or lack of it, in a particular recording: less gain for a '70's Rock album and more for an "audiophile" recording like the Telarc or original RCA Living Stereo. As I discovered with the Aqvox Phono 2CI with its dual current controls, matching the phono stage output to the amplification results in better sound.

My review of the Benz-Micro Ace L cartridge discusses the synergy between it and the Nova Phenomena, both in the financial and musical sense. The Ace L is thoroughly well-balanced from bass to treble, and with Benz' recommended impedance setting of 280 ohms, so is the Nova Phenomena. But where the Ace L steadfastly outputs every analog wiggle of the grooves, the Nova has the flexibility to take the voltage signal and create 17 different cartridges! Be warned; in the wrong hands, a great deal of mischief may be done. You won't damage your pre-amp at resistances higher than 600 ohms, but it definitely won't be happy.

Musical Surroundings sent me the unit with a 280-ohm setting. Switching to 380 ohms, the next setting up the scale, the Ace/Nova combination sounds more exciting with brighter, more metallic cymbal strikes and additional studio sounds but the bass is less defined, the soundstage collapses a bit and voices that tend to be edgy in the upper treble like Allison Kraus, Emmy Lou Harris and Laura Nyro, become shrill. Lower resistance results in deeper bass and a more forgiving character. I came back to 280 ohms.

Once these two components had more than 50 hours on them, and I concluded mischief-making, I proceeded to sample the Ace/Nova combo with my current (mainly loaned, not the money, the speakers, cables and amps) \$100,000 dollar reference system: the over-achieving KAB Technics SL-1210 M5G turntable, Audio Research LS-1 Linestage (with a few tweaks), Red Rock Audio Renaissance mono-blocks, XLH 1812 speakers and MAC Palladium interconnects and Cu speaker cables. In this context, the Technics turntable can be sometimes heard straining against its limitations; but I wonder how many Ace owners will play it in an Acutus or HRX?

Right at this very moment, I'm listening to the Cleveland Orchestra and George Szell play the Dvorak *Eighth Symphony*, in mono, on Epic. Even over the three fans in my computer I can hear the *piano* bass tones right down into their wood bodies. Maurice Sharps flute, Bernard Adelsteins trumpet and John Macks oboe come through with wonderful clarity and tone. And the strings: shimmering on the highs of the *decrescendo* answered by the trumpet at the end of the second movement.

My serious-in-my-listening-chair auditions began with the dreadful pressing/wonderful mastering of the recent Classic records Diana Krall, *From This Moment On*. Aside from my own thoughts on the sound, several of my audiophile friends remarked the same thing: 'her voice sounds so natural'. I'm in complete agreement. Beyond that, the imaging is just first rate. Ace/Nova layers drums, bass and guitar so well in the piano quartet and the horn sections, when present, are well back and widely spaced across the front wall. Special note must be taken of the artistry of Jeff Hamilton who uses his brushes to add texture to the rhythm.

Last night I was listening to *The Montreux Collection*, cuts from the most recorded Jazz Festival of all time in 1975. This is a really great compilation and a terrific live recording. The last cut on side 4, "Dizzy", has Tommy Flanagan on piano. I was thinking as I was listening to him play trills in the top octave that the keys

rang just like they did years ago at home on our Steinway. Those last seven keys are where the piano runs out of breath. The sound is so distinctive up there, and seldom reproduced properly. Usually, either the percussiveness is lost or the notes ring over-long. This was done right enough to evoke memories.

I hesitate to pick out any more of these vignettes, because listening to the Nova Phenomena driven by the Ace L really isn't about strengths or weaknesses of the bass, mid-range and treble. It's about balance. If you have the amplification and speakers to reproduce it, you will hear low-bass texture and tone that lets you hear, not just the notes, but the strings vibrating, even electric bass. I find that remarkable. If the mid-range of the recording is rich or lean, you will hear that. The highs, which are to me the summit of the high-end and what lots of dollars of necessity must be spent on, are pure and ever so gently rolled off. A wonderful price/performance engineering compromise was made here. The result is low surface noise, a complete lack of artifice and yet excellent detail, air and imaging. Balanced.

O.K., so what about those batteries? It's far quieter and more musical with inky black backgrounds on batteries, right?

Well, there is a touch more air in the treble on batteries but I strained to hear it. Maybe it's the Technics turntable or maybe it's my aging ears but I heard no additional noise at the mouth of the 97dB efficient horns with the red light on, Roxanne. In fact, there's no sound at all either way. Batteries should provide cleaner, steadier power so perhaps a higher-end cartridge and table would reveal more of a difference.

Keeping in mind that the total cost of the Nova Phenomena and Benz-Micro Ace L are about the same as the total cost of just the parts in my DIY amplifier, or that of the next really meaningful step up in a cartridge by itself, each individually and the pair especially, are an overwhelming bargain.

[Other reviews by Bill Epstein](#)

[DAGOGO's Staff and their articles](#)

Please send us your feedback: editor@dagogo.com

©Dagogo 2008