

Music Hall MMF 2.1LE Turntable, Thorens TD 190-1 Turntable, and Bellari VP129 Tube Phono Preamplifier



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Two affordable turntables and the bargain of a lifetime (tube) phono preamp.

Music Hall MMF 2.1LE Turntable

For years I've recommended that friends planning to spend less than \$500 on a source purchase a CD player rather than an inexpensive turntable, assuming that one would have to shell out around \$800 on something like a Rega P3 and a decent cartridge to fully appreciate the advantages of vinyl. So, I asked myself, could Music Hall's striking Ferrari-red MMF 2.1 LE, priced at \$399 with arm and cartridge (or \$349 in basic black), outperform a good CD player in this range?

The answer is not entirely clear. While the Music Hall doesn't have the rock-solid speed stability, low noise, or extended frequency response of its digital counterparts, it was, for me, more natural sounding and musically engaging. It

gives you a good taste of analog magic. I can listen to this 'table all day without aural fatigue—something I can't say about inexpensive digital players.

Music Hall makes the set-up process relatively painless by pre-installing and aligning its Music Tracker cartridge. You can be up and running in less than ten minutes, provided you can loop the anti-skate weight around its post in less time than it took me. If you're a novice, the manual does a good job leading you through the process.

The first album I use to evaluate analog gear is *Adagio* [DG]. While it's not one of the great "tulip" DG recordings, if the massed string tone is too bright or edgy, I know I'm in for a rough ride. Mercifully, the strings sounded relatively rich, warm, and natural with the Music Hall. On higher-quality reis-

sues like Prokofiev's *Lt. Kije* [RCA/Classic Records] and *Rossini Overtures* [Decca/Speakers Corner], massed strings sounded even better. Yes, I could hear some pitch wobble on sustained tones, but I'm willing to live with that, particularly at this price level, for better timbres and less listening fatigue.

I was surprised by how much more appealing voices and saxes sounded on the Music Hall than on CD players in this price range. Voices typically had more body and air, were sweeter, and had superior timbre without thinness or stridency. The same goes for saxophone. Admittedly, this sweetness may be too much of a good thing, but just listen to Mirella Freni's dulcet voice on *French and Italian Opera Arias* [EMI] or Ben Webster's airy sax on *Ben Webster Meets Oscar Peterson* [Speakers Corner/Verve], and you'll clearly hear why so many of us are taken with analog. I had meant to sample just one track on each LP but found myself listening to entire albums—sorry, but this doesn't happen with most modestly-priced CD players.

Still, those of you who have different sonic priorities may prefer a good mid-priced CD player, such as the \$499 NAD C 542. The NAD's midrange is the best I've heard in this range, but it's not quite as natural sounding as the Music Hall's. However, the NAD offers superior speed stability, more extension at the frequency extremes, better transient speed, and greater detail. On most audiophile "scorecards" the NAD would probably win, yet I found the Music Hall to be more satisfying, even though you need to be able to "hear through" a higher noise floor to get to the music. And because this 'table is designed to hit a price point, you're not going to get the precise imaging, fine detail, or sense of music emerging from a black background that you'll get with more expensive models.

The bright-red MMF 2.1LE has been one of the few audio components passing through my listening room that has caught the eye of my 18-year-old daughter. She thought it looked "very cool" and after hearing the difference between it

and her iPod said, "I want it!" Her first LP is the excellent Classic Records reissue of *Led Zeppelin II*, which sounds a lot more thrilling and robust through the Music Hall than you'd expect. I suspect the 2.1LE will attract a lot of new enthusiasts to analog, and with all the used vinyl out there priced under \$2, it's cheaper than downloading songs at a buck a pop. If you or your relatives have a bunch of LPs in the garage gathering dust, treat yourself to a 2.1LE and start enjoying them.

Thorens TD 190-1

Rightly or wrongly, automatic turntables are associated with "mid-fi" gear. Yet many of us got into this hobby using 'tables with automated features. I started with a Garrard changer, moved up to a semi-automatic Philips GA-212, and, even after graduating to a manual Rega Planar 2, installed an aftermarket auto-lift device so I wouldn't have to jump up at the end of a record. There's no doubting their convenience, but how much of a performance penalty does one pay for automated features?

Supplied with the Ortofon OMB 10 cartridge, the \$599 Thorens TD 190-1 serves the music in the important middle frequencies. Whether you're listening to Joan Sutherland, Joni Mitchell, or Maria Callas, voices have an attractive smoothness without any objectionable sibilance or shrillness. Saxes, cellos, and violins sound rich and full. In fact, the TD 190-1 has a classic tube-amplifier-like sound, with a dollop of syrup, and although it does not offer the last word in dynamics or inner detail, you can listen to it for hours without aural fatigue.

I expected the Thorens to be a bit noisier than its manual counterparts, but I found it to be quite competitive. With the Thorens, music emerges from a blacker background than from

Bellari VP129 Tube Phono Preamplifier

Full-function preamps with integrated phonestages are becoming hard to find, so if you want to listen to vinyl these days you'll probably need to buy a separate unit. But many inexpensive solid-state models sound cold, flat, and edgy, while potentially better-sounding tube units tend to be pricey. At least until now.

For \$199, the Bellari VP129 tube phonostage offers warm musical sound and may be just what the doctor ordered for those who want to get into analog without loading up the credit card.

Although the Bellari uses an older circuit, it avoids some of the sonic limitations of many classic tube designs. In particular, it has better detail and transient speed. While the older preamps can sound really lush, they can also homogenize music—blunting the leading edges of transients and imparting a syrupy coloration. With later, edgy-sounding classical recordings this old-school tube lushness can be a good thing, but it can also



make listening less exciting. By contrast, the Bellari not only makes these records more listenable, but also preserves a lot of the excitement of the performances.

Listen to Ella Fitzgerald on *Take Love Easy* [Pablo], and you're likely to fall in love with the Bellari (as long as you don't

SPECIFICATIONS

MMF 2.1LE turntable

Type: Belt-drive, manual turntable with tonearm

Speeds: 33.3 and 45rpm

Dimensions: 17" x 4.5" x 13"

Weight: 17 lbs.

Music Tracker cartridge

Type: Moving-magnet

Output Voltage: 5mV

Loading: 47k/ohms

Recommended Tracking Force: 1.75 grams

Bellari VP129 phonostage

Type: Tube phonostage

Input Sensitivity: 30dB gain @ 1kHz

Output Impedance: 8 ohms headphone; 100 ohms RCA

S/N Ratio: >80dB unweighted

Dimensions: 6" x 5.4" x 2.5"

Weight: 2 lbs.

Thorens TD 190-1 turntable

Type: Belt-drive, fully automatic turntable with TP 19 tonearm

Speeds: 33.3, 45, and 78rpm

Dimensions: 17.3" x 4.7" x 14.2"

Weight: 13.3 lbs.

Ortofon OMB 10 cartridge

Type: Moving-magnet

Output Voltage: 4mV

Loading: 47k/ohms

Recommended Tracking Force: 1.25–1.75 grams

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

MFA Venusian preamp (modified); VPI Aries (updated with TNT V platter/bearing); Graham tonearm; Koetsu Black cartridge; Musical Fidelity Tri-Vista 21 DAC; Edge G-4 power amplifier; Hyperion HPS-938 loudspeakers; Quad ESL-57s (PK modified), etc.

listen at too high an output level—her vocal peaks sometimes overloaded the VP129, until I dialed down the volume control). Perhaps even better was the sound of Joe Pass' guitar on this album. It not only has natural body and rich tone, but you can also hear the initial transient of his fingers plucking the strings and the fingers of his left hand sliding over them. Admittedly, the Bellari does have a warm balance, but it's not overdone. And while the bass is full and a bit ripe, it is also extended and without serious bloat.


With only 30dB of gain, the Bellari is designed for moving-magnet cartridges, such as the Music Tracker or Ortofon OMB10 mentioned above. It worked well with the Thorens/Ortofon combo, but locked in better with the Music Hall and Tracker because the combination had more dynamic headroom and was quieter. In an

unfair test I tried it with my Koetsu, but that cartridge's meager 0.6mV output meant that I had to crank the Bellari's gain control to 2 o'clock, resulting in a sound that was too flat, noisy, and dynamically constricted. Inserting a moving-coil step-up transformer helped considerably, but still caused a sonic mismatch because the Koetsu's boosted signal sometimes overloaded the Bellari, producing audible distortion. While the Bellari can lose its composure on dynamic peaks (its biggest failing), I found this problem was far less obvious with moving-magnet cartridges. In short, I'd stick with the manufacturer's recommendations when it comes to cartridges.

With a single 12AX7A tube in the output stage, the Bellari enables "tube rollers" to tailor the sound according to personal tastes (within limits). It also includes a rumble filter to eliminate

low-frequency "nasties" that can make your woofers (or subwoofers) go wild. In addition, it can do double-duty as a headphone amplifier, offering both adjustable gain and a mute switch that cuts off the signal to the RCA jacks but not to the headphone jack.

At this price point, you can expect some compromises in performance, but

the Bellari's are mostly sins of omission. Yes, you'll lose some dynamic range, fine resolution, and soundstage depth, but these are also the performance limitations of some of the 'tables and cartridge combinations likely to be paired with the Bellari. What you'll get in return is a highly listenable and engaging sound. 

MANUFACTURER AND DISTRIBUTOR INFORMATION

MUSIC HALL AND BELLARI MUSIC HALL

108 Station Road
Great Neck, New York 11023
(516) 487-3663
musichallaudio.com

Prices: MMF 2.1LE, \$399 (with Music Tracker Cartridge installed); Bellari VP129, \$199

THORENS Q-USA, INC.

462 North Baldwin Street
Madison, Wisconsin 53703
(608) 237-1726
q-usa.com

Price: \$599 (with Ortofon OMB 10 cartridge installed); Ortofon OMB 10, \$90 (if purchased separately)
