

Musical Fidelity Nu-Vista 800

Fifteen years after launching the Nu-Vista preamplifier, Musical Fidelity surprises us with a high-end integrated amplifier using nuvistor valves: the 300W Nu-Vista 800
 Review: **Ken Kessler** Lab: **Paul Miller**

As Yogi Berra said, 'It's like *déjà vu* all over again.' It certainly doesn't seem as if 16 years have passed since the debut product to carry the Musical Fidelity 'Nu-Vista' tag appeared, but it was in August 1998 that *HFN* ran the scoop review on the Nu-Vista preamplifier. In August 2014, Antony Michaelson arrived with his new nuvistor-equipped integrated amplifier, the Nu-Vista 800.

At £7999, it's exceptional value: the circa-1998 £1200 price of the original preamp translates to around £2000 in today's money, so the remaining £5999 buys a 300W/ch dual-mono power amp. Blessedly, it unashamedly eschews gadgetry, with any extras being purely of the 'useful' variety: remote control for sofa spuds, a display of input and level you can switch off, selectable home theatre pass-through for one of the line inputs, extra speaker terminals for bi-wiring.

The 39kg Nu-Vista 800 possesses a fascia machined from solid, mil-spec aluminium, with a finish worthy of a watchcase. The sides are fitted with heatsink extrusions that work well – after beating the amplifier for 36 hours solid, it was barely warm. The unit comes with spikes for the feet, and cups to protect floors; I used the unit without, nestling on the AudioCarpet.

Any of you who have thrown up your hands in despair upon seeing the back of an A/V receiver with 60-plus sockets will rejoice in the 800's minimalist posterior. A copper panel houses, in addition to the quartets of multi-way binding posts: phono sockets for four line-level sources, a balanced XLR input, plus pre-out and line-out. That's it. Except for one bit of frivolity.

This is, after all, from the man who gave us illuminated feet, as if in homage to Fred Astaire. Because nuvistors are the '800's *raison d'être*, they light up. Moreover, the colour changes from red to yellow to

green to indicate the state of warm-up. The gimmick? The feet are down-lit, too. Those of a sober mien can, via remote or the display button on the panel, scroll through eight lighting permutations, including all lights off. I left 'em on.

SO WHY NUVISTORS?

But back to the nuvistors, and why Musical Fidelity brought this out when the catalogue has no shortage of big amps. Nuvistor tubes were designed in the late 1950s, specifically to tackle all that was deficient in glass-bodied vacuum tubes. If there was a design brief, it must have addressed reliability, size, microphony,

overall performance and consistency between manufacturing batches. It achieved all of this... just as the transistor was becoming viable.

If an analogy is apposite, shed a tear for Bulova, which developed the superlative (and, it must be said, truly cool-looking) Accutron, a timepiece that might have been designed for audiophiles: an electronic watch in which a tuning fork controlled the frequency. So what happened? The Japanese perfected quartz. Boom – suddenly the Accutron is history.

Launched by RCA in 1959, the nuvistor appeared in the company's TV sets and other RF applications, but it was soon



RIGHT: A pair of nuvistor triodes drive no fewer than five pairs of Sanken power transistors per channel. Note the pair of toroidal PSU transformers and dual-mono amplifier layout



superseded by the transistor. Supplies languished, with Antony Michaelson finally rediscovering them in the mid-1990s.

NuVistors were plentiful but, according to Antony, 'Bases were impossible to obtain. For at least three years after the launch of the original Nu-Vista series, I tried to get more bases, but eventually gave up.' In early 2013, he started thinking about these tubes again and 'was able to locate what are probably the last nuvistor bases on Planet Earth' [see boxout].

For the '800, Musical Fidelity has moved Nu-Vista along from its progenitors through the use of 'state of the art surface mount design PCB techniques, the new designs benefiting from the freedom of layout that they offer'. I took a feed out from the '800 to compare the preamp section side-by-side with an original Nu-Vista preamplifier, and noted that 1) the family resemblance is uncanny, but 2) the newer unit is quieter and with more authentic bass.

Along with better surface mount technology, other evolutionary changes include CAD/CAM PCB design and software control for the volume and switching. The

Nu-Vista '800's front-end is sited on the same PCB as the input circuitry to keep all PCB tracks as short as possible, to provide immunity to stray hysteresis fields from the transformers. The nuvistor stage itself is visible through the top plate of the '800.

Beyond its physical resemblance to Musical Fidelity's outrageous Titan power amp, the latter also serves as the basis for the amplification stage. In the interim, Musical Fidelity has made improvements to the circuit. Overall configuration is dual mono, with separate mains transformers for each channel.

LET THERE BE LIGHT

OK, so switch-on results in a dazzling display of colours, as if the Aurora Borealis had mated with a piece of hi-fi equipment. I have no problem with gimmicks not in the signal path, but I do have a problem with the tedium of minimalist 'black boxes' devoid of perceived value. Musical Fidelity


'This was an amp capable of copious amounts of precise extended bass'

ABOVE: Minimalism rules, with only massive rotaries for volume and source, and buttons below for power on/off and display settings; all functions controllable by a solid metal remote

most assuredly does not listen to the audiophile who thinks that, in order for a component to be taken seriously, it has to look like crud. High-end audio is a luxury field, and the goods should reflect this. The '800 emphatically tells its owner that this is no ordinary unit.

Fed by the Marantz CD12/DA12 in balanced mode and the Denon DVD-2900 universal player in line mode, as well as the Astell & Kern AK120 digital player, the '800 drove Wilson Audio Alexias [*HFN* Mar '13] through Transparent Reference cables. This was the initial test, because the Alexias are hungrier than they first seem.

As it turned out, the '800 had no problems whatsoever, even driving them to levels that I would never suffer for more than a few seconds. The single track that made me sit back and go 'Whoa!' came from Hall and Oates, the punchy 'Africa' from *Voices* [Mobile Fidelity UDSACD 2114]. It opens with frenetic 'tribal' drumming, such that I was reminded of Kodo without feeling any need to look for their CDs, it's that much of a slammer.

Within seconds of firing up the '800, I knew that here was an integrated amp capable of delivering copious amounts of controlled, extended, precise bass. (I should remind you that my reference amplifier is the D'Agostino Momentum Stereo Power Amplifier at five times the price.) The '800 was not shamed, lacking only a trace of absolute mass. In other 

NU-VISTA THEME

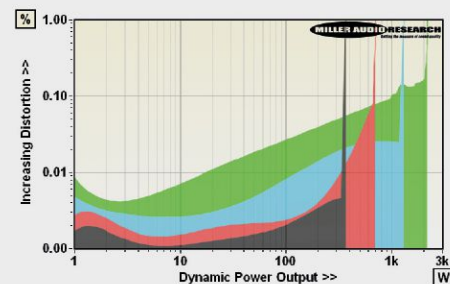
Remembering when Antony Michaelson first realised what he could do with nuvistors, and knowing that only Conrad-Johnson had used them before in a high-end audio context, I saw that his delight was contained only by the finite number of valve bases – not the tubes themselves. He had secured valves to produce the original Nu-Vista series of Preamplifier, M3 Integrated, 300 Power Amp and 3D CD Player. As he recently described the results, 'They gave an almost perfect balance between state-of-the-art transistor and tube design.' Because of the limited number of tube bases, the Nu-Vista models were produced in limited numbers and were – seemingly – a *cul de sac* in audio history, legendary products that appeared to be the *dernier cri* for the nuvistor. But that is to underestimate Michaelson, who knew that there were still multiple thousands of nuvistors out there. So what did he do? He found a company to make nuvistor bases exclusive for Musical Fidelity. All together now: 'Doh!' It's called *initiative*.

MUSICAL FIDELITY NU-VISTA 800

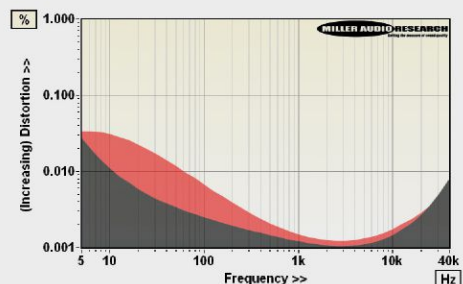
This nuvistor/bipolar hybrid integrated amplifier marks a return to Musical Fidelity's familiar stomping ground, although the provisional 330W/8ohm power rating is likely to have been revised to 300W/8ohm by the time you read this lab report. In practice the Nu-Vista 800 delivers a massive 2x325W/8ohm and 2x580W/4ohm with sufficient reserve to accommodate peaks of 370W, 700W, 1.30kW and 2.17kW into 8, 4, 2 and 1ohm loads at <1% THD [see Graph 1, below]. The five pairs of output devices (per channel) offer a current limit of 46.5A, which is more than sufficient to cook any difficult loudspeakers!

Distortion is low at 0.001-0.004% from 20Hz-20kHz though our sample showed a higher level through bass frequencies via the right channel of this dual-mono design [see Graph 2]. Distortion barely increases with level from <0.001%/1W to 0.002%/100W and 0.005%/300W although this trend clearly increases with decreasing load impedance [see Graph 1]. The frequency response is sensibly tailored with -3dB points at 3Hz-85kHz and flat within the audio band to within +0.0/-0.2dB. The A-wtd S/N ratio is 'average' for an integrated amp at 86dB (re. 0dBW) but this is a subjectively pleasant white noise.

The digitally-governed volume control operates in 0.5dB steps over a 114.5dB range with an error of just +0.3dB over 90dB, +0.5dB over 100dB and +1.3dB over a full 110dB of its range. L/R channel balance tracking is good to within ±0.1dB over this same range – impossible to achieve with a conventional analogue potentiometer! Readers may view an in-depth QC Suite report for Musical Fidelity's Nu-Vista 800 amplifier by navigating to www.hifinews.co.uk and clicking on the red 'download' button. PM



ABOVE: Dynamic power versus distortion into 8ohm (black trace), 4ohm (red), 2ohm (cyan) and 1ohm (green) speaker loads. Maximum current is 46.5A



ABOVE: Distortion versus extended frequency at 10W/8ohm (5Hz-40kHz, left = black; right = red)



ABOVE: A delight for those who hate clutter: multi-way speaker taps paired for bi-wiring, four line inputs, one balanced input, line-out and pre-out, plus IEC mains

words, despite being voiced by a man whose idea of a pianist is Grigory Sokolov while mine is Jerry Lee Lewis, the '800 rocks.

RECREATING SPACE

While bass quality is one of the crucial elements that distinguishes decent, proper, audiophile-approved playback from the dreck that appeases the masses, it isn't everything. When dealing with stereo recordings, the recreation of space says as much about performance as the tonal accuracy, given the fragile nature of the audible clues to positioning. Here is the area where the '800 excelled to a point where I rank it alongside the very best I have ever heard.

With the remastered Four Seasons catalogue, *The Classic Albums* [Rhino R122795939], we have access to fantastic editions of the superlative recordings that exist to show off one thing: peerless harmonies. The 'Jersey Boys' not only pre-dated but certainly inspired The Bee Gees, The Beach Boys, The Searchers, The Hollies and The Tremeloes, who had a No 1 hit with The Four Seasons' 'Silence Is Golden'.

Here, the original version sounds smooth, detailed, but above all, cinematic in its spatial magnificence. The '800 is so open and transparent that you feel as if you could walk around each individual vocalist. On the same, otherwise rather lame album, *Born To Wander* – where they ill-advisedly latch on to the then-current craze for hootenanny-style folk – the net effect is, unfortunately, comically like the spoof music in *A Mighty Wind*, but with faultless harmonies.

Regardless of the (artistic) quality of the material, the '800 presents it with an almost schizophrenic balance: precisely what the nuvistor promises. Yes, I must return to the cliché about the nuvistor being the true bridge between the virtues of tubes and trannies, but this will be evident to anyone who can enjoy a decent demonstration. (It should include all-tube, all-solid-state and hybrid tube/transistor rivals, in order for this virtue to manifest itself without a shade of uncertainty.)

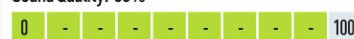
For that, I can recommend (but it shames me to do so) the stadium filler that is Foreigner's maudlin smash, 'Waiting For A Girl Like You' from *Foreigner 4* [Mobile Fidelity UDSACD 2053]. This track is awash with lush harmonies, synth-y swells, tasteful drumming, *ad nauseam*, but above all, a silky overall texture.

Fed with this, the '800 rises up like it was 1952 and it's time to unveil Cinerama. Its sound is huge, room-filling... grand rather than grandiose... persuasive rather than commanding. If I were allowed to use a wine analogy, this would be to most 'mega-amps' what Ornellaia is to Amarone. Too obscure? Then let's just say I'm at a loss for words. ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

Those who were lucky enough to savour original Nu-Vista models will know what's in store: the speed and punch of solid-state, with the 'love' you only get from valves. This is a stupendously powerful integrated in a relatively compact chassis. Its behaviour is impeccable. It suffers nothing – lightshow aside – superfluous. It is capable of both delicacy and machismo. And 16 years from now, we'll remember it!

Sound Quality: 88%



HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

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|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm) | 325W / 580W |
| Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm) | 370W / 700W / 1.30kW / 2.17kW |
| Output impedance (20Hz-20kHz) | 0.03-0.08ohm |
| Freq. response (20Hz-20kHz/100kHz) | -0.15dB to -0.20dB/-4.0dB |
| Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/300W) | 22mV / 373mV (balanced) |
| A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW/300W) | 86.0dB / 110.8dB |
| Distortion (20Hz-20kHz re. 10W/8ohm) | 0.001-0.004% |
| Power consumption (Idle/Max. o/p) | 120W / 935W |
| Dimensions (WHD) / Weight | 483x187x510mm / 45kg |