

Canor Asterion V2

This Slovakian brand's premium phono preamp is an all-tube design – with transformer step-up for MCs – and one of the latest to jump aboard the 'balanced bandwagon'!
 Review: **Jamie Biesemans Lab: Paul Miller**

Canor Audio has been around for nearly three decades, but it's only in the past few years the Slovakian company has stepped fully into the limelight. If you asked how the brand would describe itself, Canor's founders would likely say 'tube specialists'. This is fair, considering how much effort it puts into validating and testing valves before pressing them into its many tube products – and those it builds for other major brands, too. But if that might make this Slovak enterprise sound like an adherent of old-school, analogue-only hi-fi, you would be mistaken. In practice, its repertoire also embraces digital audio separates [including the 2.10 DAC – *HFN* Dec '22] and solid-state products, albeit mainly for third parties as Canor has its own hybrid designs.

CLEAR THINKING

The company's modern take on design and flexibility is part and parcel of the Asterion V2, launched together with the Virtus I2 integrated amplifier [*HFN* Mar '24]. Priced at £6000, this is a phono preamplifier that aims to entice demanding vinyl fans with its well-judged feature set. Think support for MM and MC cartridges, together with the ability to handle the balanced MC connections so beloved of Pro-Ject's Heinz Lichtenegger. Tubes are, of course, a key element of the equation.

At the same time, Canor's phono stage keeps things relatively simple compared to other high-performers, such as the £9999 Musical Fidelity Nu-Vista Vinyl 2 [*HFN* Feb '24], whose user-selectable EQ curves and multiple inputs catering to those with several turntables/tonearms can seem overwhelming. There's less of that here, as the Asterion V2 is more clear-cut and conceptually focused. Yes, it possesses

RIGHT: AC transformer [bottom right] is potted in resin and fully screened, feeding linear PSUs that include tube rectification [bottom PCB]. MC ins are via Lundahl transformers [top left] with MM/RIAA eq. achieved with quality passives and four 6922EH tubes per side [top right]

separate inputs for MM and MC (the second of those on both XLRs and RCAs), and you could theoretically connect multiple decks, but it feels more like a unit for building a straightforward but high-end vinyl system with a single turntable.

ORANGE APPEAL

There are silver or matt black options for the Asterion V2's full-sized anodised aluminium chassis, making it a visual match for the Virtus I2 and other stablemates. Either finish nicely complements the orange lighting around its large, central rotary, the lit Canor logo beneath and the dot-matrix style display off to the right of the fascia. Does this sound a bit showy? Well, it isn't, particularly as the orange illumination, evoking the 'warmth' of tubes, can be dimmed if required.

That large dial isn't a volume control, as the Asterion V2 lacks gain adjustment. Instead, it allows for quick selection of the correct load for the cartridge in use. This is more handy than fiddling with DIP switches on the rear or – even worse – inside, as is the case with many phono stages.

As you would expect, it's possible to switch between MM and two MC cartridge types – with a twist. The small buttons on the front let you select between MC1 and MC2, the difference being a higher gain and a different range of impedance values for the latter, resulting in three modes in total and eight choices of loading for each. The options are carefully chosen, on its face allowing you to match this phono preamp to a wide range of cartridges.

Par for the course, there's no faulting the fit and finish of the Asterion V2, both



inside and out. Canor has built a solid reputation for delivering the goods to its OEM customers, and its production skills are really on show here, as with the Virtus I2 amp. There's no mistaking the blue PCB [see inside pic, p58] utilising the company's CMT 'hole' technology, intended to reduce parasitic capacitances that might hinder tube performance by mimicking the advantages of wired connections. There are also distinct PCBs to keep the left and right signal paths physically separate, while the main PSU transformer is potted in resin and encased in a thick metal cover to reduce the impact of microphony and electromagnetic interference.

Internally, the Asterion V2 immerses a fully passive RIAA equalisation stage into

a high-gain preamp utilising four 6922EH triodes per channel (plus a 6CA4EH employed as rectifier in the anode PSU). The rated +46dB gain suffices for most MM cartridges [see PM's Lab Report, p61] while MCs are given an added boost by a high-

'The Edge's guitar bounced around the soundstage'

quality Lundahl step-up transformer. High-output MCs will be best used into the MM input here [see PM's boxout, below].

QUIETLY DOES IT

Slipping Canor's flagship phono preamp between an ELAC Miracord 90 Anniversary turntable [*HFN* Jul '17], my trusty Primare PRE35/A35.8 pre/power [*HFN* Dec '19 & May '22] and Focal Sopra N°2s [*HFN* Sep '15], all was set for some serious vinyl listening. The Asterion V2 obliged with an authoritative,

ABOVE: Canor's bold but dimmable dot-matrix display indicates the selected input and loading. The large rotary allows the user to scroll through both the impedance and capacitive loading for MCs and MMs, respectively

presentation that arises from a quiet background. Just don't expect a 'fat' tube-infused sound. The bottles here are instead put to good use to ensure the Asterion V2 combines richness with excellent clarity, displaying fine detail as good as your chosen cart can extract from the vinyl.

I've swapped the ELAC deck's original D90E18 MM cartridge, a rebranded Audio-Technica AT440MLB with a line contact stylus, to a VM750SH, a dual-magnet design with a Shibata stylus, and this tracked U2's *Zooropa* with complete security. Recorded shortly after their Zoo TV Tour in 1993, in collaboration with producers Brian Eno and Flood, this

album is without doubt the most eccentric the superstar band has created, and still sounds remarkable now, particularly via its yellow vinyl 30th anniversary reissue [Universal UMC 5599259].

LAVISH SOUNDS

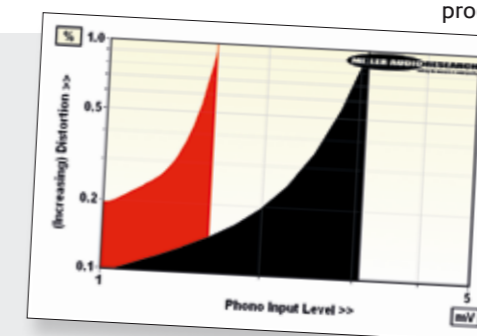
This saw some remastering done by guitarist The Edge, cleaning up the presentation and adding more in the way of low bass extension. With Canor's preamp pulling the strings, this new 'weight' was very noticeable during 'Babyface', where Adam Clayton's droning bassline sounded invitingly full-bodied, and elsewhere the album's lavish production was in full view. When the title track revs up, The Edge's guitar is infused with more delay than ever, bouncing around the soundstage, and the



MIND YOUR HEAD(ROOM)

While typical MM pick-ups are rated at 3-5mV output, and MCs some 10x lower, in practice they'll all deliver far higher signal levels when tracking very highly modulated vinyl grooves. As such, it's important every phono stage has sufficient input headroom to accommodate these increased levels without clipping.

In practice, with its passive RIAA soaking up a lot of gain, the Asterion V2's input headroom is less generous for its balanced MC1 and MC2 in/out – we saw something similar with the all-tube Zesto Andros Deluxe II [*HFN* Sep '21] and ModWright PH 9.0 [*HFN* Feb '22]. For example, the MC2's huge +82.5dB gain yields an unusably high sensitivity of 75µV (or 150µV in single-ended/RCA mode) and an input limit of just 1.6mV/1600µV [red trace, inset Graph]. Even the MC1 input [black trace] has a high 136µV sensitivity and a correspondingly low input overload threshold of 3.1mV (a margin of just +15.8dB with a default 500µV-rated MC). There is a 6dB reduction in sensitivity and 6dB improvement in headroom with MCs used via the single-ended/RCA outs but all this still suggests the Asterion V2 is best used with very low-output MCs only. PM



CANOR ASTERION V2



ABOVE: Standard single-ended RCA inputs are offered for one MM and one MC with an XLR for balanced MC connections. Outputs are on RCAs and balanced XLRs

Asterion V2 delivered it with assured definition and positioning.

There was excellent separation – a strong point of Audio-Technica’s MM, but a forte of the Asterion V2 too – which brought openness and depth to *Zooropa*’s often multi-layered compositions. Additionally, and provided you’ve set it up right (and your turntable), this phono stage reveals oodles of fine detail against a very, very quiet background. With these poppy U2 songs we’re not talking about the vibrations of snares and the wooden instruments of a traditional classical piece, but samples echoing into the distance. This sounded entirely ‘natural’ at the tail end of ‘Babyface’, while the full-bodied analogue synthesiser notes during ‘Numb’ were a joy to experience.

TAKE A SEAT

Changing from the ELAC Miracord 90 Anniversary to an EISA Award-winning Pro-Ject X2 B [HFN Sep ’22] with MC9 cartridge, I was treated to more serious late-night vibes when spinning *Songs For The Cosmic Sofa* [Milan 19658870761], a collection of tunes created by Japanese jazz composer Yoko Kanno and played by ad hoc grouping The Seatbelts.

I will stress here that I hooked up the X2 B turntable single-ended to Canor’s phono preamp, selecting the unit’s MC1 mode and a load of 300ohm. First out of necessity, as the requisite cable to connect the 5-pin mini-XLR output (which Pro-Ject is now providing on most of its decks) to the XLR inputs on the Asterion V2 was missing in action.

This turned out to be fortuitous, as the result was excellent as it stood, and PM’s Lab Report [opposite] indicated the single-ended/lower gain route would be the better choice with this cartridge anyway. And when a replacement Pro-Ject Connect it Phono DS cable was eventually delivered, I still preferred the single-ended

connection for its more fluid sound and natural high-frequency detail.

Anyway, the tunes on *...Cosmic Sofa* were originally created for the milestone anime series *Cowboy Bebop* – not the derivative Netflix version – but Kanno re-recorded them last year for this vinyl release. ‘The Real Folk Blues’ made for especially satisfying listening, the Asterion V2 giving the carefully plucked guitar plenty of presence just as A-Sha Mai Yamane’s crooning was both gritty and packed with emotion. Yet what really stood out – and pardon the audiophile cliché – was the black background, testament to the vanishingly low noise of the Asterion V2 and to the Pick it MC9’s tracking prowess.

SUCCESS STORY

When this rare vocal track segued to the dub-infused ‘Pot City’, the lazy, drugged-out feel of the song lay like a thick blanket over the room, proving the Asterion V2’s ability to switch seamlessly from one style to another, its inherent qualities of balance and detail shining through – with vinyl, success is down to the sum of the entire source-chain, so it’s reassuring to know that Canor’s phono amp will always be one of the strongest links in your system. ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

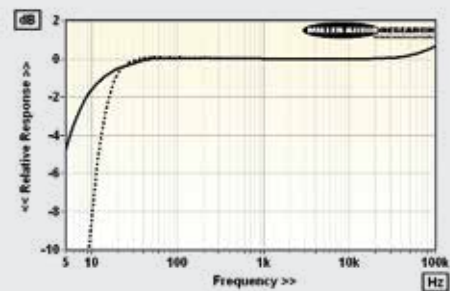
Offering excellent build quality, extensive loading options and impressively low noise, the Asterion V2 is a phono preamplifier capable of delivering all of the detail and dynamics your vinyl and cartridge have on offer. In practice, it really comes into its own with moving-magnet cartridges and MC’s connected single-ended, illustrating why tubes are still the first choice of many demanding vinylistas.

Sound Quality: 84%

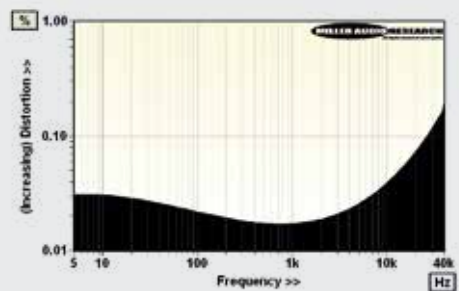


Tested via its MM/RCA and two MC/XLR inputs, and partnering balanced XLR outputs, the Asterion V2’s notional +46dB, +70dB and +76dB gain settings are, in practice, +53.1dB, +77.3dB and +82.5dB, respectively. Used via the RCA line outputs, the MM gain falls back by 6dB to 47dB, so these are perfectly ‘useable’ figures amounting to sensitivities of 2.2mV (XLR out) and 4.4mV (RCA out, all re. 0dBV). The high voltage 6922EH tube-based RIAA stage also endows the Asterion V2 with a very substantial 19V maximum output (re. 1kHz/1% THD) but because the gain is fixed – there’s no volume control here – and because the passive eq. section soaks up a lot of headroom, the input overload margin is necessarily limited. For the MM stage this amounts to 49mV which is +27dB (re. 2.2mV input sensitivity) or +19.9dB (re. standard 1kHz/5cm/sec), both sufficient to accommodate the maximum groove excursions likely to be encountered in practice.

Audiophiles need to be more mindful with MC pick-ups deployed in balanced mode, and via the balanced XLR outputs, because the high gain of the MC1 and, in particular, the MC2 input yields exceptionally high sensitivities allied to restricted input overload margins [see boxout, p59]. This is a pity because the Asterion V2 has otherwise been expertly engineered to achieve a fabulous A-wtd S/N of 91dB in MM mode and 89dB in MC1/MC2 modes. These are state-of-the-art figures, and all the more impressive bearing in mind the high gain. Distortion [see Graph 2, below] is well managed too – just 0.016-0.08% (20Hz-20kHz, re. 0dBV) – while the RIAA-corrected response is true to ± 0.6 dB from 20Hz-100kHz [see Graph 1, below]. The optional subsonic filter includes a 3rd-order roll-off below 18Hz, reaching to -3dB/14Hz and -9dB/9Hz [dashed trace, Graph 1]. PM



ABOVE: RIAA-corrected frequency response from 5Hz-100kHz (subsonic filter, dashed trace; balanced o/p)



ABOVE: Distortion versus frequency re. 0dBV from 5Hz-40kHz (MM input, balanced output)

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Input loading (MM/MC)	47kohm/50-840pF / 10-1200ohm
Input sensitivity (re. 0dBV)	2.21mV / 136 μ V/75 μ V
Input overload (re. 1% THD)	49mV / 3.1mV / 1.6mV
Max. output (re. 1% THD) / Imp.	19V / 245ohm-2.9kohm (balanced)
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBV)	91.0dB / 89.2dB (MM/MC)
Freq. resp. (20Hz-20kHz/100kHz)	-0.55dB to +0.00dB / +0.65dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, re. 0dBV)	0.016-0.08%
Power consumption	60W
Dimensions (WHD) / Weight	435x170x485mm / 18kg