

Music First Audio Classic 632

Admired for its high quality transformer-based passive preamps, Music First Audio introduces a powered component in the form of the Classic MM Phono Amplifier 632
 Review: **Adam Smith** Lab: **Paul Miller**

Various debates have long exercised the audiophile community: alongside the arguments over valves versus transistors and CD versus vinyl, the subject of how best to amplify a moving-coil cartridge remains a popular and seemingly unsolvable topic. Enthusiasts either choose head amps or step-up transformers for that initial boost to signal level, but the two are not mutually exclusive as the brand behind this review serves to illustrate.

The company in question is Music First Audio, best known for its passive transformer-based preamps, but throwing its hat into the ring here with the £2400 Classic MM Phono Amplifier 632 which, as its name suggests, offers loading and sufficient gain for most moving-magnet (not MC) pick-ups. This is actually the company's second active design following the Reference Phono Amplifier, released last year. The latter is a two-box design and is very much a flagship, bearing a price tag of just under £10,000.

THE 632 TRANSFORMER

Music First Audio (MFA) is a wholly owned subsidiary of Stevens and Billington Ltd, a well-respected manufacturer of audio transformers with a history stretching back to the 1960s [see boxout, facing page]. This acclaim has clearly rubbed off on MFA's high-end audio designs, which started with transformer-coupled preamplifiers and MC step-ups. It's entirely appropriate then, that the brand's £660 MC Step-Up 632 – a fixed 1:10 ratio step-up transformer – was also supplied to increase the useable range of our Classic MM Phono 632.

Of course, transformers are fine for linear step-up of voltage but additional circuitry is required for implementing the necessary RIAA correction. The Classic MM

Phono 632 uses solid-state amplification throughout although, perhaps not unexpectedly, features transformers on its outputs. The items in question are a long-standing design and their part number gives the unit its '632' moniker [see inside shot, below].

Fortunately, with Music First Audio's expertise behind it, the mix of transformers and active stages in its Classic MM Phono 632 bodes well for performance. Internally it is laid out on two circuit boards as a fully dual-mono design, with each PCB carrying dedicated power supplies fed by an external $\pm 18\text{VAC}$ 'brick'.

The Classic MM Phono 632's circuit comprises a passive RIAA network and two active gain stages, which feed a THAT Corporation balanced line driver IC and those TX632 output transformers. The result is a balanced output through XLRs as well as unbalanced out via conventional RCA sockets. As standard, the unit only has unbalanced phono inputs but XLRs can be provided on request.

In terms of adjustment, the Classic MM Phono 632 might be considered somewhat

lacking with its fixed +50dB gain and default 47kohm input loading. That said, each PCB will accommodate alternative choices of loading resistance and capacitance which, as with the XLR inputs, can be specified at the time of ordering. The standard 47kohm will cover most MMs though some may benefit from some additional parallel capacitance. If you are handy with a soldering iron, it's not difficult to fit these yourself, but I imagine Music First Audio would not encourage this!

INDUSTRIAL CHIC BOX

Internally the unit is well constructed with a neat PCB layout and good use made of its ground planes. In addition, a sprinkling of high quality components, such as Mundorf M-Cap Supreme polypropylene and Elna electrolytic capacitors are fitted in appropriate places. The 'industrial chic' casework is a four piece 'joggle' style case with a 6mm thick front panel that's available in a variety of colours, including the bright blue seen here.

The partnering MC Step-Up 632 transformer is available in silver, red or

black finishes (but not blue?) and while its 1:10 input/output winding ratio is offered off the shelf, the internal transformer can be wound to any ratio of the customer's choosing. Similarly, the load 'seen' by the attached MC pick-up through the 632 transformer can be further manipulated by altering the input resistance of the Classic MM Phono 632.

SUBTLE AND INSIGHTFUL

For auditioning I used an Ortofon 2M Black MM cartridge with an Ortofon Kontrapunkt b MC to test the mettle of the MC Step-Up 632 transformer. With the Classic MM Phono 632 given a good few days of warm-up, and starting with the MM cartridge directly into it, my initial impressions were of a delightfully warm and inherently musical sound that seemed to miss nothing in the depths of its presentation. Here, plenty of subtle and delicate detail was to be found but presented in a slightly

unfamiliar, if never less than a wholly accomplished, fashion. The result is easy on the ear, yet insightful, and the sort of sound that invites you – teases you even – to listen more closely and for longer.

When it comes to treble, it is easy to give an impression of detail through a judicious high frequency boost here, or a subtle frequency tilt there.

On first listening this can impress but it soon begins to sound false and somewhat wearing. The MFA Classic MM Phono 632 turned this deceit on its head by at first sounding a little over-smooth. However, as I listened further I realised that it was actually very neutral, free of artificial edginess and, in practice, telling me all I needed to know.

At the top end, cymbals had no clatter or splash, but rang out confidently within

ABOVE: Folded alloy chassis is not as substantial as the thick fascia plate, available to order in a variety of paint finishes. Our blue Classic 632 was finished off with a matching power-on LED

the soundstage. The leading edges were pleasingly taut and the shimmering decay was absolutely delightful. It seems that

the measured low levels of distortion [see PM's Lab Report, p61] do not announce themselves in a showy way but, rather, may well explain my gradual realisation that the Classic MM Phono 632 was adding nothing

that shouldn't be there.

I was keen to introduce the MC Step-Up 632 and change the Ortofon MM for its costlier MC relative. Naturally, the two cartridges share a family sound, and the Music First combination made this very clear from the outset. Switching between MM and MC settings on some phono stages

can bring about a noticeable change in sonic character, but not so with the 632 pairing where the inherent 'character' already

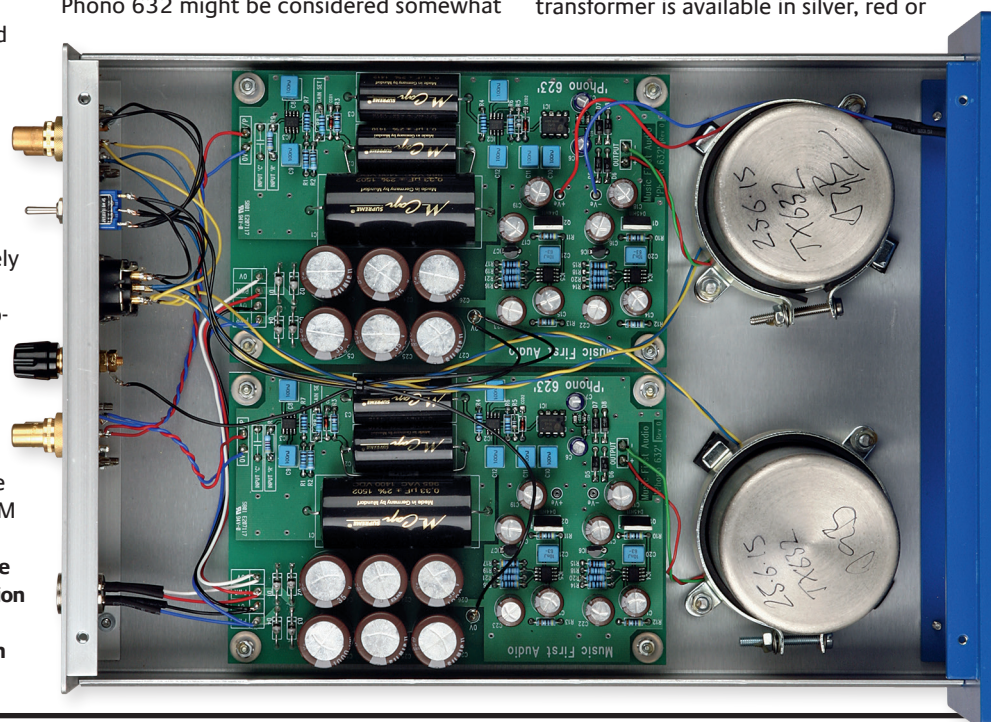
discovered with the

Classic MM Phono 632 was broadly retained if rendered with just a suggestion of over-smoothness. Was the 632 pairing (MC transformer and MM phono stage) just a little too laid-back? Possibly... We are only talking about the addition of a step-up transformer, after all, but stranger things have happened! In both MM and MC setups, the 632 impressed with its

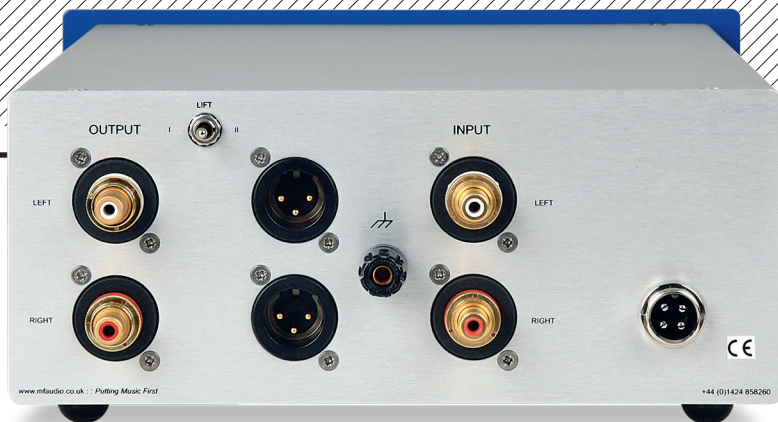
'The shimmering decay of cymbals was an absolute delight'

MUSIC FIRST AND LAST

The history of Music First Audio stretches back to 1963 when transformer manufacturer Stevens & Billington was formed by Jonathan's father and Mr C St John Stevens. They made a variety of wound components for broadcast and audio use until Stevens left in 1971 to make musical instruments. The company continued as JS & AR Billington, with the 'AR' being Jonathan's mother. In 1978 Jonathan's father passed away and Stevens came back into the business to provide support to Mrs Billington. She was further assisted by Jonathan in 1986, who had worked for the company in his younger days, but took time out to complete a degree in electronics. Fully back on board, he began to develop new business opportunities and found a growing customer base within the OEM hi-fi industry, where demand for his transformers increased steadily. Reasoning that he could also utilise his transformer designs in a series of bespoke audio products, while keeping Stevens and Billington as a general entity, Music First Audio was launched as a dedicated audio manufacturing offshoot in 2002.



RIGHT: Built as a dual-mono amp on separate L/R PCBs, with outboard $\pm 18\text{V}$ PSU, equalisation is achieved via two active gain stages and passive RIAA. Output is via a pair of step-down (1.5:1) mu-metal cored transformers



ABOVE: Switch connects (or lifts) the earth to either the RCA or XLR outputs. As standard, input is via RCA but a balanced input option is available by special order

rhythmically fluid and taut sounding bass, allowing the music to ebb and flow with ease. Bass detail was also very impressive with the string tone of plucked double-bass sounding astonishingly definite.

Upper bass was also warm and precise but I was still left hankering after a little more 'get up and go' from the units. The dynamic qualities of the track 'The More You Live, The More You Love' from A Flock Of Seagulls' [The Story Of A Young Heart; Jive Records HIP-14] was arguably a little blunted. This is a slice of 1980s synth pop and it normally charges along at a hundred miles per hour. Through the MFA MC/MM pairing there was a sense that everything had been reined in slightly, for while the track was still hugely enjoyable I occasionally wished it would really pick up its skirts and fly.

SPOTLIT NUANCES

Part of the my period with the MFA Classic MM Phono 632 coincided with the reappearance of my wife's flute from a long hibernation, and comparisons here were interesting. Compared to the 'real thing' the Classic MM Phono 632 sounded a little over-soft at first, but time spent with both the instrument and phono stage suggested that, actually, the latter was capturing the essence of the former very well indeed.

As I've suggested, the Classic MM Phono 632 seems to miss little in terms of instrumental or vocal detail across the midband but, again, neither does it force anything at the listener. Guy Garvey's vocals on 'Angela's Eyes' [Courting The Squal; Polydor 4758702] were vivid and blessed with a pleasing rasp, but the backing synthesisers were as melodic as could be hoped for. The interplay between these two aspects of the track, along with the other backing instruments, was very

pleasing as the Classic MM Phono 632 filled the space between my loudspeakers with a sound that was both precise and quietly confident.

I was also hugely impressed by the MFA's ability to reveal the subtle textures of different instruments. Guitar strings are clearly heard being plucked when they are plucked, while softer movements, when the performer is merely strumming, are typically just as easily distinguishable. I kept repeating the introduction to Seals and Crofts' original version of 'Summer Breeze' from *Seals And Crofts Greatest Hits* [Friday Music FRM-2886] for precisely this reason – several plucks followed by a strum have never captured my attention so much!

In fact, on several occasions, nuances that had once lurked in the back of recordings seemed to move forward into the spotlight. Indeed, with several well-known tracks, percussionists seemingly achieved the same level of sound but with less application of effort. I kept coming back to the word 'easy' when making notes during my time with the Classic MM Phono 632 but can think of no better way of putting it. It really does seem effortless. 📶

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

Music First Audio has another winner on its hands with the Classic MM Phono 632. Years of transformer know-how have been combined with intelligent electronic design to deliver a phono stage that rarely puts a foot wrong. It has a wonderfully organic presentation with plenty of warmth and no sense of unwanted artifice. Naturally, MFA's MC Step-Up 632 makes for an ideal partner.

Sound Quality: 80%



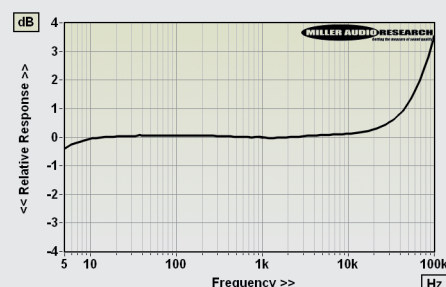
LAB REPORT

MUSIC FIRST AUDIO CLASSIC 632

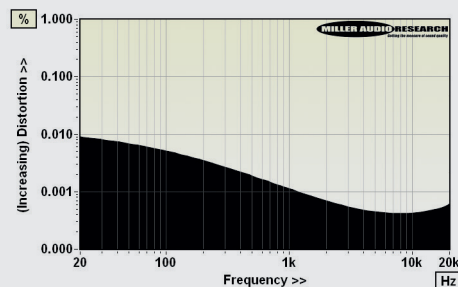
Judging the amount of gain to offer in a fixed input/output MM phono stage is tricky – too high, and input overload margins can be compromised with very high o/p pick-ups, too low and lower output MMs or high output MCs may not achieve an adequate S/N ratio. Music First Audio has opted for +49.5dB (x300) with an input loading of 46.9kohm, sufficient to raise 0dBV from its balanced XLR outs with a 3.35mV input. It's ideal for lower-output MMs and most high output MCs. The generous gain, and passive RIAA, almost guarantees that input headroom will not be as high as some fully active units. In this case a figure of 49mV represents +19.8dB (re. IEC standard 5mV) which is very close to the peak groove excursion(s) carried by the most dynamic of LP recordings. Despite the moderate gain, however, the A-wtd S/N ratio is impressive at 85.2dB.

Distortion is fabulously low, especially through midband and treble frequencies where its minimum of 0.0004% is more than 1000x lower than that possible from any contemporary MM or MC pick-up [see Graph 2, below]. The RIAA response is very flat and extended, eschewing the 7950µs subsonic pole and also any correction for the commonly-seen ultrasonic boost of +3.6dB/100kHz [see Graph 1, below].

The partnering 1:10 step-up transformer does indeed offer another 20dB gain, but with a commensurate 20dB reduction in input overload level, and 69.5dB A-wtd S/N (re. 500µV) when connected through the Classic 632. In practice the total +69.5dB gain and 470ohm input loading should be ideal for most low output MCs. Finally, with or without the step-up, the Classic 632 offers a substantial maximum 14.5V output from a moderate 125ohm source impedance (both figures usefully reduced by the 3:2 ratio output coupling transformer). PM



ABOVE: RIAA-corrected frequency response over an extended 5Hz-100kHz at 0dBV via MM input



ABOVE: Distortion versus frequency (20Hz-20kHz) at 1V out. THD also falls with output to 0.0009% at 10V

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Input loading (MM/MC)	47kohm / 470ohm
Input sensitivity (MM/MC, re. 0dBV)	3.35mV / 335µV
Input overload (MM/MC, re. 1% THD)	49mV / 5.0mV
Max. output (re. 1% THD) / Impedance	14.5V / 125ohm (balanced)
A-wtd S/N ratio (MM/MC, re. 0dBV)	85.2dB / 69.2dB
Frequency response (20Hz-20kHz)	-0.0dB to +0.3dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, re. 0dBV)	0.0004-0.0089%
Power consumption	4W
Dimensions (WHD) / Weight	239x100x328mm / 2kg