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THE MCINTOSH MP1100

Maximum Flexibility

By Jeff Dorgay

What's better than a great phonostage with two inputs? One with three inputs and an on-board analog-to-digital (ADC) converter, so you can digitize your favorite vinyl to 24/96 or 24/192 high resolution digital files. While that might seem counterintuitive to analog devotees that don't enjoy digital, but for the rest of us, it's fantastic. Those of you that are with me, who love your vinyl collection, but a: like to take it with you and b: just can't *find* everything you have on vinyl on Tidal or any other streaming service will enjoy the MP1100 tremendously for this feature alone.

Having just finished a visit to the McIntosh factory in Binghamton, NY, the level of quality that goes into every McIntosh component is still freshly burned in my memory. Watching the entire McIntosh crew in action, seeing their components go from raw materials to finish products is truly amazing. They do it all under one roof, bending their own chassis, cutting the glass faceplates to every aspect of final assembly. This level of hands on manufacturing means your MP1100 will not only be able to be repaired decades from now, McIntosh will be able to cut you a new front panel, should the movers drop it. Another great reason to consider McIntosh a long-term audio investment.





Settings and more

Personally, I love the MP1100 because it sounds great and offers three inputs, perfect for my Technics SL1100/SL1200 collection. It's so much fun to be able to plug in all three and switch between them on a whim when the mood strikes – variation is one of the most intriguing parts of a vinyl collection. Mono records, 78s, older records with different EQ curves, the MP1100 is equipped for every option you can think of. Which

makes an incredible tool for evaluating cartridges and turntables along with whatever different records you find when perusing the bins. It's the perfect component for major analog geeks.

All three inputs can be configured as MM (40db and 46db gain settings) or MC (52db, 58db and 64db gain settings) with a range of seven capacitance settings, eight MC loading settings, and four different EQ settings as well; RIAA, NAB, AES, and 78.

This made for a quick run for some very old Ella Fitzgerald 78s, all handled rather nicely. It also comes pre-configured for the McIntosh MT5 or MT10 turntables, so if you happen to be building an all McIntosh system, it's another nice touch. Best of all, most settings can be adjusted from the comfort of your listening chair, making it easier to optimize your setup. When finished, you can customize the alphanumeric display to list your turntables or

cartridges in order, so you don't lose track of what you're listening to. As McIntosh head honcho Charlie Randall is fond of telling me, "we like to make our gear as user friendly as possible." They've certainly hit a home run here. (But don't ask me how to program an AV processor!)

The higher end McIntosh preamplifiers all have on-board phono capability, and every one we've tested has been excellent, but the MP1100 takes it all to

the next level. This is a serious stand-alone phonostage, regardless of what's in the rest of your system. Should you have a McIntosh preamplifier and add the MP1100, you can have 5 turntables in your system, woo hoo!

All tubes, all good

Using a pair of 12AX7s for MM phono and overall gain, with a second pair to provide the additional gain for MC cartridges, the MP1100 is quiet. *(continued)*



Perhaps one of the quietest all tube phonostages we've heard. We had a similar experience with the C1100 control preamplifier. That's where 60-plus years of experience makes the difference. Those looking closely will find a pair of op amps under the cover, but they are not in the *gain* path. A recent visit to McIntosh, where I had the good fortune to get some clarification from Chuck Hinton, reveals the op amps are used as phase splitters to provide fully balanced operation.

Much like other current McIntosh components we've auditioned, using the MP1100 with the stock tubes is a safe bet. McIntosh carefully tests and grades their

tubes to keep noise down and musicality high. Those craving the last few molecules of performance can shell out for some hand sorted NOS 12AX7s, but it's going to cost a *lot* more. A really amazing set of four NOS 12AX7s will set you back about a thousand bucks these days, and if you're going this route, you really need a second set because sometimes bad things happen to good tubes. 98% of you can rest assured that you'll have a blast listening to the MP1100 just as it comes from the factory, and the other 2% of you (you know who you are) will be pulling out the telefunkens and bugle boys. *(continued)*

An analog yoga master

Those with extensive vinyl collections and multiple turntables know the key to analog happiness is flexibility. The MP1100 has more moves than your yoga instructor. In addition to all the gain, loading and capacitance settings, it features three RCA inputs, with the third configurable as a balanced input, for those of you so equipped. All great stuff, but McIntosh hits it out of the park by offering four, separate tonearm ground posts. Once you go beyond two turntables, it gets tricky keeping everything connected and grounded. What seems like a minor complaint, is a fairly big hassle, when you pull one wire out and the other two go with it. Having a separate grounding lug for each tonearm you use makes the process so much easier. The only other manufacturer I've seen do this is Pass Labs, so hats off to McIntosh for this.

The more time spent in and out of the listening chair, swapping turntables and cartridges, the more I appreciate the flexibility of the MP1100. In the context of the room two system, centered around the Quad 2812 ESLs and the PrimaLuna DiaLogue HP Integrated (with KT150s) amplifier, the McIntosh is both a sonic and stylistic match. And the handy remote makes it easy to make minor tweaks from the comfort of the listening spot.

(continued)



In case you've run out of analog inputs, the MP1100 has a switchable analog input – a perfect place to add a tape deck if you are so inclined. The only thing missing is a fixed level output, but it was easy to pop a pair of Cardas XLR adaptors in the balanced outputs and jack my trusty TEAC 2300sx into the MP1100 and make a mix tape or two. I had just as much fun making mix tapes as I did digitizing obscure albums. Awesome!

The proof is in the listening

Gliding through CAN's trippy "Cascade Waltz," the voluminous sound stage and gentle, yet refined tonality of the MP1100 comes through immediately. Every tube has a sonic signature, and this preamplifier is no exception. Where the Audio Research PH9 (also in for review), which has an architecture based around the 6H30 tube has a markedly different feel, with the McIntosh feeling a bit more organic and the ARC slightly more dynamic. To clarify, the MP1100 doesn't feel soft, slow, gooey, or vintage, but there is a warmer, more saturated tonality with the Mc, where the ARC is a purpose built high performance machine, with a single input and more resolution. Though similarly priced, these two excellent phonostages will appeal to completely different customers.

The rest of the musical range is equally well represented. I'll hand the MP1100 8 out of 10 on frequency extension and dynamic range, a 9 for tonality and a 9.5 for low background noise, which is as good as it gets for a tube phonostage. With ARC, CJ and Nagra here to compare to, the MP1100 is as quiet as any of the premium (i.e. *more expensive*) tube phonostages I have on hand. *(continued)*

There's a body that the MP1100 possesses, (some call it the McIntosh sound) that works wonders with average recordings. Perhaps this is embellishing ever so slightly, but I didn't hear a record that I didn't like through the MP1100. Yet when listening to the T-Rex classic, *Electric Warrior*, all the layers and overdubs came through clearly. The MP1100 was equally beguiling with solo vocals, be it Shelby Lynne or Johnny Cash.

Because the MP1100 is so good overall, you don't notice what it doesn't do until you step up to something like the Lyra Etna, or Clearaudio Goldfinger, but these are cartridges that cost more than the MP1100. If you are working with cartridges in the \$500 - \$3,000 range, I feel confident that you will find the level of music revealed by the MP1100 to be just lovely.

Gotta have one

After many hours of listening, recording, and watching those blue meters bounce, I liked the MP1100 enough to purchase it as a reviewing tool here at TONEAudio. The MP1100's input and output flexibility makes it a must have for a multiple turntable guy like me. At \$8,500 it may be a bit overkill for someone with only a single turntable, especially if you have no interest in digitizing your vinyl, but for someone wanting a reasonably priced, all-encompassing vinyl playback and archiving workstation with multiple turntables, the MP1100 is without peer.

As McIntosh's CEO Charlie Randall is fond of saying, "We make extremely user-friendly gear for music lovers wanting a high degree of connectivity." The McIntosh MP1100 isn't an analog crescent wrench, it's an analog space station. You can dock and play everything with it. So if this is what you've been looking for to integrate your collection of analog toys and recordings, take one for a test drive. I think you'll be as excited about it as I am. Happy listening. ●

McIntosh
MP1100 Phonostage
MSRP \$8,500

MANUFACTURER
McIntosh Labs

CONTACT
www.mcintoshlabs.com/us/Products/pages/ProductDetails.aspx?CatId=phonopreamplifiers&ProductId=MP1100

PERIPHERALS

Turntables
Grand Prix Audio Monaco 2.0 w/tri-planar and Lyra Etna, AVID Acutus Reference SE w/SME V and Clearaudio Goldfinger, Technics SL-1200 GAE, 1200 mk.2, and SL-1100

Amplifier
PrimaLuna DiaLogue HP Integrated, Audio Research LS-29/VT80

Speakers
Quad 2812, Graham LS5/9, Graham LS3/5

Cable
Cardas Clear

Power
Equi=Tech 1800