

Review of Audia Flight FLS1, by Michael Fremer, 03/2019, on



Audia Flight FLS1 preamplifier



Our conservative two-channel audio world doesn't easily accept change. Not that many years ago, even remote control was considered a sign of electronic moral decay certain to degrade sound quality. Today, home theater-like operating systems, with their fluorescent-screen hells and microprocessor-controlled functionality are commonplace, even in the highest of fi. Consumers accustomed to the convenience of audio/video processors now demand it on every price tier of two-channel hi-fi, though purists who think sound quality is commensurate with inconvenience can have that if they want it.

Audia Flight, founded in 1996 in Civitavecchia, Italy, on the Mediterranean, not far north of Rome, makes a wide range of high-performance electronics with convenient operating systems, at a variety of price points. The FLS series is their newest, priced below their cost-no-object Strumento line

The FLS1 (\$6995) is a fully balanced, dual-mono (each channel on a separate board), feature-packed preamplifier with a built-in headphone amplifier that outputs 12Wpc RMS into 8 ohms. The FLS1 can be switched among three unbalanced (RCA) and two balanced (XLR) inputs, with both balanced (XLR) and unbalanced (RCA) outputs, as well as a fixed Record output (RCA).

The rear panel leaves space for the optional phono preamplifier and DAC boards. The review sample came with the MM/MC phono preamplifier card installed (\$1000). Soon to be released is the DAC board (\$2000). This will have five digital inputs: optical, AES/EBU, two S/PDIF, one for Audia Flight's SACD/CD transport, and a USB port that will be able to handle 32-bit/768kHz PCM and DS128 data.



A swept-wing OLED screen and a large Volume knob dominate the sculpted front panel. Below the display is a row of six small, recessed pushbuttons, from left to right: On/Off, Input, Set (menu), Mute, Phase, and Out (for Output Disable); to the right of these is a ¼" headphone jack. The case is stylish, robustly built of thick plates of brushed aluminum secured with hidden fasteners to produce a sleek, modern design that looks and feels as if it costs more than its price. A non-illuminated, eight-button remote control of brushed aluminum adds to this impression, as does the FLS1's weight of 24 lb.

Menu: easy to understand, easy to use

Nested menus can be intimidating and confusing, sometimes forcing you to keep the instruction manual handy to avoid getting lost. Not with the Audia Flight FLS1, which is fortunate—its manual's English translation from the Italian isn't nearly as elegant as the operating system's design.

Push and turn the Volume knob to scroll through the inputs, and select the desired input by pushing Input. Or, using the remote, push Input, then the + or – button to scroll through the choices. Some other front-panel functions, such as Phase and Output Disable, aren't available with the remote, but the most useful ones are: Volume, Balance, Mute, On/Off. Naming inputs and skipping unused ones is easily done from either the front panel or the remote.

The gain of each input can be adjusted within a range of ± 6 dB. In addition, you can: set a Soft Mute for -90 or -30 dB; change any input to Direct status and thus bypass the volume control, for use with a home-theater processor; set the headphone gain; and even disable the Infrared remote, if you think it's degrading the sound. You can also reset the FLS1 to its factory defaults by selecting Load Default.

Unlike some nested menus I've experienced, the FLS1's was easy to grasp and use, aided in part by the OLED screen's large characters. I had the FLS1 configured to my liking and needs within a few minutes of plugging it in.

Phono card

In the [May 2009 issue](#) I positively reviewed Audia Flight's standalone phono preamplifier, which then cost \$6100 and now, miraculously, is priced at \$5995. The FLS1's \$1000 phono-card option adds to the rear panel two inputs (Input MC, Input MM) and eight DIP switches per channel. The DIPs let you easily adjust capacitance values for moving-magnet cartridges (50, 100, 150, 200, 250, 300, 350, 400pF), and resistive load values for moving-coils (20, 25, 30, 70, 100, 200, 250, 330, 600, 1000, 1500 ohms).

This combination of inputs and DIP switches means that you can have one of each type of cartridge, MM and MC, simultaneously connected and ready to use at all times. In addition, by pulling the card from the back of the chassis, you gain access to two sockets that let you install your choice of loading resistors. The MM gain is 46dB, the MC gain 66dB.

At this price, something had to give.

Like AVM's Ovation PA 8.2 modular preamplifier (\$8995), which I reviewed in [December 2018](#), the Audia Flight FLS1 is priced well below my reference preamp, a [darTZeel NHB-18NS Mk.2](#) (approx. \$44,000)—in fact, at \$6995, it plays in a different league from the rest of my far more costly system. With the FLS1 inserted, my system's sound took a hit, but the damage was minor and well controlled, not a bombing run. I spent weeks with it installed in place of the darTZeel.

The FLS1's midrange was smoothly presented and richly appointed, though I was in no danger of confusing it with the rich midband bloom produced by tubes (of which there are now very few in my system). The FLS1's bottom end was moderately well extended if somewhat softly expressed, and its top end followed suit. The three regions, being of similar character, blended well to produce a coherent overall sound that leaned toward the soft, pleasing side, while avoiding any hint of edge, etch, grain, or glare.

Bluesman Doug MacLeod hasn't put out one bad record in his long career, and the ones on the AudioQuest and Reference labels sound great, too. His latest, *Break the Chain* (2 45rpm LPs, Reference Recordings RM-2519), recorded live at Skywalker Sound by Keith O. Johnson and Sean Royce Martin, with no edits or overdubs, is yet another winner. This record first hit the turntable while the FLS1 was in the system, and with nothing to reference it against, I heard MacLeod's voice reproduced with richness and warmth, appearing three-dimensionally well back in the space between my speakers. In "Travel On," percussionist Oliver Brown's light-fingered taps convincingly hovered in space in the right channel, well connected to the spacious, three-dimensional soundstage. In an instrumental, "One for Tampa Red," MacLeod solos on National Style O resonator guitar in open D tuning, accompanied by Denny Croy on double bass. Johnson bathes MacLeod's guitar in a lonesome echo, Croy's walking lines directly behind it.

I found no fault with the FLS1's reproduction of this track until I played it again, this time through the darTZeel preamp, which costs more than five times as much, and is not designed to a specific price. Then I heard, far more clearly, the contours of the reverb, longer decays of notes, greater definition of the transients of plucked bass notes and, especially, bass weight, and MacLeod's expressive use of microdynamics as he digs in to emphasize certain notes. I also more clearly heard the light bass thumping of MacLeod tapping his foot.

I thought it more productive to play through the FLS1 only recordings I'd never played before—I've got thousands!—then play them again through my reference darTZeel preamp. Rummaging through my shelves, I was embarrassed to find an album with quotes from John Atkinson and Art Dudley on the jacket, probably written based on the CD edition. It's Holst's *The Planets*, arranged for brass quintet and organ, performed by the BUZZ Brass Quintet and organist Mélanie Barney, and engineered by Nagra's René LaFlamme (2 45rpm LPs, Fidelio FALP028). It's out of print, but maybe one of the reissue labels will bring it back. Someone should!

Wow! Simply miked, recorded with an Ampex 354 tubed tape deck, and mastered by Bernie Grundman, this record is a stunner! Those two geezers are right! My bad—and my loss—for never having played it! Recorded live in a Montreal church, this production has it all: huge space, and a brass quintet that goes low with a bass trombone and high with a piccolo trumpet. And, of course, there's that pants-flapping pipe organ. Enrico O. Dastous's arrangement is so canny that I don't miss the orchestra—each movement sounds and feels fully fleshed out and complete. I seriously enjoyed this album through the FLS1: It conveyed well the richness of the brass, the enormous sense of space—especially depth—and seemed to plumb the deepest frequencies of the pipes controlled by the organ's lower pedals. Switching to my reference darTZeel preamp demonstrated that the FLS1 was guilty of no sins of commission, adding to the brass no grain, etch, or hard edges. Playing *The Planets* through the darTZeel demonstrated that the FLS1 did lose some bass weight and some sense of drive in a long-held organ note in *Jupiter, the Bringer of Jollity*, and softened the brass's subtle attacks. Through the darTZeel, the image height goes through the roof, and the space opens farther, from very good to "you are there" (though I've never been there). Brass attacks and textures went from pleasingly burnished (Audia) to properly metallic (darTZeel). I entered the digital domain. Pipa player Zhao Cong's *Sound of China* (CD, Modern Records MCD3101UHQ) is a superbly recorded collection of classical Chinese music and hybrid "East/West" blues/jazz kitsch, engineered in Copenhagen by Hans Nielsen. The result sounds like a soundtrack for a contemporary Chinese film, with depth-charge bass-drum thwacks and delicate flutes, plus strings, guitars, pianos, Chinese lutes, and voices. I'd played *Sound of China* often through the darTZeel, on both CD and LP, and was familiar with its spectacular sound: sharply drawn 3D imaging, generously wide and deep soundstages, precise transients, super transparency, subterranean bass, and every other desirable attribute of an audiophile sonic spectacular. It's occasionally corny, but it's a lot of fun. The FLS1 passed it all in a balanced, evenly diminished form: Those bass thwacks lost some weight and slam, overall dynamics were somewhat diminished in scale, the midrange richness (one of the Audia Flight's most attractive qualities) reduced transparency somewhat, transients were slightly softened, and instrumental textures somewhat homogenized. But once my ears acclimated, I enjoyed it as much as I had through the far more expensive darTZeel NHB-18NS—again, the Audia Flight FLS1's only sins were those of omission.



The best \$1000 phono preamp

While it's unfair to compare a \$1000 phono card that slips into a high-quality power supply-and-switching infrastructure to a \$1000 outboard phono preamplifier whose cost includes its power supply, case, and chassis, the FLS1's phono card performed well above its price point in every way.

I ran an Ortofon MC Century (0.2mV output) and a [Lyra Atlas SL](#) (0.25mV), among other cartridges, into the Audia Flight's MC input, and the combination of enough gain and "black" backgrounds resulted in a dynamic expressiveness that did sonic justice to these cartridges. I also tried MuTech's RM-Kanda Hayabusa, which I reviewed in "Analog Corner" in the March 2019 issue—in terms of output (0.45mV), an even better match for the phono preamp's gain.

Regardless of cartridge, the sound of the FLS1's phono card was commensurate with that of its line stage: it leaned somewhat toward the warm, midrange-rich side. Depending on where you wish to go, you could add a somewhat bright- and/or aggressive-sounding cartridge, a Shelter 301 or [Denon 103R](#) to make things sound warmer.

The FLS1 owner wanting to play vinyl without investing too much would be smart to drop the \$1000 for the phono card, rather than compromise on a less-expensive outboard phono preamp.

Headphone amplifier

Other than on airplanes and at the gym, I don't use headphones much.

Nonetheless, I plugged my AKG 701 headphones into the Audia Flight FLS1's headphone jack. The AKGs have a reputation for sounding bright and analytical, though I've found that, with enough break-in, they don't sound actually bright—they're revealing, which is a nicer word for analytical. Through them I hear everything, and their bottom end is impressive.

Drive them with a relatively powerful, well-designed headphone amplifier like the one built into the Audio Flight FLS1, and they sing sweetly—even if the FLS1's headphone amp is specified to output 12W into 8 ohms and the AKGs have an impedance of 62 ohms. I enjoyed the sound, but not being an expert on headphones or headphone amps, I'll leave it at that.

Happy conclusion

Though designed to retail for \$6995—in today's High End, that's considered a moderate price—the feature-packed FLS1 doesn't look, feel, or sound as if Audia Flight has compromised on quality. Everything about the Audia Flight FLS1 made for pleasant listening and reviewing.

While the appearance of an audio component isn't critical to its sound, it does matter—especially when that component is a preamplifier. The preamp, after all, is where you meet and greet your system every listening session, and hopefully will for a long time.

The FLS1 looks good. You get a deluxe experience when you interface with it, via either its front panel or its solid, brushed-aluminum remote control. The FLS1 feels solid. From the outside (I didn't open it up), it seems well built, and its logically designed menu system was a pleasure to set up and use. I especially liked the big, easy-to-read display.

The FLS1 sounds good. Its sound was very well balanced—essentially neutral, especially throughout the midrange. Though the FLS1's overall sound was on the smooth, rich side, its clean transient attacks and generous sustain kept it from ever sounding bland or boring. The performance compromises made by Audia Flight's designers to bring the FLS1 in at under \$7000 were made carefully enough that they were either inaudible or at least easy to ignore. And the options of easily adding an impressive-sounding, highly configurable phono preamplifier for \$1000, and/or a DAC for \$2000, only add to the FLS1's attractiveness.

If you're in the market for a versatile preamplifier for under \$10,000—and especially if you play vinyl—add the Audia Flight FLS1 to your list.

