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## High-End Analog Roundup: Three Cartridges and an LP Cleaning Machine

Jonathan Valin

I have some genuine goodies to report on in this issue—three world-class cartridges and a record-cleaning machine that is certainly the most convenient that money can buy.

First the cartridges.

Although our Mr. Pearson has already reported most favorably on the Benz Micro LP S-MR, I want to add my highest recommendation to his. As Harry has said, this is a cartridge that does the sort of thing that truly outstanding electronics and loudspeakers do—raises resolution by lowering electromechanical noise. Part of the reason for this lower noise may be the cartridge's micro-ridge stylus, which sees more of the groovewalls at relatively unworn spots deeper in the grooves for cleaner tracing, and part may be the damping of its cantilever's suspension, which, Albert Lukaschek claims, effectively reduces the high-frequency resonances that make other mc's sound like, well, mc's. Whatever the reason, the LP S-MR is unusually smooth in the very area where many moving coils tend to be brash and aggressive—the upper midrange and treble. Indeed, the LP S-MR has a moving-magnet-like naturalness through the upper frequencies, and yet this smoothness does not come at a price in transparency and resolution, as it usually does with mm's.

Indeed, in a suitable medium-mass tonearm such as the ceramic air-bearing arm on the Walker Black Diamond Mk III (yes, boys and girls, there is now a Black Diamond Mk III) or the Da Vinci Grandezza 12\*\* double-gimbaled ruby-bearing arm (for further comment on which, see my review of the AAS Gabriel/Da Vinci Mk II on p. XXX), the LP S-MR is capable of extraordinary speed and resolution, nearly on a par with that paragon of transparency and resolution, the Ortofon MC A90—the difference being that where the Ortofon sounds a tad cool and clinical in overall balance and is definitely a little elevated in the upper mids, the Benz is smooth and *gemütlich* top to bottom. While the Ortofon may hold the slightest edge in transient speed and very low-level resolution over the Benz (and over almost *any* cartridge), the LP S-MR is still capable of retrieving details from vinyl discs that you never knew were there, even in records you've owned for dozens of years. And since the Benz does this trick without any leanness of timbre in the midrange or added zip in the upper midrange and treble, on really good recordings it can make instruments sound so much more like themselves that you occasionally get the “fool ya” sense of realism that generally only comes with sound effects like doorbells or ringtones. Through the Benz, I've heard an instrument with quite distinctive starting and stopping transients and complex timbre like a contrabassoon sound so much like an actual contrabassoon that it literally startled me (and the other listeners sitting beside me).

In addition to being unusually true to life in tone color, the Benz is also capable of a helluva unraveling act. For instance, string, wind, and brass instruments, especially when they're playing in an ensemble or doubling one another at the same pitches and intensities, are particularly difficult for stereo systems to parse. The Benz (and the Ortofon) are better at telling you what's playing what at any given moment—no matter how many instruments are in the ensemble—than any other cartridges I've heard (save for the two others in this survey). It's rather like a getting a score along with incredibly

natural playback. The thing is almost as magical at sussing out the bowing and fingering of string instruments (including different kinds of pizzicatos) as the A90, and it is simply marvelous with human voices, wherein you will hear the minutiae of tremolo, breath control, head tone, chest tone that define not just a performance but a performer. As with great electronics and speakers, the Benz lets you better *see* as well as hear whom you are listening to.

Though the LP S-MR won't give you quite the same blueprint of the recording studio and mastering suite as the A90, it comes mighty close, revealing details of engineering and mastering that have previously gone unnoticed. You will hear miking changes, overdubs, gain-riding, the editing in of different takes with utter clarity. As with midrange timbre, you will also hear slightly fuller, more *gemütlich* bass with the Benz than you will with the ultra-tight, ultra-fast Ortofon and a somewhat more expansive soundstage. I think this sense of expansiveness has something to do with the relaxed quality of the Benz, which, though it doesn't lack for focus, doesn't image with the sharper definition of an ultra-fast cartridge like the A90, which is also a little elevated in the transient-rich upper midrange.

Indeed, a more relaxed, less aggressive presentation is precisely what the Benz has on offer. On top of this the Benz LP S-MR is not a demanding cartridge to set up. Moderately high in output at 0.35mV so that it presents no problems to mc phono stages, happy to be loaded at 47k which is what Albert Lukaschek recommends (although I rather like it at 500-1000 ohms, too), tracking contentedly at anywhere from 1.8 to 2 grams with VTA set so that the arm is parallel with the surface of the record, it is a non-fussy pleasure to use. Best of all, at \$5k it is the least expensive cartridge in this mini-survey and, along with the (harder-to-find) Ortofon A90, the least expensive option for those of you who won't settle for anything less than the best LP playback. In sum, a world-class cartridge at a relatively reasonable price—and one of my references.

Next on the agenda is a cartridge I'll bet you never heard of—I know that I hadn't—from a tiny German company called H&S. It is the Ice Blue, and it is really something. Designed by Eugene Stoeckl, for ten years the Technical Director of Ortofon, Germany, it bears more than a passing resemblance to the Ortofon A90, both visually and sonically. Indeed, it looks a bit like an A90 with its cowling removed (to further lower resonant mass). Where the A90 has a Replicant 100 stylus on a boron cantilever, the Ice Blue has an ultra-fine line-contact stylus on a tapered aluminum cantilever with what H&S calls “a three-dimensional cantilever suspension.” (Your guess is as good as mine.) Like the A90, the H&S uses a platinum disc sandwiched between two rubber absorbers to damp the cantilever/stylus assembly and improve trackability. Unlike the A90 (which uses 6N copper wire), the Ice Blue uses 4N silver wire for its coils.

It's actually rather easy to describe the sound of the H&S Ice Blue: It is, almost exactly, a cross between the *gemütlich* Benz LP S-MR and the more austere Ortofon MC A90, which is to say that it is slight leaner and cooler in tone color than the Benz and slightly fuller and richer than the Ortofon. Like the Benz and the Ortofon, it is very transparent to sources—very low in coloration and high in resolution and transient speed, though (like the Benz) not quite as high as the Ortofon.

Although it takes a bit of break-in for the Ice Blue to show its best (it will sound a bit warm at first), it comes into its own after twenty or thirty hours of play. After that you will get many of the virtues of the Benz (though not all of its more relaxed upper

midrange) with most of the stunning speed and clarity of the Ortofon. This will actually be a very nice compromise for many listeners.

Like all the cartridges in this survey the Ice Blue is capable of extraordinary resolution of low-level detail, like the whispery tremolo Melody Gardot adds to certain lyrics throughout *My One and Only Thrill* (and the duration that she sustains those *pianissimos*). It will also supply much of the electrifying transient response of the A90, so that the crisp pop and va-room-like rebound of sharply-struck drumheads or the startling snap of violin strings against the fingerboard on so-called “Bartók pizzicatos” will come across with lifelike speed and impact. The Ice Blue also has exceptionally tight, discerning bass with a bit more of the precise pitch definition of the A90 added to slightly fuller timbres. As with the examples I’ve already cited, this makes for the exceptionally realistic (and exciting) reproduction of low-pitched instrumental passages such as Tina’s deep, powerful electric bass ostinato at the start of “Take Me To The River” (from *Stop Making Sense*) or the big block bass chords (and the middle- and top-octave ones, for that matter) that Martha Argerich whirls through on her Steinway in her famously fiery rendition of the Prokofiev Third Piano Concerto [DG/Clearaudio]. (Here, BTW, is an example of multimiking in service to an artist’s performance, for though the piano’s timbres are a bit drier than life because of the close-miking, the precision with which Argerich points dynamic contrasts—the very soul of her performance of this most original piece—is fully retained, as is clarity of the piano lines even in the fleetest of runs amid the densest orchestral accompaniment.)

The Ice Blue is an exceptional soundstager, on a par with the Benz and the A90, though, as you will soon discover, not quite the equal of the best soundstaging cartridge in this remarkable group. As with the A90, it has a little tighter definition than the Benz, making for very sharp focus (and high clarity) on large ensembles spread out on the stage, side to side, foreground and back. It is also probably the best tracker in this bunch, sailing through an overmodulated passage in the RCA disc *Venice* that caused most of the other cartridges in my little reference collection to stumble.

The Ice Blue is not quite as much of a snap to set up as the Benz, however. Its low output of 0.2mV may try the patience (and the gain limits) of your phono stage. It didn’t faze the ARC Reference Phono 2, but be aware that this is a low-output moving coil. The Ice Blue also likes to be loaded down to 100 ohms, where its frequency balance comes closest to flat, colorless neutrality. (You don’t seem to pay the same penalty in dynamic range and transient speed by loading the Ice Blue down that you sometimes do with other moving-coil cartridges.) It is happiest tracking at the recommended 2.3 grams with the tonearm parallel to the record surface. At \$9k, it is nearly twice the money of the Benz and Ortofon, but it does something that neither of these others do—it combines their virtues almost equally and completely, making for an option that you can’t get by simply choosing one or the other. Another world-class cartridge—and another reference.

We come now to the most intriguing cartridge in this exceptional bunch and, frankly, the one I’ve spent the least listening time with. I picked it up last month (as of this writing) in Erlangen, Germany, and have only had a scant few weeks with it in my system. But I’m reporting on it now because I want TAS readers to know that it is undoubtedly extraordinary—and available (at least, to those of you with deep pockets).

The mystery cartridge is Clearaudio’s new, top-of-the-line Goldfinger Statement. And it is...well, I’m not sure yet of all that it is, although I am sure that it is the best

Clearaudio cartridge I've heard (and I've heard most of them) and, perhaps, the best cartridge (a lot of) money can currently buy.

I'm going to be honest: I've had a long love/hate relationship with Clearaudio cartridges. They've always been extraordinary soundstagers with exceptional resolution, transient speed, and dynamic impact. But, until the last few years, they've also had a rather caustic tonal balance. Just take a look at that little printout that comes with every Clearaudio and note the inevitable sharp peak in frequency response between 10kHz and 20kHz. While the peak adds energy and excitement to transients, air and space to the stage, and more detail (or the impression of more detail) to the presentation, it also adds audible brightness to timbres.

This characteristic overly bright, lean, analytical tonal balance began to change several years ago, with the Clearaudio Discovery. Though it was still way too bright, the Discovery began to add a little more density of tone color to the mid-to-upper bass and midband—and to subtract a little energy from the overly emphasized upper midrange and treble. Each subsequent Clearaudio cartridge has veered a little more away from “too lean, bright, and mechanical” toward “neutral, natural, and organic.”

With the Statement, Clearaudio has almost done a one-eighty. I'm not entirely sure of what all has changed here—I do know from my visit to Clearaudio in Germany (see p. XX) that designer Peter Suchy has tripled the number of magnets in his patented “Magnetic Ring” configuration to twelve, creating a magnetic field that is strong enough to allow him to use 30% thinner 24k gold wire in the coils, thus reducing moving mass and creating a magnetic engine of very high efficiency. The Statement is also the first Clearaudio cartridge to have EMF shielding integrated into its 14k gold body (Suchy says it is, in fact, the first cartridge from any manufacturer to do this).

Clearaudio is claiming that these (and other) improvements result in higher output, improved channel separation, increased dynamic range, and “ultra-high” resolution. And, folks, I'd have to say that all of these claims are true.

Some of them are verifiable by measurement. My friend Andre Jennings (than whom no one else is better at cartridge setup) measured 35dB channel separation (an astoundingly good figure) with the Statement's azimuth optimized in the Walker Black Diamond Mk III's air-bearing tonearm. He also measured harmonic distortion of 0.20% (another astounding figure), using the Audio Research Corporation Reference Phono 2 (at the low gain setting). These are standard-setting numbers in my setup, but they don't tell you how the Statement sounds.

You're going to find this hard to fathom—I certainly did—but in tonal balance the cartridge that the Statement most resembles isn't the Goldfinger v2 or the Ortofon A90, which is what you might expect; it is the Koetsu Blue Lace! Yep, this is a voluptuous-sounding transducer—the polar opposite of the traditional Clearaudio sound.

Now, I don't know if this gorgeous tonal palette will change with further break-in. But at the moment this is one ravishingly beautiful cartridge to listen to. Let me be more precise here, lest you get the impression that the Statement is a highly colored cartridge. It is not. But it *is* warmer and sweeter and fuller (i.e., closer to lifelike with a touch of romance) than any Clearaudio I've heard—ever. It is also, and here's where the Clearaudio heritage comes in, the most phenomenal soundstaging cartridge I've heard—ever. With the best, which is to say the deepest reaching, most powerful, most highly resolved, most completely natural bass I've heard—ever—from an analog source.

To hear this thing on a really great, really dynamic recording—such as Clearaudio’s own sensational showpiece *The Percussion Record*—is a jaw-dropping experience. Honestly, this cartridge simply blows the walls out, delivering an almost surround-like soundfield of unparalleled width and depth, with the added bonus of the most thunderous, floor-and-wall-shaking bass (and this record *has* some bass, folks) I’ve heard in my room from the Magico Q5s (or any speaker).

When you add A90-level transient response and resolution of inner detail to this package, you come closer to achieving the unachievable—a transducer that will *fully* satisfy “fidelity to mastertapes” listeners, “absolute sound” listeners, and “as you like it” listeners—than any cartridge I’ve heard. Unless its sonics go to hell in a handbasket over the next few weeks, this has to count as a break-through for Clearaudio—and a standard-setter for analog fanatics.

I have some more good news and one piece of bad. The good is that the Statement is a snap to set up. Its very high output of 0.9mV makes it an easy match to any phono stage. It prefers a 47k loading, tracks wonderfully well in a medium-mass arm like the Walker or the Da Vinci at around 2.8 grams (with the tonearm parallel to the record surface), and for those of you with arms like an SME or a Graham doesn’t really need a lot (or any) help from viscous damping. Now the bad news: The Goldfinger Statement costs 11,000€, which is about \$15k (and I don’t know if that is the final price). So...another world-class cartridge (maybe, even, the class of world-class) and most certainly a reference, but simply unaffordable for most of us.

Finally, let me turn to a new record cleaner, also from Clearaudio, the Double-Matrix Professional. Here the news is entirely good. This is a product that improves upon its predecessor, the Double Matrix, in every way *for substantially less money*. Two thousand dollars less, as a matter of cold, hard cash.

Like the Double Matrix, which I reviewed in Issue XXX, the Professional will clean both sides of an LP simultaneously, which results in a genuine savings of time, labor, and boredom. Unlike the Double Matrix, which proved to be quirky in its operation (among other things its motor would cog and the turntable would simply freeze if the record being cleaned wasn’t clamped down just so), the Professional appears to be foolproof. Its motor never cogs; it disperses fluid evenly over both sides of the record being cleaned (provided that the machine is properly leveled); it scrubs and vacuums in two directions; and the speed of the platter is variable from very slow to quite fast via a control knob.

I’m not going to claim that the Double Matrix Professional does the “best” job of cleaning vinyl of any of the many record-cleaning machines on the market. (As far as I can tell, the finest of them do almost exactly the same things equally well.) What I am going to say is that the Double Matrix Professional is the most convenient option on the market. It is also handsome looking in its (now) aluminum chassis, and smaller, more compact, and easier to position than the original Double Matrix. At \$4k it isn’t cheap, but if you have a lot of (dirty) records, it is the cleaner I would recommend.

### **Specs & Pricing**

#### **Benz Micro LP S-MR**

Mass: 16 grams

Stylus shape: Micro-ridge

Compliance: 15/15 $\mu$ /mN  
Recommended tracking force: 1.8–grams  
Output voltage: 0.35mV  
Loading: >400 ohms  
Price: \$5000

### **MUSICAL SURROUNDINGS**

5662 Shattuck Ave.  
Oakland, CA 94609  
(510) 547-5006  
musicalsurrroundings.com

### **H&S Ice Blue**

Mass: 7.2 grams  
Stylus shape: Line contact  
Compliance: 15/15 $\mu$ /mN  
Recommended tracking force: 2.3 grams  
Channel separation: 30dB  
Output voltage: 0.2mV  
Loading: 100 ohms  
Price: \$9000

### **BERTRAND AUDIO IMPORTS**

(603) 883-1982  
betrandaudio.com

### **Clearaudio Goldfinger Statement**

Mass: 17 grams  
Stylus shape: Micro HD  
Cantilever: Boron  
Compliance: 15/15 $\mu$ /mN  
Recommended tracking force: 2.8 grams (+/-0.2 grams)  
Channel separation: >30dB  
Output voltage: 0.9mV at 5cm/s  
Loading: 47k ohms  
Price: \$15,000

### **MUSICAL SURROUNDINGS**

5662 Shattuck Ave.  
Oakland, CA 94609  
(510) 547-5006  
musicalsurrroundings.com

### **JV's Reference System**

Loudspeakers: Magico Q5, TAD CR-1, MartinLogan CLX, Magnepan 1.7, Magnepan 3.7

Linestage preamps: Conrad-johnson GAT, Audio Research Corporation Reference 40

Phonostage preamps: Audio Research Reference 2

Power amplifiers: Conrad-johnson ART, ARC Reference 610T, Lamm ML2.2

Analog source: Walker Audio Proscenium Black Diamond Mk III record player, Da Vinci AAS Gabriel Mk II turntable with DaVinci Grand Reference Grandezza Mk II tonearm

Phono cartridges: Clearaudio Goldfinger Statement, Ortofon MC A90, Benz LP S-MR, H&S Ice Blue

Digital source: Mac Mini/Wavelength Audio WaveLink HS 24/192 USB-to-S/PDIF converter/Berkeley Audio DAC

Cable and interconnect: Synergistic Research Galileo

Power Cords: Synergistic Research Tesla, Shunyata King Cobra

Accessories: Synergistic ART system, Shakti Hallographs (6), A/V Room Services Metu panels and traps, ASC Tube Traps, Critical Mass MAXXUM equipment and amp stands, Symposium Isis and Ultra equipment platforms, Symposium Rollerblocks and Fat Padz, Walker Prologue Reference equipment and amp stands, Synergistic Research Tesla power conditioner, Walker Valid Points and Resonance Control discs, Clearaudio Double Matrix SE record cleaner, HiFi-Tuning silver/gold fuses