GROUP TEST

Are you in the market to perk-up your pick-up? Our in-depth group test features seven very special moving-coil models at different rungs on the upgrading ladder. Credit cards on standby.

CHOICE PICK-UPS
£515-£1070
TESTED THIS MONTH
ZYX R50 BLOOM £515
AUDIO-TECHNICA AT33EV £569
BENZ MICRO ACE SL £595
HEED ZENE £699
DYNAVECTOR KARAT 17D3 £749
ORTOFON CADENZA RED £795
CLEARAUDIO TALISMAN V2 GOLD £1070

GROUP TEST

If you haven’t been seduced already, it’s probably just a matter of time. Moving-magnet cartridges can be very good, but somehow a decent moving-coil will always trump them: typically giving musicians a more tangible presence within the soundstage, and presenting fine detail in a more vibrant and natural way. Movingmagnets can start to sound matter of fact by comparison.

The good news is that there are now more moving-coils to choose from than before, and in real terms they can be better value for money too. Our group test here covers the price band in which, arguably, the performance-versus-price equation is most favourable. Many of these models feature materials and technologies that once came only with massive four-figure price tags.

SWITCHING COMPONENTS
For the listening sessions in this review, each of the seven cartridges was carefully installed in my SME Model 10 turntable. With the use of multiple M2 headshells, the camera-like precision of the SME arm made it possible to switch cartridges quite quickly for comparison, while repeatedly aiding the correct set-up for each one.

Also included in the system was the Acoustic Signature Tango 2 phono stage, which is a good all-round performer but also offers sensible loading adjustment if required. From here the signal went via Vertere Pulse interconnects to the line inputs of the stalwart Classe CAP-2100. Speakers were the long-served Dali Ikon 6, bi-wired with Chord Odyssey speaker cables.

MUSIC TRACKS
Album selections for the review included the classic 1976 direct-cut The King James Version [Sheffield Lab LAB 3], a live recording, of course, which captures the horns and rhythm section of the Harry James big band in a supremely natural way. The leader’s trumpet solo on the ‘Corner Pocket’ remains a good test of tracking ability, too.

Christine Collister’s Love [Rega ENS 002] is a painstaking analogue studio recording from 2006 with some unusual and revealing instrumental sounds as well as demanding vocals. Though recorded in 1978, Dire Straits [Vertigo 9102 021] and particularly ‘Sultans Of Swing’ still seems to test any product’s ability to give the finer nuances that make the difference between a communicative, musical performance and a plodding ordinary one.

Coming up to date, a recent audiophile vinyl issue of Folk Art by Joe Lovano’s Us Five [Pure Pleasure PPAN BST91528] is a truly demonstration-standard recording, and the long bonus track ‘Jazz Free,’ not on the original 2009 Blue Note CD issue, proved especially revealing, with its gamut of percussion sounds from the group’s two drummers and the vibrant interaction of the whole group as they move into pure improvisation.

Finally, there was that all-time classical favourite, Sir John Barbirolli Conducts English String Music [EMI ASD 521], from the old Kingsway Hall, which tests a system’s ability to recover space and atmosphere, as well as its ability to make a string orchestra sound truly glorious.

RECOMMENDATION

CHOICE

ZYX R50 BLOOM
AUDIO-TECHNICA AT33EV
BENZ MICRO ACE SL
HEED ZENE
DYNAVECTOR KARAT 17D3
ORTOFON CADENZA RED
CLEARAUDIO TALISMAN V2 GOLD

HIGHLY RECOMMENDED

CARTRIDGES
HEADPHONES
AMPLIFIERS
AM/FM TUNERS
SPEAKERS

CD PLAYERS
TURNTABLES

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Benz Micro ACE SL (£595)

Before founding his own cartridge brand in Switzerland, Ernst Benz had been a leading supplier of diamond styli, and had even acquired the American Empire company. With a background in aircraft instrumentation, he also created his own watch brand, which still thrives. He retired in 1994, selling the cartridge business to his long-term collaborator, Albert Lukaschek, who heads the Benz Micro operation today.

In Benz Micro’s extensive range the base models are the low-output Gold MC and high-output Silver MC, both with basic elliptical styli mounted on aluminium cantilevers. Next step up from these is the ACE, which comes in high and medium-output versions as well as the low-output ACE SL reviewed here. For this model, the aluminium cartridge frame is encased by an acrylic body, but the generator with its tiny coils is exposed below.

As with the more expensive Glider, the ACE now falls into what Benz Micro calls its ‘S’ Class, and uses a proprietary ‘pure iron core coil’ system, the coils claimed to be of lower mass than previous models and matched to the cantilever. The cantilever in this case is a 0.28mm-diameter boron rod, on which is mounted a 6x40mm line-contact nude diamond stylus.

Recommended tracking force is 1.7 to 2g, with an optimum of 1.7 to 1.8g; I ended up setting it at just under 2g.

**TELLING DETAIL**

The Benz didn’t give an instant impression of dynamic fireworks or glittering detail, yet it did reveal inner dynamics and detail. It could bring out the subtleties of guitarists’ finger and plectrum sounds or reveal the individual singers in backing vocals while instruments took their natural places within a realistic soundstage. It conveyed a performance as a whole, so that listening to the most familiar track you could be made newly aware of its emotional power.

**HI-FI NEWS LAB REPORT**

As with all Benz MCS [HiFi Aug ’09, Nov ’10 and Sept ’11] the ACE is phase-inverting, so you may choose to ignore the colour-coding on its rear pins. Moreover, this SL version is clearly a low-output/low impedance version of the SH [HiFi Sept ’11] offering 15dB lower sensitivity (540pV vs. 3.2mV), superior stereo separation (35dB vs. 28dB at 1kHz), tighter channel balance (0.06dB vs. 0.3dB) and VTA (2.3 vs. 26°). The ideal tracking weight is slightly higher at 2g but the 25g compliance and tracking performance (good to 70µm or +15dB at 100Hz) is broadly unchanged. Unequalised distortion is low at 2.3% (re. 1kHz/5cm/sec) while the equalised trend [red in fig, below] hovers at or below 1% through bass and midrange (re. –8dB).

The lateral/vertical responses are far better matched in the SL, promising more consistent imaging across the soundstage. PM

**ABOVE:** Benz Micro’s familiar exposed generator has a boron rod cantilever and line contact stylus, as in the ACE SH.
GROUP TEST VERDICT

Our test group quickly revealed the sheer diversity, in design approach and sound, to be found in this market today.

Audio-Technica's AT33EV hits you immediately with a big soundstage and quite good inner detail, yet it somehow puts a gloss of its own on the music, which can seem a little artificial and even become tiring. Although inspiring affection, the AT33EV is a less worthy contender than Audio-Technica's AT559 ML3, which costs only a little more.

Turning to the ZYX R-50 Bloom-Hd, this too has a signature sound that's intriguingly different from others in the group. Listening to the more upmarket ZYX R-1000 Airy 3 XH some years ago, it seemed to me that the 'Airy' name was well-chosen, and this lower-cost ZYX similarly gives an open, inviting stereo spread. This light and delicate presentation may suit many ears, although I felt it somehow lacked solidity and might not be the most satisfying in long-term listening.

LOSING OUT ON PRICING

At the other end of our price scale, the Clearaudio Talismann V2 Gold was also almost opposite to the ZYX in sonic terms. It gave a strong, assertive performance, though with bass that seemed over-full. Possibly it might have shown to greater advantage in a Clearaudio turntable system. But in our group context, it did not show the superiority that would have justified its (recently much increased) cost.

Heed's newly-launched Zene can give a thoroughly enjoyable and rhythmically persuasive musical performance. Sometimes it could appear slightly over-bright, but offered vitality and realism. Inevitably, the badge-engineered Heed is more expensive than the Benz Micro upon which it is based, and this is its principal drawback.

Dynavector's Karat 17D3 had an impressively dynamic and detailed sound, though it could occasionally sound just busy rather than musically integrated. Its bass was well-controlled and springy. After listening with it mounted normally, I tried the importer's recommendation, adding nylon washers to each bolt above and below the headshell, plus more as spacers at the front to give a three-point contact. Actually, due to the SME's headshell's cutaway underside, I had to use a stack of three washers for the 'outrigger'.

This did give a softened sound with stereo perspectives that were a little more laid-back and relaxed, if with a loss of punch in the bass, which will suit many systems.

OUR TWO WINNERS

Subtly different, perhaps, from the higher-output ACE SH reviewed last September, the Benz Micro ACE SL is clearly another winner at its price point. Above all it has a cohesive, all-of-a-piece quality that seems to let the music speak for itself.

The other winner in this group is the Ortofon Cadenza Red. It has something approaching the outstanding bass quality of the pricier Cadenza Blue, and in this respect at least it outperforms the Benz Micro ACE, even though it is otherwise slightly restrained and finer-grained. It also offers much of the Cadenza Blue's detail and fine stereo imagery, yet with a slightly warmer, more rounded character.

The Cadenza Red gives an initial impression of correct balance and proportion. And this first impression, for once, is well borne out in the longer-term listening satisfaction which this model should provide.

Above: (Clockwise from top) the Ortofon Cadenza Red and Benz Micro ACE SH offer outstanding performance while the Dynavector Karat 17D3 is uniquely exciting.