

Benz-Micro Ref 3 cartridge

(This one was written in May 2007. Unfortunately, Benz-Micro replaced this model before this review could appear. By its brief length, you can tell this was meant to be part of an overall series on cartridges.)

If you're looking for a bigger, clearer, more dynamic presentation in your analog rig, take a look at Benz-Micro's wooden-bodied Ref 3 cartridge. This moving-coil cartridge, which offers 0.3 mV of output, is almost startling in its ability to deliver clean, extended high frequencies. I also found the Ref 3 to provide stunning dynamic contrasts with ease when mated to my Michell Orbe SE turntable and SME V tonearm. For instance, the Benz's skills at drawing out powerful and convincing musical crescendos from a stark black

background were evident while I listened to my treasured Athena pressing of Rachmaninoff's *Symphonic Dances and Vocalise*, performed by Donald Johanos and the Dallas Symphony Orchestra. The Ref 3 never sounded compressed or taxed by the louder, more rhythmically complicated passages. More than once, goosebumps were raised on my forearms, a telling sign.

The midrange quality of the Ref 3, however, may have sounded slightly subdued in the context of the outstanding performance in the treble region, but it never detracted from the overall presentation. If anything, these frequencies were smooth and relaxed, possibly a result of the superbly-crafted wooden body. At the same time, the Ref 3 is one of the rare wooden-bodied cartridges that could never be called warm or lush, although I suspect the body is what keeps this Benz from being characterized as cool or analytical.

The Ref 3 is sensitive to loading, preferring to be run full-out at 47k ohms. Experiment with lower settings (I originally had it set at the same 100 ohm setting as my Koetsu Rosewood), and you'll find the bass response to virtually disappear. Once I opened up the throttle, so to speak, the Benz sounded full and impressive, and in perfect balance with those spectacular highs.

I think the Ref 3 might be the ideal cartridge for turntables, such as acrylic models, that might sound otherwise overdamped. I actually mounted it on my Technics SL-1200, and the Ref 3 almost completely eliminated that dark, claustrophobic Technics sound that troubles me so. I know that it sounds crazy to mount a \$2000 moving-coil cartridge on an SL-1200, but for the first time, I was able to enjoy the sound of LPs played on this rig. So if you're looking for a cartridge that will inject a little excitement into a fairly dull-sounding analog rig, the Ref 3 is it. It's the cayenne pepper of moving coils!

