

## Rega P5 Turntable; Rega Exact & Benz Micro ACE-L phono cartridges

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### Chris Martens

As a middle-aged audiophile, I remember the good old days when vinyl playback was king, and the finest moving-coil cartridges didn't cost well north of a grand. While today's über cartridges are no doubt marvels of precision micromanufacturing, many are scary expensive, so that now more than ever there's a need for cartridges that provide a taste of top-tier performance at prices mere mortals can afford. Happily, such cartridges exist, and one of the nicest I've found is the Swiss-made, \$550 Benz Micro ACE-L.

The ACE is derived from Benz's famous \$795 Glider L2 cartridge, and offers much the same kind of well-balanced, "jack of all trades" sound that made the Glider popular. Like the latter, the ACE uses a fine-line stylus, a boron cantilever rod, and an exposed motor design, but—unlike the Glider—the ACE protects its "naked" motor with an open-bottomed, wraparound acrylic shell that makes the cartridge less prone to installation damage. ACEs are offered in high (H), medium (M), and low (L) output versions to fit different applications, but many enthusiasts believe the L model offers the most resolution and nuance. (Sallie Reynolds reviewed the H in Issue 9 of our sister e-magazine, AVguide Monthly.)

When I put the ACE in my 'table, a number of hoped-for virtues came into play: midrange purity, grainlessness, fast transients, extended treble response, and taut and snappy bass. My initial reaction was, "Wow, the ACE pulls an astonishing amount of air and textural detail out of a record groove." As the ACE gained run-in time, its treble response toned down just a bit, becoming less spectacular but better balanced. On Ray Brown, Shelly Manne, and Joe Sample's *The Three* [Inner City], the ACE was capable of almost mesmerizing realism—largely

because it caught, but did not overdo, the transient attack of Sample's keyboards and harmonics of Manne's cymbal work. While the ACE doesn't offer that "nth" degree of transparency provided by some top-tier moving coils, neither does it force listeners to grapple with more detail than they bargained for. Instead, the ACE offers a smart and satisfying compromise, giving enough detail to capture instruments' harmonic and dynamic flavors, but not so much that listeners feel like they're dealing with the sonic equivalent of an electronscanning microscope.

In the midrange, and down into the bass, the ACE has a pure, open sound that conveys the timbre of instruments and voices in a direct, honest way. On "Jericho" from Joni Mitchell's *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter* [Elektra], you not only hear the lighter tonalities of Mitchell's soaring voice, but also the darker, more suggestive undertones that add color and expression to her phrases. The ACE's freedom from grain helps, too, removing layers of sonic gauze that might otherwise come between the listener and the music. Though the ACE may not take you to the sonic mountaintop in terms of three-dimensionality, it gets you a good part of the way there.



On the same Mitchell track, you will also hear one of the best-ever recordings of the amazing Jaco Pastorius. His fretless bass tone is surprisingly difficult to get right, because it combines rich, powerful, not-too-tightly-damped fundamentals overlaid with intensely modulated, taut bass accents that give his Fender Jazz Bass its incomparable growl. The ACE captures his signature sound with élan. Some cartridges give you the fundamentals without the growl, others the growl without the foundation below, but the ACE nails them both. This ability to simultaneously convey low-frequency richness and articulation is what sets the ACE apart.

Overall, the ACE proved a fine tracker, gracefully delineating complicated vocal and orchestral lines and giant orchestral swells, as in the Reiner/Chicago reading of Mahler's *Symphony No. 4* [RCA]. The cartridge also performs well in the imaging and soundstaging departments, though with one small anomaly—namely, the fact that it does a noticeably better job of reproducing soundstage width than depth. The ACE's tendency to throw wide but not correspondingly deep soundstages isn't particularly noticeable, yet it sometimes makes recordings with spectacular soundstages (e.g., Andreas Vollenwieder's *Caverna Magica* [CBS]) sound less expansive than they otherwise might. However, to keep things in perspective, remember that by any reasonable standard the ACE offers fine tracking and lateral imaging, with good to very good soundstaging.

To get the most from the ACE, try using it in a mediummass arm and on a 'table that provides good foundational bass support (the ACE works beautifully, for example, in my Linn Ittok/LP-12 combo). When I tried the ACE in Clearaudio's relatively low-mass Satisfy arm and on its Emotion table, the cartridge sounded somewhat more alive, but also—at times—thinner and more aggressive than it did in the Linn. The trick is to choose a 'table/arm that maximizes the ACE's virtues without turning them into double-edged swords, so that you get natural clarity but without a sound that becomes painfully unforgiving on less-than-stellar recordings. For electronics, all you'll need is a good and quiet MC phonostage. I got great results with the built-in MC phonostages in my Musical Fidelity integrated amps and in the terrific NAD C 162 preamplifier. One word of caution: keep cabling and connections simple, because the ACE's unshielded motor assembly can reveal any ground loops or other noise sources in your system.

Benz's ACE-L offers many of the best qualities of premium- priced moving-coil cartridges at an accessible, real-world price. For today's analog enthusiasts, I think the ACE offers one of the best-balanced combinations of musicality and audiophile virtues that \$550 can buy.

## Jim Hannon

Twenty-five years ago, I made one of the most significant system upgrades I've ever experienced. I replaced my sexy Philips 212 turntable and highly regarded Denon 103D moving-coil cartridge with a rather plain Rega Planar 2 'table and Grace F9E moving-magnet cartridge. Coupled with original Quads and modest tube electronics, that system caused many a jaw to drop. After several years, I moved on to more costly components, but dollar-for-dollar, that Rega-based system gave me more sheer musical enjoyment than just about anything

since. When I was asked to review Rega's P5 turntable system, I wondered if it would produce a similar effect.

Well, this thoroughly designed system solution—for \$2240 it includes the P5 'table, RB700 arm, and Rega Exact cartridge—is one of the most musical front ends I've heard at anywhere near its price. By effectively dealing with "bad vibrations," the P5 lets the music shine through, producing surprisingly engaging and natural-sounding results. The Rega P5 is as close to a "set it and forget it" analog front end as you're likely to find, and its absence of "groove noise" is astonishing. I prefer its overall musicality to just about any digital system I have heard, as well as to several more expensive analog rigs.

Using the Rega P5 can be a liberating experience. Since selling my Rega Planar 2 years ago, I have admittedly become much more obsessive about things like cartridge VTA, turntable suspensions and/or isolation, and record cleaning. However, Rega founder Roy Gandy's design takes most of the worry out of setting up and using an analog front end. My P5 came with the cartridge already mounted on the arm, so all I needed to do was put on the glass platter and tonearm counterweight, adjust the tracking force and anti-skate, and connect the power to the 'table. With this combo, there's no need to worry about fiddling with cartridge VTA, isolating the 'table with a mass-loaded stand (a lightweight, rigid end-table works great), or buying a record clamp (not recommended). Instead of spending time cleaning records, Roy suggests putting a new record directly on the platter, closing the dustcover, and letting the music flow. It's as close to instant analog gratification as you're likely to get.

Overcoming years of programming, I listened to a stack of new jazz reissues without cleaning them first. I was much more drawn into the music with the P5 than with the digital players I've recently reviewed. The timbre of the saxophones of Coleman Hawkins, Ben Webster, Stan Getz, Paul Desmond, and Sonny Rollins all sounded life-like and natural. Record surfaces were eerily quiet. I went through one record after another with hardly a pause. Although I had planned on listening to just one track per record, I found myself listening to both sides of every album. It reminded me of when I listened for hours on end with my Rega Planar 2, but the sound through this new Rega is much more refined, with more detail, clarity, transient speed, and bass extension.

What's the secret to the P5's outstanding musicality? Roy Gandy and his team have taken a systems approach to keep structural resonances from interfering with the vibration of the stylus and blurring the transmission of musical information. And they obviously do a lot of listening. To dramatically reduce structural vibrations, a minimum number of joints exist between the stylus tip and the P5's connection to the preamplifier. Additionally, three-point mounting allows Rega cartridges to be rigidly affixed to the tonearm. The new RB700 arm mounts to the plinth using a similar arrangement. Gandy believes these structural elements make far more of a sonic difference than small VTA adjustments, and that a lightweight albeit rigid plinth that quickly dissipates energy is preferable to a massive one that stores it. I hate to admit it, but he may be right.

Compared with my friend's Rega Planar 3, the P5 was quieter, had tighter and deeper bass, a more three-dimensional soundstage, and better highs. Don't get me wrong; the lower-priced Rega 'table is quite the bargain, but the P5 is noticeably superior and worth the additional cost. Although I didn't have its predecessor (the P25) on hand for comparison, the P5 offers several significant improvements to further minimize vibrations, including a 24-volt motor, a smaller, lighter, and less-resonant plinth, and an optional external power supply. Perhaps the biggest difference is the RB700 tonearm. It offers higher-quality bearings that have tighter tolerances than the RB600, as well as the threepoint arm mount that increases rigidity and reduces unwanted stress on the plinth. Others might charge in excess of \$1295 for an arm of this caliber, but Rega includes a great 'table, too.

Since it's not a moving coil, I thought the Exact cartridge might be a bit slow and shut-down, but it has good transient speed and openness. Better still, it doesn't have the "zippy" top end of many comparatively priced moving coils, yet rivals their level of detail and bass extension. Like all Rega cartridges, the Exact is produced in-house and is hand-built. Compared with most moving magnets, it has one-third of the windings around its coils and more naturally extended highs. With its high output, the Exact should be compatible with just about any preamp, including low-gain tube types. In keeping with Rega's philosophy, it features a Vital non-detachable stylus and rigid, one-piece body to minimize spurious vibrations. These design elements produce a strikingly low-level of groove noise.

While I found the Rega P5 refreshing, it isn't for "Type A" audiophiles who like to continually fuss with VTA or who

treat their analog front ends like science experiments. If Rega's unique cartridge overhang alignment bugs you, you can use the typical Baerwald null points, but you'll lose the advantage of the three-point cartridge mounting. Although the P5 gives up some dynamics, details, and soundstaging to my reference rig, its overall musicality and low groove noise come surprisingly close— and for a small fraction of the price.

If you believe your audio system should help eliminate stress rather than increase it, the Rega P5 turntable system will prove highly rewarding. Its engaging musicality, easy setup, and ease of use should delight music lovers, and may be just the antidote for demanding audiophiles who've longed to be drawn back into the music.