

TESTED: Benz Micro Glider SM Phono Cartridge

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The “S” Series of Benz Micro cartridges made its debut in 2008. Its innovations are embodied in revamped versions of the Wood Body, Glider, ACE, as well as a new version of the LP and SLR Gullwing. Virtually every aspect of cartridge design has been addressed, from coil to cantilever, from suspension to stylus. For the Glider S Series cartridges (available in low, medium, and high output) these improvements include new coil windings and an overall lower-mass coil, a refined pole piece/damper design, and further refinement of the solid Boron cantilever. The stylus is a nude line-contact diamond, mirror-polished. The Glider is optimized for medium-mass tonearms and turned out to be an excellent fit with my own SME V/SOTA Cosmos rig.

I was taken off-guard by the superlative tonal balance of the medium-output Glider SM. In fact, I did numerous A/B comparisons with various CDs and tonally the Glider SM was extremely faithful to my digital source, the Esoteric X-05. So why the surprise? It’s just part of my love-hate relationship with the black magic of moving coils. In prior years what impressed me most from mc’s was transient speed, inner resolution, and delicacy. But just as often the effect was undermined by a thin rising top end and overall coolness. The Glider has little of this hybrid-personality—a reassuring dash of warmth in the lower mids and bass, a lush midrange, and a presence range and treble that have air and harmonic delicacy but none of the dreaded etch and dryness and toppiness. Vocals such as Jennifer Warnes’ on *Famous Blue Raincoat* [Cisco 45RPM] have a liquidity and harmonic color that never veer toward brittleness. The Glider is both faster on transients and more complex micro-dynamically, without the treble darkening that dogged the now-extinct Shure V15. In many ways it’s most reminiscent of the Clearaudio Maestro Wood (reviewed in Issue 185), emulating that mm cartridge’s “glow” but adding inner detail and energy that the Clearaudio softly buries in its warmer, more cushiony personality. Also while the Maestro’s 3.6mV output will give you the added value of playability with any phono stage, the Glider’s 0.8mV is not so demanding that it will require the quietest phono pre on the block.

Besides its tonal honesty—the cornerstone of performance criteria—other elements that rate high with this cartridge are its gobs of low-level detail, its clarification of complex inner voices (separating members of a brass ensemble during the direct-disc *Fanfare from the Common Man* [Crystal Clear], for example), and its reproduction of distance and depth. The Glider S retrieved depth and vocal-placement cues from the fourth movement of Solti and the CSO's performance of the Beethoven Ninth [Decca] like no cartridge I've reviewed in the last two years. Bass reproduction is simply stunning. From the rolling bass drum volleys of *Fanfare* to the subterranean synthesized bass of Jennifer Warnes' "If It Be Your Will," the Glider balances pitch and timbre and resonance in a way that's almost breathtaking.

Great vinyl playback can be a complicated equation. Factors like 'table, tonearm, phono stage, and interconnect (and one's own expectations) all need to be addressed. I liked the musical synergy I achieved with the Benz Micro Glider more than anything I've auditioned recently. I can understand how someone else might want (and want to pay for) a more epic sweep to the soundstage, or greater extension and air at the frequency extremes. However, for those searching for the business end of a playback system that's as musically expressive as it is honest, the Glider will set your system soaring.