

Good Wood

Tony Bolton spruces up his record collection with Benz Micro's superb Wood SL moving coil cartridge...

Sometimes, just the name of a country can evoke images of top quality, bespoke engineering. Mention Switzerland and watches in the same sentence and names like Patek Philippe and Jaeger LeCoultre spring to mind. In the audio world, this home of precision engineering has produced Benz Micro, manufacturers of hand made pickup cartridges. Designed by Albert Lukascheck, who personally tests each unit before it leaves the factory, the range of products runs from models costing a couple of hundred pounds up to those costing several thousand.

Situated approximately half way up the range are the wooden bodied S series. These come in three versions, high, medium and low output, and it is the latter that is under review here. Although the models have been around for a few years, recently the stylus profile has been changed from a Geiger S to a Micro-ridge design. This shape has several claimed advantages over other designs, including a very small contact area with the groove wall, promising good detail retrieval, and the curvature of the tip (3 micron radius) ensuring that wear to the tip does not alter the profile, giving long life and minimal wear to both stylus and records.

As the name suggests, this series of cartridges comes clothed in a wooden body. The official description calls the material Bruyere, and a little research found the English name: Briar-root wood (*Erica Arborea*), better known for making the bowls of tobacco pipes. Encased inside is the generator, a crossed-coil design as found in other Benz Micro products. The solid Boron cantilever with 'side-bonded' stylus, grooved rear pole piece and countersunk O-ring damper are carried over from the previous version of this unit.

I initially installed the Benz on

the Hadcock 242 Cryo arm attached to my Sondek, where it fed the Sutherland 20/20 phonostage that I reviewed a couple of months ago. First impressions were good, although the sound was a little tight and lacked a certain degree of flow in the rhythms being described. After about twenty hours playing it was sounding a lot looser, and the beat of the music seemed more natural. At this point it was relocated to the Clearaudio Carbon Satisfy tonearm on the Master Solution turntable, the signal being amplified by the Leema Acoustics Agena phono stage, running into the Tucana II and Chario Ursa Major loudspeakers. After another twenty five hours playing, and a commensurate level of further loosening up and settling down to the sound, I started doing some serious listening.

SOUND QUALITY

The first LP was an old favourite, The Benny Goodman Trio playing a live concert in aid of the Fletcher Henderson Fund. (He was Goodman's arranger and a band leader in his own right, who unfortunately died of a brain haemorrhage, so the band did a fundraiser which was recorded and transmitted on radio station WNEW in the 'Make-Believe Ballroom' series.)

This is a mid fifties mono LP in average condition, and usually plays (via the Ortofon Kontrapunkt a) with a subdued background of crackles and the occasional pop. My first reaction as the run-in groove played was disbelief. Most of the background noise seemed to have disappeared. As the tracks played through, and a couple of the usual 'crunches' failed to materialise, I became more and more impressed with the Benz's

tracking abilities. It seemed to follow the groove wall extremely accurately, digging into the groove to produce one of the best renditions that I have heard of this record.

The musicians seemed to be working together in a particularly cohesive manner, and the whole experience demonstrated the reason that Goodman was known as the 'King of Swing' for over twenty years. The timing was immaculate and the presentation vibrant without being forward or fussy. This was perfectly demonstrated on track four of the second side, 'I Found A New Baby'. Towards the end, Gene Krupa executes a superb drum solo which gets the band so involved in listening that Krupa has to repeat a phrase, and can be heard calling out "that's your cue". As Goodman and Teddy Wilson (piano) rejoin the music, Krupa inverts his drum beat and plays the rhythm backwards through to the end of the track.

Over the years I have heard a lot of cartridges stumble at this, the beat seems to get a bit messy, and the whole thing can sound a little cacophonous. This time there was no such loss of definition, and the whole thing came smoothly to a close to shouts of appreciation from the audience, followed by enthusiastic applause.

Staying in the nineteen fifties, I moved into the world of stereo



with the 1959 Renata Tibaldi/ Carlo Bergonzi recording of Verdi's 'Aida' on Decca. The sleeve notes (by the respected producer John Culshaw) are interesting. Anxious to show off the special capabilities of the then new stereo medium, the engineers used multiple studios, each with a different acoustic, with Von Karajan's direction of the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra being relayed through closed circuit television. The results of these efforts are impressive. The Grand March seemed to take place outdoors in a large space, whilst the closing aria 'O Terra Adio', where Aida and her lover Radames die, walled up in a tomb, had a close intimacy. As the track draws to a close, there is the background chanting of the priests, and the lamentations of Amneris as she realises the full extent of the results of her jealousy.

It was magical. The two leads occupied the centre stage, whilst Giulietta Simonato's heartbroken contralto seemed to hang in the air, high up to the right, with the priests' chorus murmuring at a similar height, but from the left and centre. I can honestly say that this is the best I have heard this record since the demise of my Roksan Shiraz cartridge several years ago. Bear in mind that the current list price of a Shiraz is about twice the cost of the Benz and you'll see why I was so impressed.

A day or two later and I was in a very different musical mood, enjoying the Progressive Trance beats of 'Electric Roundabout' by Human Blue. This LP starts with a deep pulsating bass that seems to get louder and bigger, until it suddenly breaks into the track proper. The Benz romped through it, propelling the music along with an even handed analysis of the electronic noises and effects, seeming to project some of them almost from the far sides of the room. The limits of the image, firmly placed, were a

little beyond the outside edges of the speaker cabinets, with some noises seeming to start way back and rush forward and almost past me before stopping and performing their dance on the carpet in front of me.

Intrigued to see just how much provocation the Wood SL would take before losing its composure, I put on some recently acquired 1960s seven inch singles. Not having had time to put them through the cleaning machine, for once I broke my cardinal rule, and played them as found. I was expecting an ear crunching mess, but found instead the Benz gamely disentangling four and a half decades of dirt from the music, and playing these average condition discs with a degree of refinement and finesse that amazed. Yes, there was surface noise aplenty, but it was in the background, and only really obvious bits of groovewall damage intruded into the music. In the meantime I was more entranced by the levels of definition and energy in the sound, and the sheer amount of detail retrieval being displayed.

In case you haven't guessed, I think I'm in love! I've never had a Benz cartridge to play with at home before, and I have been won over by its exemplary manners, unshakable tracking ability and sheer musicality. I have always considered the Ortofon Kontrapunkt range masters of the art of putting music before a description of the condition of the grooves (and my old Kontrapunkt b was particularly adept at this) but here I think there is a new claimant to the crown. The Benz Micro Wood SL seemed to be unperturbed by record condition or musical genre, and a master of playing the tunes encased in the grooves in a particularly enjoyable and engaging



way. It seemed unfussed by aged recordings (or vinyl) and just rolled up its sleeves and got on with the job in hand - that of making highly enjoyable music.

CONCLUSION

With a price tag just the right side of £1,000 it isn't cheap, but the Benz Micro Wood SL offered a performance that, I think, would cost considerably more to achieve elsewhere. The stylus profile has claims of longevity, so the cost should be ameliorated by a longer than usual usable lifespan. Overall, a truly impressive product, and one I recommend for audition without any hesitation. In fact I would say it was an essential listen if you are in the market for a fabulous piece of Swiss precision engineering.

VERDICT

Smooth, well defined and very musical moving coil cartridge from respected Swiss manufacturer.

BENZ MICRO
WOOD SL £949
 Select Audio
 +44(0) 1900 813064
www.selectaudio.co.uk

FOR

- musically highly involving
- particularly well mannered
- very low surface noise

AGAINST

- nothing



MEASURED PERFORMANCE

The Benz Micro Wood SL has a supremely flat frequency response our analysis shows, quite an amazing result. It will sound evenly balanced and likely smooth and svelte. The stylus suffers very little tracing loss, so behaviour on inner grooves (red trace) was little degraded, a treble loss of a few dB above 10kHz serving to give this cartridge a ruler flat frequency response here.

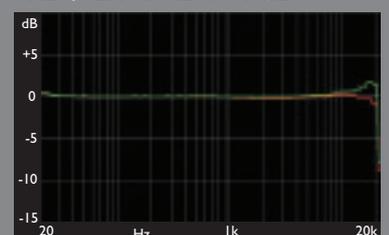
Tracking was very good at 2gms, if not quite up with the best in the midband. At the recommended downforce of 1.8gms the Benz still managed well, if not quite as well as the best. However, mistracking shouldn't occur.

Output was on the low side at 0.6mV on a 5cms/sec rms cut, so quite a lot of external gain is needed in a phono stage, as well as low noise.

With wide channel separation and low distortion, due largely to a vertical tracking angle set exactly to 22 degrees measurement showed, the Wood SL measures extremely well in all areas. It should sound very even, perhaps tonally neutral, peak free and with strong detail retrieval. NK

Tracking force	1.8gms
Weight	9gms
Vertical tracking angle	22degrees
Frequency response	20Hz - 20kHz
Channel separation	34dB
Tracking ability (300Hz)	
lateral	90µm
vertical	45µm
lateral (1kHz)	22cms/sec.
Distortion (45µm)	
lateral	0.8%
vertical	1.6%
Output (5cms/sec rms)	0.6mV

FREQUENCY RESPONSE



Green - outer grooves
 Red - inner grooves