

# Benz Micro Buby Z

Alberto Pascual

## The motivation

Never before now have I had the opportunity to analyze a phono-cartridge. However, there has to be a first time for everything, and this will be my initiation in the world of analogue sources.

I've had in my system different needle brands, among which were Goldring, Benz Micro, Clearaudio and Lyra, so our special guest today is one we are familiar with. In fact, I owned a Benz Micro Ruby 2. A moment of candor here: I purchased the Ruby but never quite fell in love with it. It never sounded the way I wanted it to, despite being combined with an SME IV tonearm and my old Brinkmann Edision. I ended up selling it and acquiring a Clearaudio Concerto.

As stated, this first contact with the Benz Micro was not especially fortunate. It will be interesting to see how the phono-cartridge from the reputed Swiss brand, headed by Albert Lukaschek, responds this time in my system. I like giving a second chance to products whose fame and reputation warrants it.



I should also point out that since the last time I had a Benz at my house, I have changed my turntable. I have moved from a Transrotor Leonardo 25 25 60 Doppio turntable, with an SME IV tonearm to a SPJ La Luce with an SPJ titanium tonearm. With the most recent turntable, I have been using a Lyra Titan i. Again, I wasn't happy with this combination either. I had the impression that my new combination of turntable-tonearm could sound much better than it actually did. I had spoken several times with Judith Spothem, designer and owner of SPJ, who informed me that the combination of an SPJ tonearm and Lyra phono-cartridge was not the best. She suggested very explicitly that I try the Benz Micro.

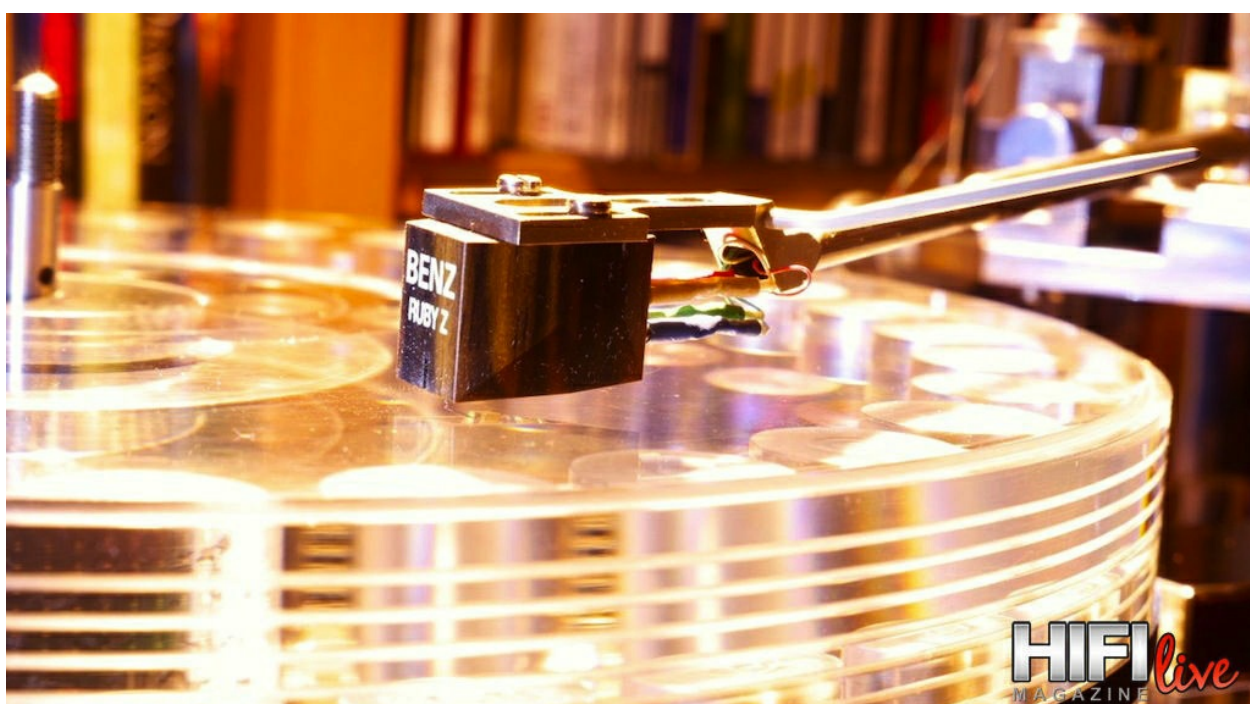
This was my state of mind when the opportunity arose to try out a Benz phono-cartridge. Without any hesitation, I set about testing the object of this review which, without further ado, is: the Ruby Z phono-cartridge.



### A small package arrives on the scene

A small box arrived to my house. White paper, decorated with the black Benz Micro logo, is elegantly wrapped around a wooden box with a methacrylate cover to protect the object of this review from any harm. I could barely wait, so when I got home I dismantled the Lycra and replaced it with our guest of honor.

What can be said about this phono-cartridge before we listen to it? The finish is perfect and its aesthetic is classy. The "Z" for this phono-cartridge refers to the type of wood employed in its construction; dubbed Zebra, it is precious. It has a weight of 10.6 grams, a compliance of 15Cu, an output of 0,35mV, an internal impedance of 38 ohms and a loading capacity higher than 400 ohms. In theory, the right VTF range to be applied varies from 1.8 to 2.0 grams, though you can use up to 2,2 grams in weight.





# Benz Micro Buby Z

Alberto Pascual

The needle is the so-called “micro ridge”, a rare diamond stylus, polished with a microscopic curvature and a radius of only 2 microns. Due to its shape, the diamond stylus does not wear out, it does not alter the contact surface with the groove; so, in principle, we should be able to always listen to the sound produced by a new phono-cartridge. The idea here is to preserve a homogenous sound during the lifetime use of the diamond stylus. Curiously, this needle shape was invented during the development of “Video Disc”, and lends a splendid dynamic combined with very low distortion and top notch definition.

The phono-cartridge’s wooden body, besides being precious as mentioned earlier, is one of considerable size and demands an adjustment for a correct geometry that is a bit more complicated than usual, requiring as it does greater visual effort to get everything just right. Due to this, a correct alignment of the cantilever is harder to appreciate since it is barely visible once it is resting on the reading surface. This now takes us to the set up.



I proceeded to make a preliminary adjustment that was not especially problematic. One has to first try out the cartridge, which undoubtedly implies varying certain parameters so that once the suspension and diamond stylus are at optimal performance, they will sound one hundred percent.

I adjusted the overhang and VTA while applying a VTF of 2 grams and an anti-skating setting in sync with the weight value and proceeded for my first listening with some tried and true records. Most days, I listened to some of the same tracks on these vinyl records to check the progress of the Benz phono-cartridge.

With my first trials, I was able to detect how every time I cleaned the diamond stylus with a small brush, a white, semi-liquid paste appeared. No doubt it was some leftover glue used to fix the diamond stylus to the cantilever, which comes off when the needle reaches in-operation temperatures resulting from friction with the vinyl. This ceased to occur after two or three hours of use. I believe it is necessary to be attentive here and with each use one should clean the stylus after musical reproduction. This will help prevent the glue from solidifying anew and adhering, in addition to dirtying the diamond stylus while resulting in damage to same.

The Ruby Z sound began. I listened calmly, and did my best not to reach any premature conclusions. In this analogue universe, a precise and adjustment quite often is the difference between decent and vulgar sound and

sound that is musical and excellent. Even so, in my early listening, I could appreciate how the sound personality and characteristics of the Benz phono-cartridge did not sound well, but very well. An auspicious beginning and a good sign for the next step.



### **One cartridge, one calibration**

Finally after a 15-day period, I felt the phono-cartridge had passed the 50 hours required to guarantee its optimal testing. The Ruby offered a sound that was sufficiently homogenous.

First and to be totally strict about things, I checked that the phono-cartridge's geometry was right, employing Dr. Feickert's marvelous protractor. Once this was done, I then proceeded to calibrate anew the VTF (the weight exerted by the phono-cartridge on the vinyl's surface) with a high-precision scale. This allowed me also to measure the weight at the turntable's height similar to that of a 180-gram vinyl.

The next step was adjusting the SRA (the vertical angle of the diamond stylus with respect to the surface). This was adjusted by a microscopic USB, an arduous step since it requires adjusting the VTF with each variation in the tonearm's position. This Micro, allows for precise measurements and adjustments so that the diamond stylus can attack the vinyl's grooves at a perfect angle. Once the desired angle is achieved, I corrected the overhang distance (the distance between the axis of the tonearm's pivot and point where the needle rests when it is aligned with the axis of the turntable's turning), which was modified when there was a variation in the height of the pivot.

# Benz Micro Buby Z

Alberto Pascual

Subsequently, I corrected the azimuth (the angle which controls lateral inclination of the phono-cartridge) via a Fozgometer from the brand Fosgate. Lastly, I checked the anti-skating mechanism (the amount of force used to counterbalance the force generated by the phono-cartridge's contact with the vinyl and which tends to bring the tonearm towards the center part of the record) to make sure it was correct. This was done to ensure that the Benz Micro was in the best possible location for a critical listening.

Once all these maneuvers had been carried out, I listened to the Ruby Z over a period of 15 days in order to peacefully appreciate its sound with a variety of musical genres. My listening was distributed with auditions that varied in sound intensity and duration. This allowed me to appreciate in a very precise manner the sensations that the owner of our protagonist would experience in the daily life of a Benz.





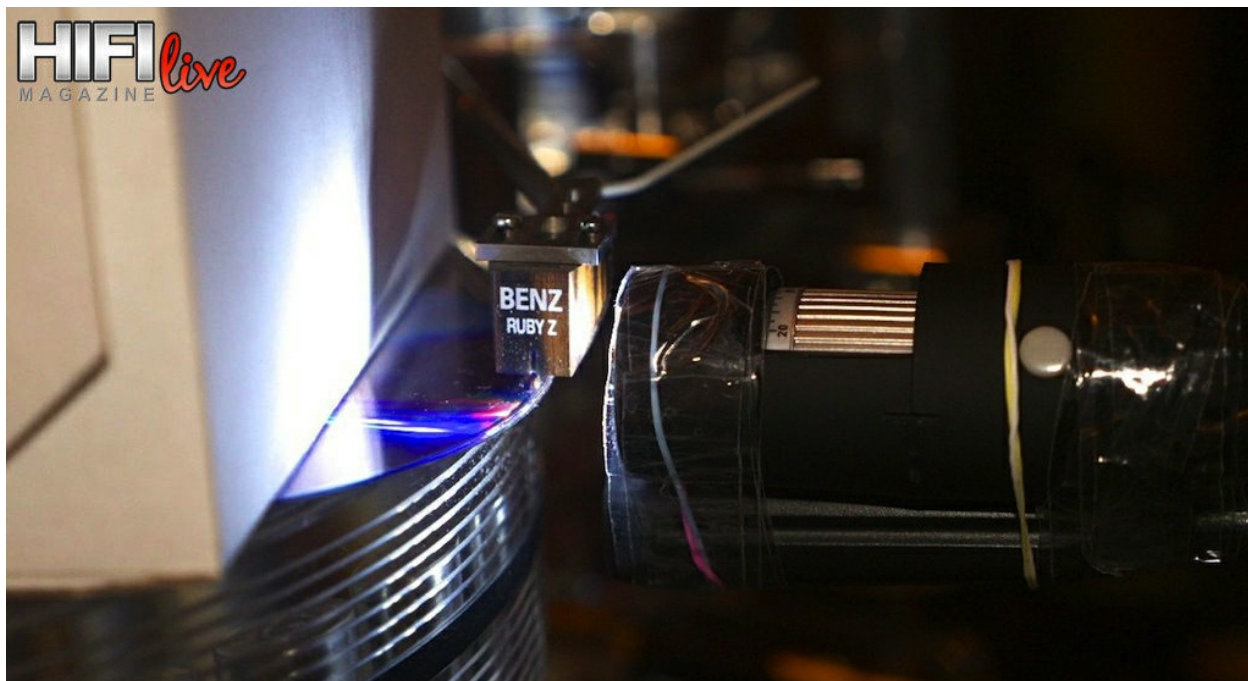
### **One phono-cartridge, one sound**

To begin my review properly, I want to state that the Ruby Z has destroyed any preconceived idea or opinion I may have had regarding Benz Micro phono cartridges. From the outset, I liked it in every way and it has filled my system with analogue sound.

The Ruby Z has very complete bass and tremendous energy. It articulates in an exemplary manner, removing itself from that heavy bass sound which seems to accompany any musical passage that appears on the scene, with just one note. In this case, nothing could be further from the truth. The phono cartridge provides a lower part of the sound spectrum which is rich with texture and nuances, affording a very complete experience. One thing to watch out for ... we should control our equipment, however, or run the risk of encountering serious problems. Having a listening room that is acoustically treated against bass traps, and a good location for one's speakers

and listening point, guarantee our ability to fully enjoy the sublime sound of a bass on a Benz.

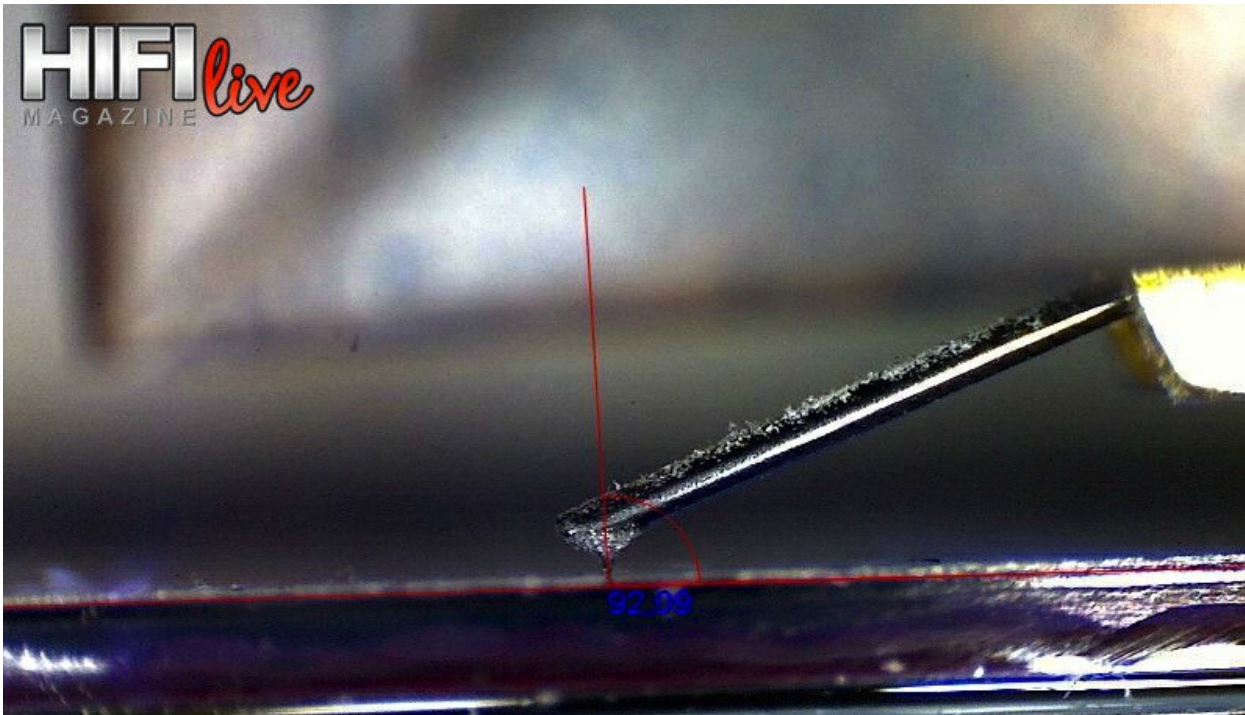
Mid-range sound is simply other-worldly. Describing it is like painting oneself into a corner, one will simply run out of room and words in doing so. Naturalness and presence truly are the adjectives which describe it to perfection. Voices surge in space and are projected, lending a holographic impression that is absolute. It is perfectly supported by a middle-bass which surges in a completely natural way from the deepest entrails of the bass. All this takes place without the slightest trace of coloring and or attraction of undue attention. There is total fluidity and a dynamic in the middle which, quite frankly, many other more expensive phono cartridges cannot even dream of. Choral works are simply exquisite, presenting the various individual protagonists with volume within the overall choral sound. String instruments have a texture that is resplendent. The precision is such that we can perfectly discriminate the sound produced with a plucking or rubbing of the string, or even the resonance created by the instrument. What a joy!



The treble is defined and has full extension. If we compare it to a phono cartridge of a higher level we may find that it offers less detail and microdynamic. In no way, however, is this difference an exaggerated one. This characteristic renders the Ruby Z a benevolent phono cartridge during an elaborate review, and allows listening to go on for a prolonged period, even when listening to vinyl recordings that may be slightly defective. This leads me to believe that the Benz is a phono cartridge which undoubtedly reconciles the music lover with the audiophile. Now, let's not get carried away and feel that the object of this review has a timid treble. Nothing could be further from the truth. It is open, detailed, and has presence, but it never accentuates excessively the highest end of the sound spectrum.

The soundstage is wide and very well defined. It situates the sound protagonists in a simply delicious manner and sketches them with the right amount of volume and scale. I love that that the soundstage is a bumpy ride and not just mere points. The width of my equipment is superlative, capable of filling the entire front wall of my listening quarters. Equally, the height and depth of the soundstage are more than correct.

The dynamic is at the level of the best. I do not miss the clout with respect to my phono cartridge of reference, despite the latter having a cost that is significantly superior. Nevertheless, the Ruby Z rises to the occasion and this cartridge's height, provoking a dynamic and lively sound that is capable, if necessary, of impressing the listener with sound pressure beat or delighting one with a surprisingly sublime and intimate moment. The impression is that the attacks at a given moment have an energy which is similar to reality, evoking a visceral response which at the same time, is controlled. This is a very pleasant discovery.

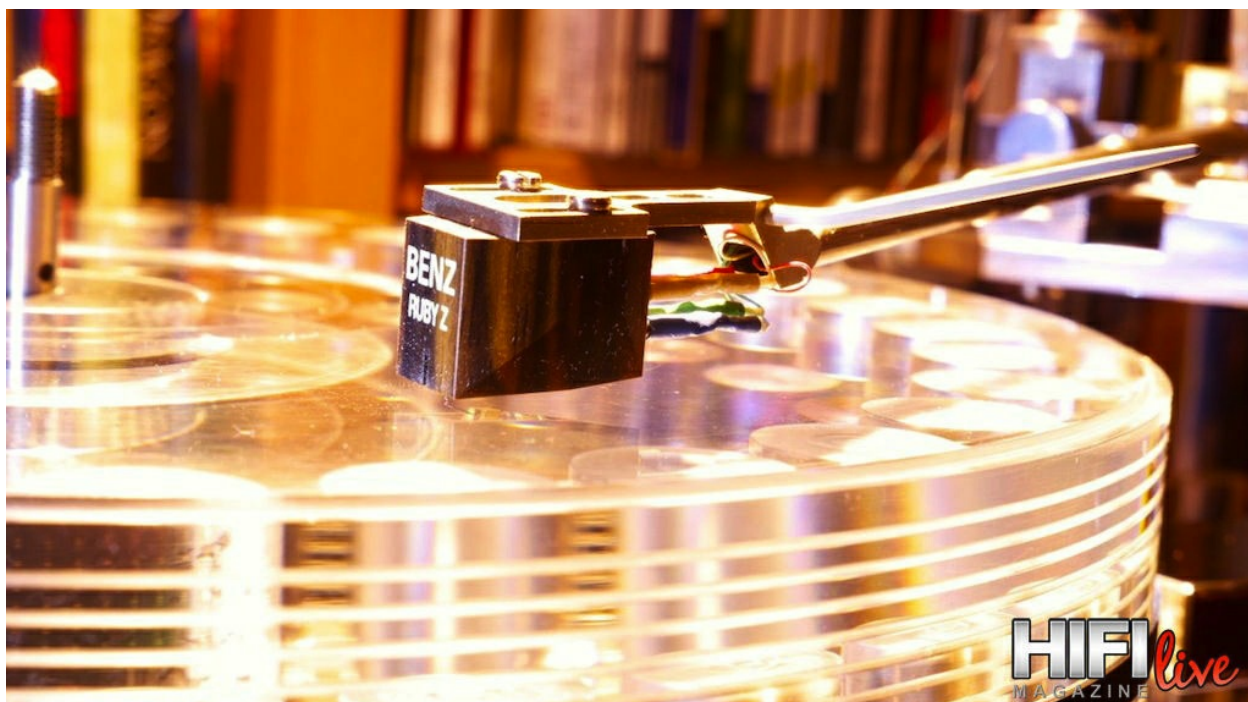


### **So, what is the verdict 30 days later?**

Finally, after coexisting for a significant period with the Benz Micro Ruby Z and writing this review, I have reached a few final conclusions, and it's time to dismantle the phono cartridge and send it back to the importer of same. Really, after reading these lines, did anyone seriously think I was planning to return this phono cartridge? Clearly, that is not going to happen.

The Ruby Z has proven to be a phono cartridge that is tremendously musical and resolute. The Benz Micro stands out especially for having a middle-bass that is first rate, highly enjoyable, accompanied by an extreme treble that not only fulfills its mission but is also at the height of the top performers in its field. This Benz is capable of extracting all the existing information in the micro-grooves of vinyl records, managing at the same time to present them in a perfectly natural way. At no moment does it go beyond its point and never does it call attention to itself due to excesses in any part of the sound spectrum. One will literally fall backwards with the sound of the voices, and the bass will do justice on any rock record that has been decently recorded. All of this comes with just the right amount of sprinkling on a soundstage that is extremely wide and precise, which at times will appear to exceed the limits of one's listening room.





I have listened to the phono cartridge with all types of music and, if truth be told, I find it valid for any style, as long as the recording has been carried within reasonably acceptable limits. To resolve catastrophic vinyl recordings, there are some models which allow one to listen to almost anything (for instance, the Denon 103). Now, if the vinyl used falls within the range of 99% of records decently recorded, the Ruby Z is the phono cartridge to go with. The music lover will savor its fluidity, and the audiophile will enjoy its rigor.

The Benz Micro allows one to experience music in unsuspected ways. One can focus on parameters of the interpretation and realize that all the diverse details are present or similarly enjoy an experience that joins all the players on one piece and converts them into one unit. This ability to allow music to slide easily during our particular listening is what makes it so special. The Benz Micro Ruby Z is a music-making machine and will remain in my house, right where it is, at my turntable.

Lastly, I wish to express my gratitude to Lyric Audio Elite and, especially José Francisco Gutiérrez, for his most attention, in making the realization of this review possible. Now, it's time to enjoy it!

**Benz Micro Ruby Z – 2575€**

**Distributed Lyric Audio, [www.lyricaudio.com](http://www.lyricaudio.com), tel: 979118000**

## **ASSOCIATED STEREO EQUIPMENT**

### **Analog Front End:**

- SPJ La Luce with SPJ Titanium Tonearm limited edition
- Cartridge: Lyra Titan I
- Phono Preamplifier: Brinkmann Edison
- Interconnect Cable (tonearm – preamp) Fono Acústica Armónico RCA 1m
- Power line Cable: Fono Acústica Armonico HD Limited edition SS, Furutec connectors
- Interconnect Cable ( phono preamp – line preamp ) Fono Acústica Armónico balanced 1m

### **Digital Front End:**

- Wadia 861
- Interconnect Cable ( wadia – preamp ): Audioquest Diamond X3

- Power line Cable: Fono Acústica Armónico HD Limited edition SS, Furutec connectors

#### **Preamplifier:**

- Viola Cadenza
- Power line Cable: Cleraudio Power Cord

#### **Power Amplifiers:**

- Dual chassis Cello Performance II amps
- Power line cable: Oyaide Tunami Power Cable
- Interconnect Cable ( pream – amp ): Cello Strings One

#### **Speakers:**

- Wilson Audio WATT & PUPPY sytem 7e
- Speaker Cable: Viola Audiolabs Jazz

#### **Passive subwoofer:**

- Wilson Audio WHOW II serial number 52
- Filter: Wilson Audio Controller
- Power Amplifier: Krell Kav 250a in mono config
- Power line cable: Clearaudio Power Cord