

Ortofon MC Verismo

Precision manufacturing, state-of-the-art materials and magnet technologies combine in this new addition to the 'Exclusives' MC range – the ultimate blend of art and science?
 Review: **Ken Kessler Lab: Paul Miller**

Talk about alpha to omega: we've looked at two Ortofon cartridges this month, the £295 2M Bronze supplied with Thorens' TD 1500 [see p62] and now the MC Verismo moving-coil, at £5349. It's the latest MC in Ortofon's 'Exclusives' series, which already includes the £6999 MC Anna Diamond [HFN Oct '19] and £3799 MC Windfeld Ti [HFN Jan '18], but with an open body shape first pioneered in this Danish brand's MC A90 [HFN Sep '09].

FAMILY TRAITS

Despite the difference in shape, the Verismo shares some mechanical technology with the Anna Diamond, so if you're shopping in this rarefied sector, you'll want to know the trade-offs. There are similarities in the two 'Wide Range Damping' systems employed at the cantilever's fulcrum but the coils and magnet assemblies are distinct, the Verismo employing gold-plated copper in



LEFT: The Verismo's SLM (Selective Laser Melting) titanium body offers a secure, rigid housing for the MC 'generator' [lower left] while also minimising body mass

Furthermore, the MC Verismo weighs 9.5g while the MC Anna Diamond is a far heftier 16g and the newer cartridge requires a downforce of 2.5g-2.8g, with 2.6g sounding optimal, while the MC Anna Diamond gets away with 'just' 2.4g. These numbers came into play for me as I have access to four suitable tonearms of varying effective mass, including detachable headshells whose weight also varies by as much as 10g.

As the body colour conveys, the MC Verismo's open housing is fashioned from titanium by 'Selective Laser Melting' (SLM), a technique pioneered by Ortofon and also used for the MC Anna in its two-part body. In addition to dealing with the hardness, SLM has enabled Ortofon to control the density and thus the damping properties of the body material.

PROPRIETARY DIAMOND

While its name suggests a movie starring Schwarzenegger or Van Damme, the chosen 'Replicant 100' line contact stylus features a long, narrow surface with minor major stylus tip radii of 5/100µm [see inset picture, below]. It's also featured on the MC Anna (Diamond) along with a very similar diamond cantilever [see PM's boxout, left]. So, once again, I find myself with a cartridge fitted with a gemstone cantilever, the AVID Ruby Reference [HFN Nov '20] being our last memorable example.

All cantilevers impart a 'sound'. With diamond cantilevers, there's typically a – don't groan, please – cut-glass precision which improves transient attack from mid-treble on up, and

the former and a Field Stabilising Element (FSE) in the latter. Otherwise, both MCs require a 10ohm load and have identical claimed outputs of 0.2mV. Compliance differs, however, with the MC Verismo specified at a slightly softer 13µm/mN while the MC Anna Diamond is a lower 9µm/mN [see PM's Lab Report, p49].

DIAMOND – AN AUDIOPHILE'S BEST FRIEND

In an effort to improve the 'coupling' between the stylus and vinyl groove at one end and, in an MC, the coils at the other, the ideal cantilever would be both infinitely stiff and vanishingly lightweight. Hardly practical, but it explains why exotic cantilever materials have proved popular in high-end pick-ups since 1979 when Dynavector launched its Karat Diamond and Ruby MCs [HFN Nov '80] and Technics used a boron pipe in its EPC-205 MM [HFN Dec '80 & Sep '18]. As ever, the choice of material is a compromise between physical properties, cost and practical considerations – it's a lot simpler to mount a diamond on a shank through one end of an aluminium cantilever [Vertere Sabre, HFN Feb '22] than to glue it onto a boron pipe [AVID Boron, HFN Apr '21] or diamond rod, for example [see inset micrograph].

For the Verismo, budget was not an issue so Ortofon could look dispassionately at diamond, its 1100GPa Young's modulus making it 2x 'stiffer' than boron, 3x that of ruby and 15x that of aluminium, although it is slightly denser, increasing the cantilever's moving mass. Ortofon faced this conundrum most recently with its Anna Diamond [HFN Oct '19], tackling the weight/inertia issue by reducing the number of (moving) coil turns while simultaneously beefing-up the neodymium magnet's field strength to mitigate any drop in output. It also improved the mechanical behaviour of the cantilever under load using a rubber suspension impregnated with carbon nanotubes. PM



ABOVE: Swooping body shape – with three-point headshell contact and threaded inserts for secure mounting – makes initial set-up/alignment somewhat tricky, but exposed diamond cantilever/Replicant 100 stylus makes for easy cueing

I've also detected better resolution of minuscule details with MCs employing diamond or even ruby cantilevers.

As Infinity's Arnie Nudell told me decades ago, retrieval of fine detail is just as essential in the recreation of a soundstage as is channel separation, which might partially explain why this thing made its presentation seem positively cavernous. In this respect, the MC Verismo reminded me of two classic MCs – Ortofon's own SPU [HFN Jul '21] and the equally venerable Denon DL 103 [HFN Jul '09], an ability I'm pleased to report hasn't been lost in the modernisation that's yielded this futuristic design.

BRING ON THE STYLE

The MC Verismo, too, is the coolest-looking cartridge I've seen since EAT's Jo N°5 [HFN Dec '18]. It screams 21st century both in its shape and in physical details which will please inveterate cartridge swappers. The profile itself relates to matters of shielding, damping, weight and internal isolation, while the top affords the increasingly-popular three-point contact, last seen in Vertere's Sabre [HFN Feb '22].

Ortofon's explanation is consistent with this new trend: three well-defined points of contact ensure that the mechanical integration of the cartridge and the headshell is always absolutely perfect. If one is a technical simpleton such as I, the analogy is a three- versus four-legged stool. I know which I'd prefer to level.

Gains imparted by a three-point contact surface are said to be 'a significant and breathtaking increase in dynamics, resolution, and richness in detail'. A familiar patter, but there's no way to challenge it unless you are able to compare two

identical cartridges, one with a smooth, flat top and one bearing three contact points. Currently, I'm taking it on faith!

Also making life a bit easier for the installer are beefier pins for better contact and grip. Neither is there a need to remember which lead is L+ or R- thanks to the pins' bold colour coding. Better still, to assuage one's foreboding sense of doom when handling cartridges that cost this much, its naked cantilever is so truly 'al fresco' that even a myopic oldie such as I can align and cue it with ease.

Admittedly, installation still requires care beyond worrying about the cantilever's vulnerability because the body is as angular as a Lamborghini Aventador and positioning it might prove nerve-wracking

RIGHT: Fine lead out wires from the gold-plated 6N OFC coils wrap around the inside of the body to the rear of the cartridge pins. The mech 'block' incorporates sophisticated damping and magnet technology



for those who depend on, say, the perfectly parallel slab sides of a Koetsu or Kiseki. But as the cantilever is so highly visible, you'll soon realise it's easy to line up within the grids printed on set-up gauges.

VIRTUAL REALITY

As 'verismo' is Italian for 'realism', Ortofon is stating from the outset that the design goal of the cartridge is musical authenticity, but isn't that the obvious *raison d'être* of every hi-fi product ever made? Bless 'em: there was no doubt from the moment the stylus settled into the groove that I was in the presence of something not just special but memorable.

It started with Aretha Franklin's 'Baby I Love You' from the *Goodfellas* soundtrack [Atlantic RCV1 821527], a stunning transfer of a song of which I must have, what? 30 versions? Let's not be coy about this, as I trust that the majority of you who have more than a few years in front of good sound systems will concur – you simply *know* during those first few seconds of an opening track whether or not a component, a system or an LP or CD is excellent, middling or a yawn.

It wasn't just the spectacular bottom end with its glorious, sumo-wrestler bulk which stopped me dead in my tracks. It was the stage width. I know, I know, that's not a quality which should matter as much as neutrality, timbre, tonal balance or other elements of the actual sound. In essence, all the soundstage (or stereo, for that matter) does is position the performance. It's not like judging food by the plate rather than the taste because if the soundstage ain't right, neither is the rest of it.

Otherwise, and let's not be coy about this either, high-end hardware circa-2022 is so good that, unless differences are gross, as in competing loudspeakers, it's the *subtleties* that reveal key differences ☺

CARTRIDGE

RIGHT: Ortofon's gold-plated cartridge pins are very clearly colour-coded and 'sleeved' to ensure a snug fit with the standard lugs fitted to tonearm leads



between competing components. Appreciating how Aretha's familiar voice was sounding emphatically more 'real' and 'present' in the best audiophilic sense of 'being in the room', it was the perfect moment for stepping back and listening to the whole experience.

Thus the MC Verismo ticked another box, if convincing portrayal is the ultimate objective: there was absolutely no element which sounded inconsistent with the rest of the sonic picture. Textures were so believable that I am sure seasoned musicians would be able to identify the makers of the instruments being played.

BASS BOOST

It was impossible for me not to cue up the third track on that LP's Side Two, Cream's 'Sunshine Of Your Love', another cut of which I have dozens of copies. Here the MC Verismo delivered a sonic punch which I hadn't experienced since I first heard the original Apogee full-range ribbon [HFN Sep '85] nearly 40 years ago, but which also characterised the recent Wilson Alexx V floorstanders [HFN Jan '22].

This cartridge separated bass content with such authority that Ginger Baker's percussion and Jack Bruce's bass – surely one of the most weighty and powerful rhythm sections in rock history – were transformed from foundational duties to the actual virtuoso roles often obscured by Eric Clapton's powerhouse guitar work.

Those familiar with the track might wonder, what is Kessler smoking? This song has driven more music stores' sales staff to drink than even 'Smoke On The Water' or 'Stairway To Heaven'. Subtle it is not, and yet subtleties do exist in what is one of the most truly seminal heavy metal songs ever recorded.

I don't know how else to explain it, but Ortofon's MC Verismo revealed a level of grandeur that was evident even through smaller systems than my reference Sasha DAWs [HFN Mar '19]. Yes, it was even present even through tiny Rogers LS3/5As [HFN Jul '19].

As I've stated before, I try not to review with audiophile LPs, especially One-Steps. Why? Because they typically flatter a system. You might argue they can't flatter what isn't there, but the MC Verismo was responsible for one of the once-a-year-if-you're-lucky moments when I played Janis Joplin's *Pearl* [MoFi One-Step UD1S-2013]. And I write this having an original US pressing and MoFi's 'regular' 2x45rpm edition, both exceptional.

I'm helping no-one by saying that *Pearl* may be the best One-Step yet, but to my ears it is, albeit at £150 a pop. But it took no more than seconds – less time than it takes to read these 11 words – to experience the most convincing bass I've heard that wasn't on a *Persuasive Percussion* open-reel tape.

By the time Janis' vocals arrived, I was smitten. Every nuance was captured, and her soaring, wailing cries moved from soft to loud with utter fluidity. Unreservedly, I was listening to a cartridge to join the ranks of the finest money can buy. ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

The MC Verismo couldn't be more removed from my all-time fave Ortofon – the warmer, romantic SPU – yet it shares a distinct DNA in its recreation of majestic soundstages. But that's like comparing a new Mini to one from 1959 as the Verismo's refinement rivals MCs at twice the price. It's as sharply revealing as was Shure's V15 V, yet as inviting as an artisan MC from Japan. It is nothing short of sensational.

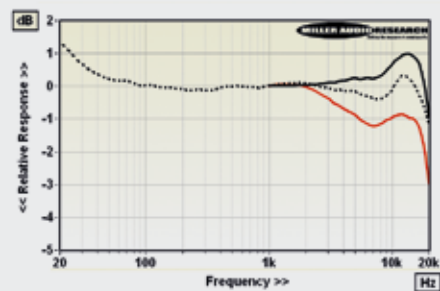
Sound Quality: 89%



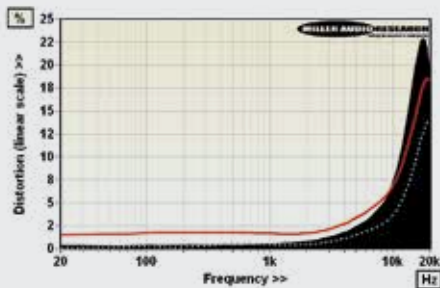
ORTOFON MC VERISMO

Ortofon's Verismo is the latest in a line of state-of-the-art MCs from the Danish brand that have been tested in these pages. These include the MC A90 [HFN Sep '09], the Anna [HFN Oct '12], the Windfeld Ti [HFN Jan '18] and Anna Diamond [HFN Oct '19]. All are low-output (low coil count/low impedance), low-compliance MCs that offer fine tracking by dint of a relatively high downforce. The new Verismo continues this trend, holding on to the 75-80µm test tracks at 2.6g before letting go on the final +18dB groove modulation (315Hz lateral cut, re. 11.2µm). This is as good as you'll get from a low-compliance (11cu) MC designed for well-damped medium/high effective mass arms.

This exquisitely-constructed cartridge offers a modest but on-spec 229µV/1kHz output (re. 5cm/sec into 100ohm) with a good 0.3dB channel balance and acceptable 25dB separation. Where the Verismo really shines is both in its very flat frequency response (within ±1.5dB from 20Hz-20kHz), showing some additional low bass 'heft', and its fine lateral/vertical symmetry [black/red traces, Graph 1]. This ensures the Verismo creates a tonally balanced soundfield, in both width and depth. Also, the Replicant 100 stylus/diamond cantilever offers a 26° VTA and response that extends beyond 30kHz – and it's this that also helps 'shape' the pick-up's distortion vs. freq. [see Graph 2]. The Verismo's THD remains <1% up to 2.5kHz (-8dB re. 5cm/sec) but then increases quite substantially with frequency reaching 8%/10kHz and over 20%/16kHz [Graph 2]. This is not an inferior generator, but a reflection of its very extended bandwidth able to render 2nd harmonics of signals beyond 15kHz. MCs with a poorer HF response only *look* to have lower treble distortion. PM



ABOVE: Freq. resp. curves (-8dB re. 5cm/sec) lateral (L+R, black) vs. vertical (L-R, red) vs. stereo (dashed)



ABOVE: Lateral (L+R, black), vertical (L-R, red), stereo (dashed) tracing and generator distortion (2nd-4th harms) vs. freq. from 20Hz-20kHz (-8dB re. 5cm/sec)

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Generator type/weight	Moving-coil / 9.5g
Recommended tracking force	25-27mN (26mN)
Sensitivity/balance (re. 5cm/sec)	225µV / 0.29dB
Compliance (vertical/lateral)	11cu / 13cu
Vertical tracking angle	26 degrees
L/R Tracking ability	75µm / 75µm
L/R Distortion (-8dB, 20Hz-20kHz)	0.7-25% / 0.3-22%
L/R Frequency resp. (20Hz-20kHz)	+1.5 to -1.3dB / +1.2 to -1.4dB
Stereo separation (1kHz / 20kHz)	25dB / 22dB