

Mono master

Tony Bolton explores the capabilities of a dedicated handmade mono cartridge from a specialist Japanese manufacturer



If I was to describe to you a pickup cartridge that tracked at between 2g and 4g, was mono and was fitted with a 1.0 mil (0.0010") conical stylus then you could easily be forgiven for thinking that this review was about some ancient cartridge from the early days of microgroove. But you would be very wrong. This specification belongs to the Miyajima Laboratories Premium BE II cartridge which is a current production model and second from the top of the company's range of six mono cartridges.

The name will not be familiar to most British readers since, until Timestep took on the distribution in July this year, they had never been represented on these shores. I had heard of them, following their garnering some prestigious awards in America, and have been waiting for the opportunity to hear one.

Each cartridge is handmade by a team of six people at the factory in Fukuoka, Japan, under the direction of Noriyuki Miyajima who founded the company. Even though they have been in production for only three decades, their first product was a dedicated mono cartridge, designed from scratch, rather than being an adaptation of a stereo design.

The Premium BE II cartridge under review here shares its African Blackwood body (otherwise known

as Mpingo; a material used in flutes, clarinets and oboes) with the range-topping Zero model. The bodies are individually milled in-house on Roland Camm-3 CNC milling machines. The generator is a unique patented design called 'Miyajima Vertical Axis Concentration' which only produces electrical energy in response to horizontal movements of the cantilever.

This is very short and disappears up into the body vertically. It can be rotated in the horizontal axis without doing any damage to the internal wiring, so careless handling need not be the disaster that it can be

with other designs. Being a moving coil design the stylus is not user replaceable.

The stylus, as previously mentioned, is conical and of 1.0 mil diameter, so is not suited to playing modern mono pressings. Other cartridges in the Miyajima range are fitted with a 0.7mil stylus that would make them suitable for playing the likes of the new Beatles box set

and post 1970s reissues of older recordings. This cartridge is dedicated to playing original mono grooves which are slightly larger than the modern variant.

From what I have managed to ascertain, the mono groove size was reduced from the late 1960s and early 1970s as original mono cutting lathes went out of use and stereo cutting heads were employed for cutting reissue records from most manufacturers.

I initially set the cartridge up

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on the Clearaudio Magnify arm but halfway through the 30 hour recommended running in period I transferred it to the SME M2-9R which is also in place on the Master Solution, while the Magnify served other needs.

Setting it up is very easy since the cartridge body is square edged and the stylus and cantilever are very visible. The cartridge weighs 11.8g

so presented no balancing problems with either arm used. I experimented with the tracking force and, after a few hours of listening, settled on the recommended 3.5g as producing the most balanced sound.

Running-in was a long drawn out process and I would say that every bit of the 30 hours is required to get this cartridge fully on song.

Having achieved a stable sound I started off with one of my earliest LPs, a 1951 Philips first pressing of Tchaikovsky's '5th Symphony'. I've had this copy since my teens and have always loved the performance for the way Van Kempen gets the orchestra striding out the beat in the 4th movement, creating a sensation of an unstoppable force propelling the tune to its conclusion.

I was delighted to discover that the Premium BE II transmitted this rhythmic intensity superbly, with the sort of snap to the pacing that I would normally expect when playing this record on an idler-driven deck, not a belt drive. The attack of notes was clean and precise and their stopping points were equally well defined. I was also impressed with the way the needle dug a pretty full-bodied sound out of these ancient grooves. Most modern cartridges are not kind to this record and it sounds elderly and frail when played with

trusty first pressing of 'Please Please Me'. This has been through the wars before I was given it but when tracked with a sympathetic cartridge, such as mono Ortofons or Benz Micros, can sound very good with tolerable levels of background noise. Playing it with this cartridge was revelatory.

The sound was vivid, very alive and superbly driven with less intrusion from the appalling state of the groove walls than I have ever heard before. There was noise but it was so well suppressed that it was worthy of mere passing mental comment as to its existence.

A near mint copy of The Oscar Peterson Quartet playing 'Stompin' At The Savoy' sounded little short of amazing. I felt very in contact with a solidly grounded sound that had



The conical 1.0mil diamond stylus. The cantilever can safely rotate if touched, without damaging the internal mechanism.

how good this cartridge is. It doesn't try to impress with an obviously forward or deep sound, but strikes a balance somewhere between the two extremes.

There is a fundamental rightness about the way records sound when played through it that has completely won me over to the point where I will state, that so far, this is the best dedicated mono cartridge that I have ever had in the house. I am now itching to try the stereo and 78 models. Watch this space.



Although this is a mono cartridge, four connecting pins are provided so that parallel mono signals can feed both channels of a stereo phonostage.

them. Here it regained the vigour and freshness that it would have displayed when new.

I was sufficiently impressed with the way it retrieved musical information with virtually no surface noise disturbance that I put on my

plenty of detail around the small sounds such as the high-hats yet filled the room with a wide and deep sense of its presence.

Needless to say I have also ransacked my singles collection and am nothing short of stunned as to

MUSIC USED:

Tchaikovsky. 'Symphony No.5 in E minor. Op.64.' Concertgebouw Orchestra, Amsterdam, conducted by Paul Van Kempen. Philips Records. A 00141 L. 1951.

The Beatles. 'Please Please Me.' Parlophone Records. PMC 1202. 1963.

The Oscar Peterson Quartet. 'Plays Stompin' At the Savoy and The Astaire Blues'. Columbia Records. 33 C 1038. c1956.

SYSTEM USED:

Clearaudio Master Solution/ Magnify and SME M2-9R arms
Leema Acoustics Agena phono-stage Tucana II amplifier
Chario Ursa Major loudspeakers

MIYAJIMA LABORATORIES PREMIUM BE II CARTRIDGE.

£849.00



OUTSTANDING - amongst the best

VALUE - keenly priced

VERDICT

the best sounding dedicated mono cartridge that I have yet heard, offering detail and musicality well beyond its price point

FOR

- solid and fast bass
- excellent timing
- mid and treble detail
- virtually eliminates surface noise

AGAINST

- cannot be used with modern mono pressings

Timestep Distribution.
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