

Mono Micro

Mono lives on in the Benz Micro Ace SH moving coil cartridge, Tony Bolton is happy to find.

As regular readers will have realised, my record collection includes a sizeable chunk of older mono recordings which I have collected over the years, covering most genres from classical through to sixties pop. Some show the ravages of time, others look as though they have never been played, but all share one thing in common; they rarely sound at their best when played through a stereo phonostage with a stereo cartridge tracking them.

This is for a very simple reason. Tracking the variable depth and width of a stereo groove as it snakes across a record requires the cartridge to be both physically compliant and electrically responsive on all axis – vertical, horizontal and diagonal.

Mono recordings are cut laterally with the groove being of a constant depth and width. Therefore any non horizontal movement of the stylus is due to surface imperfections or damage, and will come across as pops and crackles. This is the reason that I like phonostages to have a mono switch. It goes a long way towards cutting out any extraneous noises, leaving the listener with just the music.

There is another way of dealing with this problem, which is to use a dedicated mono cartridge such as the Benz Micro Ace SH Mono under review here. It looks like a conventional stereo cartridge, with four connecting pins mounted at the back of the blue acrylic body, but has a different internal layout. The pure-iron-cross coil and magnet assembly have been rotated 45 degrees and

the generators only respond to lateral movement of the cantilever. This is then combined with the 0.28mm diameter, solid boron cantilever and the side bonded micro-ridge stylus of the stereo Ace.

Three versions are available with low (0.4mV), medium (0.8mV) and high (2.5mV) outputs, the latter being able to drive a moving magnet phonostage satisfactorily. The difference in output is created by altering the thickness and number of turns of the wire in the hand wound coils of the various models. Internal impedance of this high output example is quoted as 95 Ohms. The

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recommended loading is 1k Ohms to 47k Ohms. I settled on the latter, with the tracking weight sounding correct at 1.79 grams.

Remembering that the Ace SL took quite a long time to run in and to sound at its best (the instructions quote 40 hours) I was unsurprised to find that this one also sounded pleasant but rather uptight for the first few hours. After about 40 sides it had begun to get into its stride, and certain family traits that were very apparent on the far higher mileage

stereo model began to come forth.

The first to show up was the almost spaniel-like bounce and go attitude to anything with a danceable rhythm. Humphrey Lyttelton's version of the 1922 hit 'I Wish I Could Shimmy Like My Sister Kate' felt as though it should have had the audience in the Royal Festival Hall jiving in the aisles. It was portrayed

with a zest and vigour that, I think, accurately captured the flavour of the moment. Compared to playing the same record with the stereo Ace (and the phonostage in mono) this cartridge seemed to have a tighter grip on the leading edges of sounds. It also tracked the record with a near complete disregard for the odd blemish the disc had acquired in 57 years of existence, seeming to produce a quieter background than its sibling. This was obvious from the opening moments, where the



sound of the audience seemed to fade in from a blacker space in front of me, and Humph's voice, during his introduction, stood forward of the sounds a little more.

Good behaviour with demanding record surfaces seemed to be one of this cartridge's strong points. This last Christmas I used some money that I received to satisfy one of my periodic outbreaks of Francophilia and raided ebay.fr. Amongst my haul of early 60's pop was an 7 inch EP called 'Sylvie', featuring a favourite song of mine from the period; 'La Plus Belle



'Pour Aller Dancer' and sung by the doyenne of the French "yeye girls", Sylvie Vartan. I felt that the seller's description of the record's condition was a bit optimistic. It played in an acceptable but uninspired way, with a gentle halo of crackles around the music. Played with the Ace Mono, things improved quite a lot. The sound was a lot more substantial, with deeper and more obvious bass and better projection of the midrange and vocals. In the higher frequencies, there was a clearer demarcation between the music and the surface noise. It sounded more like the record that I thought that I had bought. It could never sound new, but it stopped sounding tired.

The year that this record came out, Sylvie Vartan played the Paris Olympia with the Beatles so I dug out the LP that they had crossed the Channel to promote. This is an early pressing of 'With The Beatles' that has survived the years well. Played with the stereo Ace it sounded good, but played with the mono version, I felt that I was getting closer to the music. The sound was punchier and more direct, with a sensation of greater precision to the timing. Their cover of Chuck Berry's 'Money' had a raw edge to it that made it sound more exciting than I am used to hearing. With no distractions from any pops or crackles I focussed on the space the sound occupied. The soundstage was both wide and

MUSIC USED:
 Bach 'Brandenburg Concertos No.2 in F Major and No.3 in G Major' Karl Munchinger conducting Stuttgart Chamber Orchestra. Decca Records. LX 3029. 1950.
 Humphrey Lyttelton and his Band. 'Jazz At The Royal Festival Hall'. Parlophone Records. PMD 1032. 1954
 The Beatles 'With The Beatles'. Parlophone Records. PMC 1206. 1963
 Sylvie Vartan. 'Sylvie'. RCA Victor Records. 86.046. 1964

deep, and I found myself wondering if stereo would have given me any extra sensation of realism to the performance.

This went through my mind again, later on, when playing one of my earliest LPs. This Decca recording of the Bach Brandenburg Concertos was among the first microgroove releases in this country in January 1950, some 18 months after the format was launched by Columbia (CBS) in America. It certainly showcased the new medium, with a tonal palette that seemed to accurately portray the differing sounds of the Stuttgart Chamber Orchestra. Concerto No.3 was written for violin, viola and violoncello, backed with a violone (a low pitched six-stringed instrument) and a harpsichord. Both movements are Allegros and the Ace seemed to bring out a certain bounce to the rhythm that, for me, conjured up images of elegantly dressed Georgian-era ladies and gentlemen parading across a ballroom. Playing this again with the stereo Ace, it still sounded good, and tonally correct but just a little less substantial, and I had a subtle awareness that I was listening to an older piece of vinyl.

After my experiences with the Ortofon Cadenza Mono (see HFW May 2011) and now this Benz, I am more convinced than ever that the only real way to hear my mono records at their best is with a mono cartridge. Switching a phonostage or pre-amp to mono gives good results, but using the proper cartridge for the job raises the standard of reproduction further. I think it also provides a more honest

description of the recording, and the medium's capabilities.

This also sums up the Ace Mono. I think it is honest in its sound, with a certain tenacious quality with the timing that makes it sound quite fresh and vibrant. Compared with the Ortofon, it is a little more bouncy, and if I only listened to classical or opera then I would probably choose the slightly more measured sound of the Danish design. For jazz and pop I think the Benz adds a little sparkle to proceedings and would be my preference. Both are superb at their job and I think the final choice would be entirely system and musical genre dependent. There is one caveat; both will cause you to question whether stereo is actually an improvement.

SYSTEM USED:
 Clearaudio Master Solution turntable/
 Magnify arm. Benz Micro Ace SL cartridge.
 Leema Acoustics Agena phonostage/
 Tucana II amplifier.
 Chario Ursa Major loudspeakers.

VERDICT £
 High output mono version of Swiss handmade cartridge, offering affordable high-end performance.

BENZ MICRO ACE S-CLASS H MONO CARTRIDGE £595
 Select Audio
 ☎ +44 (0)1900 813064
 www.selectaudio.co.uk

FOR

- tight and agile grip on rhythms
- excellent surface noise control
- open and dynamic sound.

AGAINST

- nothing that I have found so far

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

The Benz Micro Ace SH Mono exhibits gently falling treble output into a 1k Ohm load, our frequency response analysis shows, so it will have a soft, even warm sound under these conditions. A 47K load lifts high treble to flatness. The red trace shows quite pronounced loss on inner grooves. Whether this will be apparent when playing old mono cuts is doubtful though, as high treble wasn't common and if the information is absent, then there is nothing to reproduce.

Distortion was very low at 0.7%, second harmonic on a 45µm peak amplitude cut. Tracking was fairly good, if not exceptional, since the SH was unable to stay in the groove on full level 'torture' tracks, even at 2gms downforce, the maximum recommended. Output was high at 0.8mV at 5cms/sec rms but still well below MMs, most of which provide 5x more output, so there needs to be plenty of gain spare in the preamp/ amplifier to cope. Whilst a High output MC seems like a good idea, extra coil turns adversely affect tracking – that is

the trade off. The SL will track best, but need an MC phono stage.

The Ace SH Mono will have a soft sound into low loads but is flat into 47k. It measures well and should do a good job. NK

Tracking force	2gms
Weight	8.8gms
Frequency response	20Hz - 18kHz
Tracking ability (300Hz)	
lateral	65µm
lateral (1kHz)	18cms/sec.
Distortion (45µm)	
lateral	0.7%
Output (5cms/sec rms)	0.8mV

FREQUENCY RESPONSE

