

Hifi Zine

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Benz Micro Glider SL Cartridge

Equipment Reviews

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If you want to start a spirited discussion among audiophiles, a good place to start is to ask “What is the most important single component in determining your system’s sound?” Most folks (other than, perhaps, Linn owners) are likely to say that it is the speakers that are the critical determinant. The excitement begins when the discussion turns to the second most important component, particularly in an analog setup. Is it the turntable? The arm? Or is it – as I firmly believe it to be – the cartridge?



With that bias in mind, we turn to the Benz Micro SL (“S” for “S class,” “L” for “low output”) cartridge, which I’ve been running in my VPI Classic 2 turntable for some months now. The original Glider was introduced eighteen years ago in 1993, and at some level has become the most well-known in this Swiss manufacturer’s line of cartridges, which runs from the Gold/Silver at \$375, to the \$5,000 LP S “statement” cartridge. In the eighteen years since its introduction, the Glider has evolved through four iterations, with the low output version being introduced in 2000 as a Series 2 (the original Glider being

available only as a medium or high output). The “S” version of this cartridge was introduced in 2008 and then further updated in 2009 with the micro-ridge stylus. Other improvements wrought in the “S” version include a more refined solid Boron cantilever, new lower-mass coil windings, and an improved pole piece/damper design.

The cartridge itself is tiny and jewel-like, with its gold-anodized aluminum structure, exposed generator, and very vulnerable-looking cantilever (more on this later). As you might expect, given the not-insubstantial price of this cartridge, packaging is impressive. Aside from the cartridge, the box contains a bubble level, a stylus brush, a small flathead screwdriver and a number of mounting screws. Each cartridge is factory-tested, and as well as a spec sheet, the cartridge comes packaged with its own individual test report in graphical form.

The Glider is optimized for medium-mass tonearms and it worked beautifully with the JMW-10.5i tonearm on my VPI Classic. (Note: This is an upgrade over the standard JMW-10.5SE tonearm provided with the Classic, and it adds “on the fly” VTA adjustment and other refinements.) At 6.8 grams, this cartridge is a relative lightweight... I had to obtain a lighter counterweight from VPI in order get the tracking force right, and I found 1.8 grams to be the sweet spot on my rig. I don’t use the anti-skating mechanism on my Classic, preferring to let the tonearm wiring provide the required anti-skating force. Once the cartridge was mounted on my tonearm, I set my phono preamp for 60dB gain and loading at 243 ohms. I played about 40 hours of LPs (the manufacturer’s recommendation) before getting serious about listening.



I had previously been using a Grado Reference Sonata on the VPI. The Sonata was my reference cartridge: superb midrange and exceptionally listenable. I expected to hear a much cleaner, crisper

sound from the Glider, and I was right in part. But I was also very wrong in part. If I had to use one word to characterize the Glider, it would be “honest.” Honest in the sense that I didn’t feel that the cartridge was getting in the way of the music, and wasn’t imparting its own “sound” to what was emanating from the speakers. What this does **not** mean (and I must admit that I was a little surprised by this) is that the cartridge sounded analytical. In my mind, analytical implies a cool, dry, austere sound with backed-off low frequencies and slightly hollow mids. Analytical means etched, detailed high frequencies. I’m fully aware that many audiophiles (and, indeed, reviewers) worship this sort of presentation. I’m not one of them; to me, a piece of gear that sounds like music, rather than like a piece of laboratory equipment, is to be sought after.

Low frequencies were honest. On the Bach Toccata and Fugue in D Minor (from an Acoustic Research demo LP dating back to the early seventies), the low notes were felt as much as heard. Through the midrange (listening to some of Linn’s LPs featuring Claire Martin and Carol Kidd, and large helpings of Diana Krall, Ella Fitzgerald, Frank Sinatra and Johnny Hartman) the Glider evinced a liquidity of tone and an effortless ability to transmit emotion. As noted above, this was unexpected, but very happily welcomed. The Glider did a superb job with higher frequencies as well, but without etching or overstatement. The title track from Art Blakey’s “A Night in Tunisia” exploded from my speakers as you would want it to: cymbals rampant, but not painful to listen to.

The Glider tracked well, though it couldn’t compete with my end-of-the-run Shure V-15 VxMR on freakish tracks like the Telarc 1812 Overture. That aside, the Glider adeptly handled whatever else I threw at it.

Conclusion? Well, it may or may not surprise you to learn that I bought the review sample, and the Glider became my new reference cartridge. The Glider provides me with a level playing field, a white canvas onto which colors and shapes appear naturally. For a reviewer, this cartridge is ideal, since it allows me to easily hear the impact of changes in other components. But for any audiophile looking for a moving-coil cartridge in the thousand-dollar-or-just-above range, and who has a phono preamp with adequate step-up, the Glider must be on the shortlist.

Addendum: As George Harrison wrote: “All things must pass.” Sadly, my failure to procure a dustcover for my turntable, matched with our housekeeper’s attention to the dusty turntable, spelled disaster for the Glider. I came home one day to find the cartridge shorn of its cantilever, which had disappeared entirely. Back to the Grado, for the moment. Fortunately, Benz is one of the manufacturers that will provide a factory rebuilt cartridge for considerably less than a new cartridge (in fact they do not recommend rebuilding by others), so I’ll be taking them up on this option.

Review Equipment:

- VPI Classic 2 Turntable with SDS Power Supply
- Musical Surroundings NovaPhonomena Phono Preamplifier
- Vienna Acoustics Haydn Grand SE and Gallo Reference 3.1 speakers
- McIntosh C712 preamplifier
- Yamaha MX-D1 stereo power amplifier
- Sony XDR-F1HD tuner
- Shanling SCD-T200 SACD player
- Apple iPod Classic, 160 gb
- Mapleshade speaker wire, Blue Jeans speaker cable and interconnects, Ultimate Cables, AudioQuest, ProSolutions and AR interconnects

Specifications

- Output Voltage: 0.4mV at 3.54 cm/s
- Internal Impedance: 12 ohms
- Frequency Response: 20-20,000 Hz \pm 1 dB
- Channel Balance: Better than 0.5 dB
- Channel Separation: Better than 35 dB at 1 kHz
- Cantilever: Solid boron rod: 0.25 mm diameter
- Stylus: Micro-ridge
- Stylus Tip Radius: 3 x 60 μ m
- VTA: 20 degrees
- Coil: Pure iron cross coil
- Weight 6.8 grams
- Serial Number of Review Sample: 33373
- Recommended Loading: 100-47,000 ohms
- Recommended Tracking Force: 1.7-2.0 grams
- Recommended Tonearm Mass: Medium
- Price: \$1,200

Distributor

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