



BENZ LP-S

Reviewer: Steve Marsh

Downstairs System (my upstairs Bastanis system was not used for this review):

Digital Source: Vecteur D-2 CD Transport, Audio Note DAC Kit 1.2 with upgrades (ps choke, tantalum resistors, Black Gate caps, copper grounding bars on digital chips wired to central ground, VTV silver foil/oil output coupling caps)

Analog Source: Nottingham Analogue Mentor turntable with 10" Anna tonearm, Goldbug Ms. Brier MC cartridge (rebuilt by Soundsmith)

Preamp: Doshi Alaap Purist Mk. II full-function tube preamp

Power Amp: Tron 211 SET amp with upgraded exotic-core interstage transformers (General Electric 211 power tubes, Western Electric 417A/5842 input tubes, RCA black plate 5U4GB rectifiers)

Speakers: WLM LaScala floorstanders

Interconnect cables: Music Metre Fidelis digital, Harmony Audio, Acoustic Systems Liveline, Bastanis Epilog I

Power Cords: Bastanis Epilog II on Tron amp, industrial-sourced power cord on Doshi preamp, stock power cords on remaining components

Speaker Cables: Bastanis Epilog Mk. II, Acoustic Systems Liveline

Equipment Rack: Adona 6-shelf, low profile isolation rack

Power Line Conditioning: PS Audio P300

Sundry accessories: Audio Prism Ground Control, Stein Harmonizers, Stein Magic Stones, Isoclean Fuses, VPI 16.5 record cleaning machine

Room Size: 29' long X 16' wide X 10' high (sunken living room with open floor plan, listening across width of room)

Review Component Retail Price: \$5000, factory retip \$800



Over the past year LP playback in my system had me rather in a pickle. That's because back in April 2010 I'd sent off my Cello—OEM Miyabe—MC cartridge for a rebuild by Miyabe proprietor Takeda-san in Tokyo (I'd acquired this cartridge on a Simon Yorke S4 turntable with Pluto tonearm). The Miyabe importer initially alerted me that it would be a couple of months before I'd have it back. With this in mind I sold my excellent sounding Soundsmith rebuilt Cardas Heart to a friend who was very anxious to get it. Nine months later I still didn't have my the Cello cartridge back. Cough.

Mind you, the long wait for the Cello/Miyabe rebuild is no reflection on the Sakura Systems importer whom I know to have done proper due diligence. However those with a Miyabe cartridge or anyone considering one should feel



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forewarned. Takeda-san apparently is a one-man operation. Combine that with a probable reduction in productivity from advanced age and there can be quite a wait for service and/or product. Still many feel the wait to be well worth his glorious cartridges.

Becoming desperate I began some intensive research on the internet and via networking on a possible new cartridge purchase. I developed a short list of contenders: Miyajima Shilabe, ZYX Omega, Air Tight PC-1, Transfiguration Orpheus, Dynavector XV-1t, My Sonic Lab Eminent Ex. and Koetsu Sky Blue. After sorting through a lot of opinions I called my friend Roger Swiatek at Music Direct. He spoke highly of the new Benz LP-S. It had also recently received a very positive albeit brief review in the series of seven cartridges auditioned by Harry Pearson in the October 2010 issue of *The Absolute Sound*.

I exchanged a couple of emails with Garth Leerer and after vetting my system he felt it was up to the standards warranted by this cartridge. Readers should note that I recently sold my Hovland HP-100 MC preamp and replaced it with a Doshi Alaap Purist Mk. II full-function tube preamp. While I loved the Hovland for many years, a head-to-head comparison with the Doshi showed the latter to be superior. The Alaap also allows me to change load impedance rather than rely on the fixed impedance of Hovland's MC step-up transformer.



Because Garth Leerer was busy preparing for the Rocky Mountain Audio Fest, we agreed to investigate a review opportunity in Denver. After returning from the event, Garth shipped me their show demo LP-S for a rushed review since he needed it back for CES. I agreed to expedite the review.

The cartridge came well packaged with all the necessary information for mounting, loading etc. (see later sidebar for specifications). I mounted it painstakingly with my Dennesen Soundtraktor (metal version) and Shure tracking force gauge. I set tracking force at 1.9g and VTA a hair below horizontal at the back of the Nottingham Anna tone arm. Be forewarned that at 16.5g this is a very heavy cartridge that some tone arms may be unable to balance out with their stock counterweights. A friend with a Well Tempered Record Player was unable to balance it with the WT tone arm. Into my Doshi Alaap the Benz LP-S sounded best loaded at 1.2K Ω (options are 90 Ω , 250 Ω , 1.2 K Ω).



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Whenever I do anything to improve the LP playback chain in my system, I have a moment of hesitation choosing the first LP to cue up. The suspense here was doubled because my recently purchased Doshi Alaap preamp had not had a truly high-end phono cartridge played through it yet. I'd purchased it back in August and broken it in assiduously ever since.



Looking at my stack of LPs in frequent rotation, I decided on the Prestige reissue two-record set of Miles Davis *Workin' and Steamin'* [Prestige P-24034]. While some turn up their noses at reissues, I find many of the Prestige reissues to be quite good. From the moment this cartridge hit the groove of the first cut "It Never Entered My Mind", I knew I was in for a very special treat. The gently caressing piano intro just melted me. When Miles' muted trumpet came in shortly after, I could hear all of the breathiness behind it and a warm golden glow in each note. As he ascended the scale I was astonished by the composure in the upper midrange. There was absolutely no glare in this critical region. I was immediately taken back to my early days of trumpet playing when my mother used to yell up the stairs while I was practicing in my room, admonishing me to get the tone right. If only my mother was still alive to experience this. This was sheer tonal splendor! Playing this album with the Benz LP-S began a sonic torrent of records that put me into a state of bliss from which I may never recover. At least I hope I won't.



This cartridge also excels on classical repertoire. Ravel's *Rapsodie Espagnole* [RCA LSC-1984] showed off all the strengths of the Benz. The tonal colors Ravel portrays were fully rendered while the crescendo at the end was handled confidently without compression or blurring. The flip side of this album is Ravel's *Bolero* and *La Valse*. The repetitive percussion as the backbone of *Bolero* was crisp in attack and more forceful than I've heard it, giving the piece the proper insistence that frankly did not come across when I have played it with lesser cartridges. Toward the end of *La Valse*, the complex milieu of instruments (oboe, violins and flutes followed by cymbals, brass and tympani) were all discernible separately yet remained unified. The trumpets playing a flute-like riff towards the end cut through the orchestration with the dexterity of fine needlework. All of this was laid out in a soundstage of impressive depth and scale. This scale had dynamics and dimension where the height of the soundstage increased in tandem with orchestral increases in power. Also striking was the heavy thwack on the tympani which I could feel in my chair. Yet the delicacy of the other instruments playing simultaneously was unperturbed.

This is not a thin-sounding moving coil cartridge nor does it exhibit the rising top-end curse of many moving coil cartridges of yore. In my experience Benz was never in that camp. In fact years ago I spent many hours listening to a friend's Benz MC-3. It gave me the impression that the cartridge tended toward the rich and romantic yet at some expense of bass speed and overall clarity.



Not so now. For this occasion I cracked open a sealed copy of The Oscar Peterson Trio's *We Get Requests* [Verve VG-8606]. Ray Brown's standup bass in the fourth cut was clean and tuneful yet not dry in any way. It had just the right amount of richness and air around it. Oscar's piano and piano on many other records stood out as a real strength of this cartridge. I've never heard such perfect balance of harmonics combined with an almost palpable sense of the energetic changes behind fingers striking keys. I found myself playing more classical music than normally not because this cartridge didn't excel with other music but because it did so much better on classical than any cartridge I have owned before.



To illustrate I played Berlioz *Symphonie Fantastique* [Mercury Living Presence SR90254]. In the first movement "Reveries and Passions", the violins swell and I was immediately drawn into the music. The huge dynamic swings of the massed violins and percussion were rendered with explosive power. This cart can go from a musical dead stop to a thunderous climax better than any other I have heard. While doing this I don't sense strain. Neither is there any blurring or masking of more delicate instruments playing at the same time. It's absolute absolute



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composure. The rolling tymps at the end of the 3rd movement were reproduced with all the necessary impact and speed yet off in the distance like the thunder they attempt to mimic. Now I had read about some mild criticisms of the treble performance of the Benz LP cartridge, the predecessor to the LP-S.



It was said to be subdued in the highs to perhaps rob the performance of some excitement at times. On 'The Jazz Crusaders' Heat Wave [Pacific Jazz PJ-76], I found the cymbals at the beginning of the title cut to be present at just the right level without splashiness, being just crisp and realistically metallic and definitely exciting! I would not call the Benz LP-S dull in the highs. I find its treble performance totally satisfying. Further into this cut, Joe Sample's piano solo was very realistic. On this record's flip side, Wilton Felder's tenor sax in Stix March leaped out of the speaker with the perfect combination of bite and weight and again, no harshness at all.

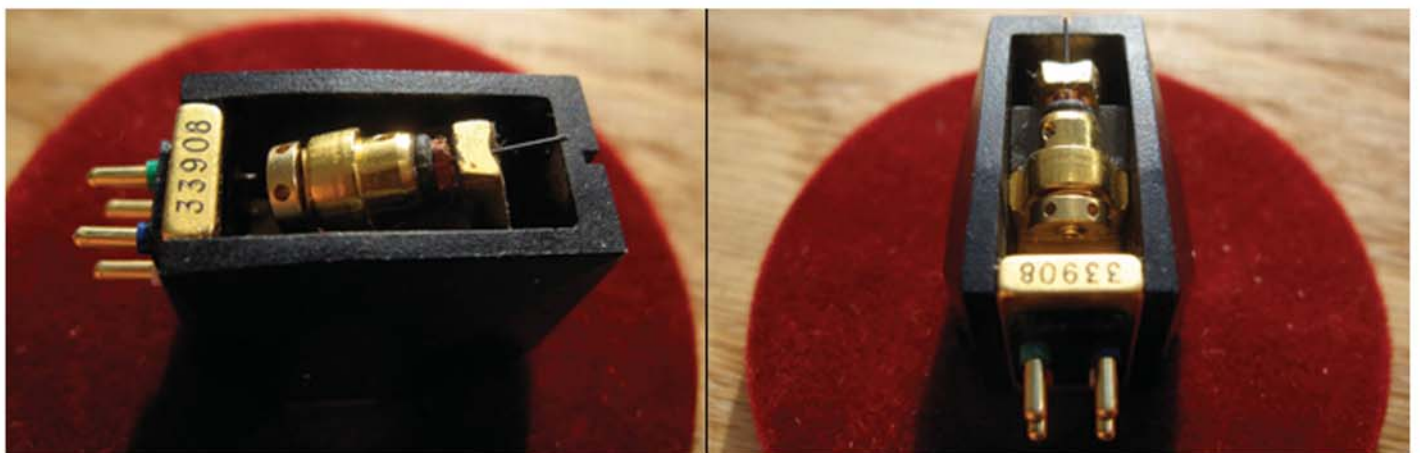


How did the Benz LP-S handle surface noise? This LP was one I was given by an old girlfriend (she was a hip chick) and had seen considerable play. The music was intact though. I could definitely hear the surface noise but it was not prominent. It stayed in the background and never interfered with my enjoyment. I would rate the LP-S highly in this regard. Another strong suit was its ability to reproduce the acoustics of the recording venue. From the grand concert halls of orchestral performances to closely miked vocals I felt like sitting in at the performance.



A shining example was the amazing 1958 two-volume recording of Benny Goodman Benny in Brussels, [Columbia CS 8075, 8076]. Listening to this with the Benz LP-S was like traveling back in time to the 1958 Brussels Worlds Fair. To quote from the liner notes, "Benny Goodman, his clarinet and a group of superb musicians shook the United States world's fair cultural effort out of the doldrums tonight with a rousing jazz concert at the American pavilion here. Playing to a full house, Mr. Goodman brought even a well-behaved first-night audience to life whistling and shouting and this was an audience not normally given to riotous behavior..."

The miking of this performance is incredible. There is an uncanny balance of the immediacy of the band members spread across the stage, crystal clear miking of Benny and other soloists and a wide-eyed and exuberant audience in the background. On Volume 2 side 1, Benny does a number called Gershwin Medley. Towards the end the whole band starts to jam with the drum set just belting it out while Benny wails away. The energy can only be described as spine-tingling. At the end the audience goes completely wild. Listening to this through the Benz LP-S ranks as one of the most memorable experiences of my entire listening career.



I played this record for an audiophile friend of over 20 years. He is a highly accomplished man who has designed many speakers and worked in the audio industry over stretches of his career. In particular there are two songs on Volume 1 at the end of side 1, "Obsession" and "Brussels Blues". Jimmy Rushing is featured guest vocalist on the latter. Though



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Benny lays down a great solo in "Obsession", when Mr. Five-By-Five Jimmy Rushing takes to stage in "Brussels Blues" he just tears the roof off the joint. The crowd who politely clapped at the end of "Obsession" is flat-out losing their minds at the end of "BB". You can feel their exhilaration over Jimmy Rushing's rollicking style that may have been the first exposure for these European concert goers to what was the dawn of American Rock 'n' Roll.

I looked over at my friend while these two selections were playing. He had his eyes closed and was evidently transported right outa here. At the end of the last number he opened his eyes, looked over at me and uttered one word - spectacular. This pretty much summed up my feelings about this cartridge.

For the Benz LP-S to capture this level of excitement speaks volumes about its ability to communicate the essence of music. Needless to say, the stellar dynamic performance is a crucial element. What's equally impressive is that the wonderful tonal balance of this cartridge remains intact even during the loudest musical climaxes. Even when a blaring trumpet section entered on big-band records or a soprano soloist belted at fortissimo there was no need to recoil or jump up to turn down the volume. The Benz played through difficult passages like these with utter confidence and control. This was unprecedented in my experience.



At this point I was really at a loss to criticize the cartridge in any way. I decided to get out some of my early rock records and see how the cartridge fared with them. My rock LP collection is heavily weighted toward the 1970s which from a sound quality perspective often leaves a lot to be desired. To get around the recording quality aspect I was careful to



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select what I knew to be good recordings. The Mobile Fidelity Sound Lab reissue of the 1978 Rolling Stones Some Girls [MFLS 1-087] qualified. After all I was trying to determine whether the cartridge could convey the punch and raw energy of this genre rather than see how it would reproduce an awful recording.

From the first bass guitar notes and drum shots on the cut "Miss You" there was little doubt about the Benz's rock credentials. As an aside I have found that a number of MFLS reissues are really excellent in terms of restoring proper tonal balance and greatly improving vinyl quality to surface noise. However the compression of a lot of 70s rock is not always remedied. Still the Benz in my system provided a clean detailed and very faithful reproduction of Mick Jagger's voice and all the raw power of the requisite electric guitars and drum kit backing.

On "Lies" I was surprised by the wealth of detail that I had never heard sorted out like this. In a recent conversation with my friend Roger Swiatek who helped direct me toward this cartridge, he told me of a friend in his area who uses this cartridge to play almost exclusively Rock 'n' Roll. Roger said the system sounded great too. Keep in mind that my system is not exactly what you would envision for a rock system given that I am using a 10wpc SET amp - albeit with mighty 211 tubes—and two-way ported speakers (which have excellent bass though). Still the system does rock!



Another pretty good Rock acid test LP is Billy Squire's 1982 Emotions In Motion [Capitol ST-12217]. While hardly an audiophile recording, this album really packs a wallop. I can remember listening to it on my past systems and sometimes cringing at the hash that came out. Not so now. On the title cut the Benz handled the sonic onslaught with aplomb. The soundstage was huge and I felt like back in some giant concert hall with a bunch of drug-crazed hardcore rockers bobbing their heads back and forth. Wow, that was a long time ago! There is one more 1970s rock record I must include - Dave Mason's 1975 release Split Coconut [Columbia PC 33698]. This is one of the better-sounding rock records I own from that period.



Another pleasant surprise on the album is vocal support by The Manhattan Transfer, David Crosby and Graham Nash. The title cut just blew me away with nostalgia. My subconscious took over and I reached for the gatefold album cover and shook it to see if any old bits of green leafy matter would fall out from the crease. Snapping back to 2010 I just marveled at the crisp funky bass line, the dreamy keyboard weaving through the mix, the punchy kick drum and then one of Dave Mason's renowned guitar solos - just fantastic! Suffice to say that this is the first moving coil cartridge I had in my system that can do full justice to rock music including hard rock. It's the Benz's combination of superb tonal balance, stellar dynamics and strong bass that make this possible. For perspective, below is a chronological list of the moving coil cartridges I have owned over the past 23

years:

- Monster Alpha Genesis 1000
- Dynavector XX-1L
- Koetsu Rosewood Signature
- Van den Hul Frog
- Cardas Heart – Soundsmith rebuilt
- Cello (Miyabe OEM)
- Monster Sigma Genesis 2000
- Sumiko SHO
- Van den Hul MC2
- Roksan Shiraz
- Goldbug Ms. Brier – Soundsmith rebuilt

In the past couple of years I've actually been thinking of selling off the rock portion of my record collection. The Benz LP-S has disabused me of that notion. To be fair the Roksan Shiraz did a pretty good job on rock but was a very distant

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second. The careful reader might rightfully point out that I do not own nor have I auditioned in my system (but have heard elsewhere) some of the super cartridges like the Zyx Universe, Dynavector XV-1t, Air Tight PC-1, Clearaudio Goldfinger etc. That is true. But I have a hard time believing that any of these would outperform the Benz LP-S let alone by any significant margin. In general terms, if the Benz LP-S is any indication of a new performance standard then I think we may have entered a new golden age in moving coil cartridge performance. In my tenure at 6moons, I have developed a bit of a reputation as being harder to please than some of my colleagues. That may be true but when I come across a really great product and proclaim it so, I would suggest you can take it to the bank. In short, this cartridge paints a vivid and complex tapestry of sound that is so beguiling and exciting to be truly addictive. Every morning I came downstairs wondering what I was going to play first. The Benz LP-S cartridge was such a revelation that I cannot resist buying one. While this will be the most expensive cartridge I ever purchased, readers should note that Benz is one of the most affordable lines for retipping. Retipping the LP-S lists at \$800. A Blue Moon Award is definitely in order.

Steve Marsh

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Absolute top-class MC cartridge

2011

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BENZ LP-S

Quality of packing: Excellent
 Reusability of packing: A lifetime
 Ease of unpacking/repacking: No problem
 Condition of component received: Demo unit in excellent condition
 Completeness of delivery: Complete
 Quality of owner's manual: Adequate
 Website comments: Generally informative, easily navigable
 Human interactions: Garth Leerer was very pleasant to deal with and he got back to me on every question.
 Pricing: Yes it's a high dollar cartridge but world class.
 Final comments & suggestions: None.

Benz LP-S Specifications

Physical

Body: Vented machined Ebony wood
 Cantilever: Solid boron rod 0.28mm diameter
 Stylus: Nude line-contact diamond, mirror polished
 Stylus tip radius: 5 x 120mm
 Vertical Tracking Angle (VTA): 20°
 Coil: Square ruby jewel plate
 Weight: 16.4 grams

Electrical

Output voltage: 0.34 mV at 3.54 cm/s
 Internal Impedance: 38 ohms
 Frequency response: 10 – 50,000 Hz ± 1dB
 Channel balance: Better than 0.5dB
 Channel separation: Better than 35dB at 1kHz

Dynamic

Tracking ability at 315Hz at a tracking force of 2 grams: 80mm
 Dynamic compliance: 15 mm/mN

Setup instructions

Recommended loading: 500 – 47,000ohms
 Recommended tracking force: 1.8 – 2.2 grams
 Optimum tracking force: 1.8 – 2.0 grams
 Recommended tonearm mass: Medium to high
 Optimum working temperature: 23°C
 Break-in period: 40 hours

Warranty

2 years manufacturing defects
 Specifications subject to change without notice

Background on company and ruby generator: In the 1980s Ernst Benz developed his line of moving coil cartridges in conjunction with Sony in Japan and AJ van den Hul of the Netherlands. These pickups were immediately recognized for their high quality and brought to market under the Benz Micro name as well as the Madrigal Carnegie 1. The Madrigal Carnegie 2 was the first cartridge made by Benz to use a ruby core generator. In the early 90s Benz came out with their own ruby generator cartridge aptly named the Ruby. The advantage of a non-ferrous versus iron core to wind the coil



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around was a purer signal in the magnetic flux field due to elimination of unwanted eddy currents. The original Benz Ruby had an output of only .18mV as a direct result of the ruby core not adding or interfering with this pure magnetic circuit. Ernst Benz turned to friend Albert Lukaschek - an electrical and mechanical engineer and avid record collector - to design a special high-gain low-noise phono stage for the MC Ruby. Albert's design became known as the Benz Lukaschek PP-1. In 1994 Ernst Benz decided to retire and sold off his various companies including diamond tool and high-temperature vacuum oven manufacturing. He sold the Benz Micro cartridge division to Albert Lukaschek.

For the next six years Albert devoted himself to improving the cartridges and their manufacturing by building a new factory. In 1997 this culminated in the Ruby 2 and Ruby H models and then the entire Series 2 line in 2000. This was followed by the Series 3 in 2004 and the current S class in 2008. Today Benz Micro is one of the world's leading cartridge manufacturers. In addition to their world-wide distributor network - many of whom have been with the product line for up to 2 decades (Musical Surroundings is at 19 years)-they manufacture cartridges and sub-assemblies for over 10 turntable and audio companies around the world.