

Red Devil

Can Benz Micro's Ace S-Class L deliver the super sound at a low price that it promises? Tony Bolton decides...



If you happened to read the December 2010 edition of this magazine, on page 105 you would have read that I had fallen in love with the Benz Micro Wood SL cartridge. Well it has turned into an ongoing love affair that shows no signs of abating. So when the opportunity came up to listen to the Wood's cheaper sibling, the Ace S-Class L, I displayed absolutely no hesitation whatsoever...

The Ace, priced at £595, is the most affordable model in the Benz range to be handmade. Like the Wood it comes in three forms; low (0.4mV), medium (0.8mV) and high (2.5mV) output, coloured red, clear and blue respectively.

The original Ace was introduced in 2000 as a more affordable version of the Glider, itself dating back as far as 1994. The name is an acronym of Advanced Cartridge Engineering. Unlike the Glider which has its internal structure exposed to the elements, the Ace comes clothed in an acrylic body, partially for greater ease of handling, and also for the damping effect the bodywork is supposed to have upon the arm. The chassis of the cartridge is made of aluminium, and the internal arrangements follow the current Benz Micro layout of a solid Boron cantilever, sporting a side bonded micro-ridge stylus.

The cantilever is attached to hand wound wire coils, the thickness of which varies depending which output is specified. Coil impedance is quoted as 12 Ohms for the Low, and 24 Ohms for the Medium output units. The cross coil generator is a pure iron cross coated in enamel.

Since the Wood had taken up residence on my Clearaudio Master Solution turntable, it seemed reasonable to give it a rest while this cartridge was listened to, so the Ace found itself bolted to the Clearaudio Satisfy tonearm feeding a Leema Acoustics Agena phono stage and Tucana II amplifier into my Chario Ursa Major loudspeakers. Setting up took a little time since the short cantilever is hidden under the bodywork (although there is a small recess in the centre of the front to help align the cartridge when lowering it onto a record).

Suggested tracking weight range is 1.7 to 1.8g. After a bit of experimentation I settled on 1.7g

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as giving the most balanced sound. Very small changes in tracking weight seemed to bring quite large changes to the sound. Too much weight resulted in a rather restrained and sat upon delivery. The 'sweet spot', when I found it, was very obvious – everything just suddenly opened up and snapped into focus.

The instructions recommend forty hours running in time, and based on my experience with the Wood which still carried on getting sweeter well beyond that number hours, I would estimate that sixty or more is really required before the final performance level is achieved. The good news is that the Ace sounded

pretty good straight out of the box. There were rough edges to the sound for the first half dozen hours, but these then started to disappear, and, in any case, were not as offensive or tooth rattling as a lot of cartridges can be for the first few hours.

SOUND QUALITY

From the start I was able to appreciate the inherent musicality of the Ace. Some cartridges are analytical, some just boogie the night away. One of the things that I have come to love about the Benz range is their ability to combine both aspects, without giving undue emphasis to either.

Once most of the running in

time was completed I reached for the 'Benny Goodman Trio Plays For The Fletcher Henderson Fund' LP that I used in the Wood review. Originally recorded in 1940 for the radio station WNEW's 'Make Believe Ballroom' show, this record was released in 1953 on the Columbia label. It shows the Trio in full swing before a live audience and the Ace captured the vibrant feeling of the event in glorious detail. This is a regular test record of mine and most of the subtle detailing, such as the clink of glasses in the background and odd comments from the band, were all there, but just not quite as obvious as they were when listening to the admittedly consid-

erably more expensive Wood.

There was definitely a family resemblance in the way both presented a very rhythmic and focused picture of the scene. Bass bopped along in an irresistible manner, interacting with Gene Krupa's pyrotechnics on the drums, and Goodman's gyrations on the clarinet. I certainly didn't feel that I was listening to an elderly recording or piece of vinyl. The sound was solid, measured, precise and wholly immersive.

A while later and I had wandered through the decades a bit and was playing a 1967 Pye LP by Petula Clark called 'This Is My Song'. It features the hit single 'Don't Sleep In The Subway' penned by husband and wife team Jackie Trent and Tony Hatch. This particular record happened to be a decent condition stereo copy which displayed a good sized soundstage (though not quite as deep or wide as that of the Wood) with Clark in the middle and the orchestra framing her on the left and right. Again the music was driven along by the bounce of the beat, and Hatch's arrangement, with all the signature drum rolls before a chorus and trumpets echoing the inflections of her voice was a delight to listen to (and if I'm being honest – to sing along to).

This evening I explored the Ace's abilities with classical music with Mendelssohn's 'Hebrides Overture'. This was on a 1976 HMV Greensleeve release with Moshe Atzmon conducting the New Philharmonia Orchestra. Image placement was good. The orchestra felt as though they had space to breath around them and tonal qualities were everything that I am coming to expect from a Benz – richly detailed but not in a gooey or cloying manner. Rather the strings had a realistically raw edge as bows sawed across them, and trumpets had a slight rasp that made them believable. Even at nearly £600, there are a lot of cartridges that can make strings sound either thin and wiry, or else a bit thick and unresponsive. I was impressed by the even handed way that the Ace negotiated the differing requirements of a full orchestra, showing no favours, but bestowing no ills. The whole thing was so inviting that I not only played the rest of the side, but flipped it over as well.

'Electric Roundabout' by Human Blue was lapped up by the Ace, settling into the medium paced throb of the bass and drums, and letting the

midrange notes and noises wander around the room between the speakers, and occasionally across the carpet towards me. The synthesised high-hats were just that - synthesised. Not in an unpleasant way, but the resolution of this cartridge is such that the listener will always know if they're hearing a real or electronically generated sound.

As you've realised, I like the Ace.



It was tonally neutral, managing to juggle the demands of tonality, timing and imaging in a very even handed manner. At this price point I can think of nothing that I have yet heard that manages such a good balancing act, and portrays images in a life like way. Similarly priced Lyras are, for me at least, a little too forward in the higher frequencies, and the Ortofon's that I have heard from the current range seem almost mannered in comparison, being very correct, but mindful of their behaviour, so that at times they seem a little stilted. The

Ace seemed to tread a tightrope between the two camps, and at the same time factor in the 'get-up-and-go' that is usually the preserve of more expensive models.

So having said all this, where does it stand in relation to the Wood? That they are closely related, there is no doubt, but the Wood plays the same music with more authority and power. Deep bass seems that bit deeper and the thwack of a drum stick against the skin of a drum had a bit more impact to it. There was more of the filigree detailing that helps shape and fill out a sound, and the presentation had an air of greater sophistication. However, the Ace is no slouch in these areas and I can see why it has been in production in various forms for eleven years now.

CONCLUSION

The Benz Ace's sound is inherently right in pretty much everything it does, offering levels of openness and detailing that cost more from other makers. It is excellent value for money and, in this latest incarnation with the Micro-ridge stylus is, in my experience, unbeatable at the price. £5 shy of £600 is still a lot of money, but in this case it buys a taste of just how good high end cartridges can get. If you can afford a Wood, then I would say buy it, the extra performance is worth it, but if your purse stretches to the Ace then buy that with the assurance that you are buying a well established and highly tuned example of the cartridge maker's art.

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

Frequency response of the Ace was unusually flat, almost as flat as a CD player our analysis shows. This suggests not just a perfectly even tonal balance but also a lack of resonances and character. Inner groove tracing loss (red trace) was low, so the stylus is well shaped and aligned.

Distortion levels were very low, largely because Vertical Tracking Angle was absolutely correct at 21 degrees. Output was healthy at 0.6mV even from our low output Ls version so hiss will not be a problem with most phono stages.

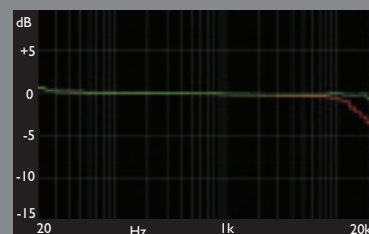
Benz suggest 1.7-1.8gms tracking force is ideal but quote tracking ability at the maximum of 2gms. Using this figure tracking was good if not quite up with the best, especially in the midband where 25cms/sec is possible but the Ace managed 18cms/sec. It should fare well in use, except possibly on some loud vocal sibilance and such like.

Measurement shows the Ace is a superb piece of micro engineering, placing it up with the best MCs available. It will have less character

than rivals and is for those who want a smoothly sophisticated presentation. NK

Tracking force	1.7-2gms
Weight	8.8gms
Vertical tracking angle	21degrees
Frequency response	20Hz - 20kHz
Channel separation	35dB
Tracking ability (300Hz)	
lateral	63µm
vertical	45µm
lateral (1kHz)	18cms/sec.
Distortion (45µm)	
lateral	0.8%
vertical	1.7%
Output (5cms/sec rms)	0.6mV

FREQUENCY RESPONSE



VERDICT

A well mannered, detailed and musical handmade moving coil cartridge at a sensible price.

BENZ MICRO ACE

S-CLASS L £595

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FOR

- excellent musical flow
- minimal surface noise
- open and detailed
- super value

AGAINST

- nothing at the price