

Myajima Kansai cartridge

by Raphael Todes

Buying a high-end cartridge is not for the faint-hearted. Dealers, however good, are not always willing to give up their time to conduct the extensive demonstrations required fully to understand what a cartridge is doing, as they are fiddly and take time. Loaning customers cartridges can be equally onerous in the case that something goes wrong, so the only way to get to terms with a cartridge's personality is by a review, or taking the plunge and buying blind. If you get it wrong, it can be a costly, painful three or four year mistake!

Miyajima has been making cartridges in Fukuoka, Japan for the past thirty years, under the aegis of founder Noriyuki Miyajima. The company's current range includes several specialist mono cartridges, as well as dedicated 78s cartridges, tailor-made for these older formats.

In a traditional moving coil cartridge, the cantilever is held in place by a wire under tension: As the stylus tracks the groove, this tension changes, and some 'slack' can appear which results in a loss of information. In the patented crossing system (CRS), the rear end of the cantilever touches a 'slide bar' making point-to-point contact, like the end of a shaft on a turntable bearing, and is thus much more accurate. The other major difference in this technology, is that the core of the CRS is non-magnetic, and a forward and backward motion of the cantilever is equally easy. The conventional MC has a magnetic core, and forwards and backwards motions are not equally easy. These two significant innovations should yield greater accuracy of converting tiny cantilever motions into voltage changes.

The Kansui is beautifully constructed from the Tanzanian hardwood known as 'mpingo', which may be found in clarinets and oboes, and requires the use of a Roland Camm-3 CNC milling machine to ensure the accuracy of cutting required. The cartridge uses a Shibata stylus, and tracks at between 2 and 2.5 grams.

Installing a high-end cartridge for someone as cack-handed as myself can rapidly reduce life-expectancy – both the cartridge's and mine when I see the repair bill. Some manufacturers recognise this and make the surgical procedure as painless as possible by the inclusion of a stylus guard. The Kansui has a flexible plastic stylus guard that covers the bolts, but as it cannot be used when fitting the cartridge to the head-shell, installation has to be done unprotected!

The cartridge apparently was two degrees off-centre in terms of azimuth alignment, and using a Feickert spirit level, I inserted some paper shims to rotate the cartridge in the head shell. Azimuth adjustment is something that the all-singing and dancing SME V tonearm sadly lacks.

Having set up the cartridge on the arm mounted on an Inspire Monarch Direct-Drive turntable, playing through a VAC Signature Mk2a phono stage and preamp, with VAC Phi 200 Monoblocs driving B&W802d speakers, I set about doing some listening.

First up is the Mozart E flat String Quintet, the Amadeus Quartet with Cecil Aronowitz, recorded by DG in 1969. I am struck by a presentation which is unfamiliar. There is a solidity and richness to the midrange which I don't often hear on a high-end cartridge. It is a dense, characterful sound, which seems to convey more detail about the makers of the instruments being played than I get with my resident Lyra Scala. The sound stage is just a little condensed, some of that classic moving-coil 'airiness' is less present than I'm used to, but the cartridge is really excelling in differentiating the subtle textures of the instruments, and making them sound utterly believable. The cello is particularly well reproduced. The Miyajima seems to time



▶ better than I've heard on my Scala, bass notes seem to start earlier with a cleaner attack. This affects the sense of timing of the group, as if the players are better together. It is also resolving a greater amount of bass detail. I also notice that some of the higher first violin passages that can shriek a little on the Lyra are better handled. I don't know if the cartridge is a fraction rolled-off at the top, but somehow the sound reminds of an old-fashioned, pre-CD world. There is also a master tape-like feel to the performance. There's no gloss to the sound, which can make for pleasurable listening, but more a matt patina. I have got used to a bit of gloss in my system, which I realise doesn't exist in the concert hall.

A similar set of sonic results follow with 'Rhapsody in Blue', with Bernstein conducting the LA Phil from the piano, on DG. The sound is not particularly euphoric, but again has a master tape feel to it. The lower orchestral bass is particularly superb; I am aware of notes that I've not heard before, and there is a sense of real refinement of timbre. Rhythmically, when the orchestra breaks into toe-tapping cross-rhythms, the cartridge captures the moment beautifully. Accurate, yes: panache, maybe not.

I had some Magnepan 3.7i's knocking around, which I tried as an antidote to the B&W802ds. The presentation is not surprisingly, shockingly different. They are a planar magnetic speaker that use ribbons, and have a startling clarity to them. Listening to some old Blue Note recordings, such as Kenny Burrell's classic *Midnight Blue*, yielded the nearest thing to being in a jazz club I've yet heard. There is something about the synergy between a timbrally fastidious cartridge, and the

larger-than-life, character of the Maggies, that really rocks – a rightness tonally and energy-wise that sucks you into the heart and soul of the music.

The Miyajima Kansui is a cartridge capable of some uniquely intelligent and ear-opening sounds. It has an old-world feel to it, but needs careful partnering with other components to get the energy levels right. While naturally introverted in character, it is brimming with insight and comes thoroughly recommended. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Low output moving coil phono cartridge. Stylus/ Cantilever: Shibata

Tracking Force: 2.0 - 2.5g 2.25g recommended

Load: 100 Ohms

Compliance: 100Hz : 7×10⁻⁶cm/dyne

Output: 0.23mV

Weight: 10.4g

Price: £2,395

Manufacturer: Miyajima Laboratory

URL: www.miyajima-lab.com

Distributor: Time-Step

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