

Miyajima Madake

PAUL MESSENGER IS SEDUCED BY A CARTRIDGE WITH A BAMBOO CANTILEVER

PAUL MESSENGER

This low-output moving-coil cartridge might seem curious to Western eyes, as it's housed in a curvaceous body made from African blackwood (*aka* mpingo), and consequently tends to remind one of designs that were widespread in the 1950s.

Readers' attention ought also to be drawn to Paul Rigby's blog at the back end of this edition, where he discusses the differently tipped monophonic cartridges in the Miyajima catalogue and explains some of the more arcane practices that were carried out in the early days of vinyl. However, I'll stick to simple and straightforward stereo (at least for the moment).

We reviewed Miyajima's *Shilabe* stereo model back in 2009, when it carried a £2,195 pricetag and performed creditably enough (though the frequency response was a bit wayward). Now handled by new distributor Timestep, the *Shilabe* is now priced at £1,995, but this newer *Madake* model takes over at the top of the Miyajima range at a not inconsiderable £3,750. That's a very hefty price for any cartridge, especially one that might be short of neutrality. But neutrality has never been the only criterion in my book, and the *Madake* came with a powerful endorsement from an industry associate whose judgement I've long respected.

The word *Madake* actually refers to a type of bamboo that is widely used in the country's craft industries. And it's a particularly rare and exotic version of madake that Miyajima uses to fabricate a largely bamboo cantilever for this cartridge (the Shibata stylus actually appears to be bonded onto a short metal sleeve at the end of the cantilever) that combines high stiffness with good self-damping. (Do remember that bamboo is actually a grass rather than a tree.)

Miyajima is also proud of its unique and patented 'cross-ring' magnetic generator. The problem is, I don't fully understand its Japanese-English, so the actual mechanism involved is rather difficult to interpret. I think the best approach is simply to follow the old saw: "the proof of the pudding is in the eating". In other respects the cartridge follows a traditional (some might even say old fashioned) approach, since it's quite heavy (9.7g), has a relatively low compliance (9cu) and a tracking weight of 2.5g.

Although the curvaceous wooden body makes it quite difficult to align the cartridge accurately for

minimal lateral tracking error, installation actually proved reasonably straightforward, though I would have been much happier if I could have carried out this work with the stylus guard in place (something that would have been simple enough to execute).

There's plenty of discussion on the web and in magazines on the best loading for different cartridges. Miyajima recommends 100ohms, which is pretty much standard for moving-coil cartridges. I reckon the phono stage itself is likely to have a greater effect, and I had three high quality alternatives available: a Naim *SuperLine/SuperCap*, a transformer-coupled Rega *Ios*, and a valve-powered Thores *Phono Enhancer*. All three were clearly capable of excellent results, but after a quick listen the Thores seemed to deliver the best sound (as well as being the bulkiest and most costly).

Measurements indicated that the Madake had a decent enough frequency response with fine treble extension, though there were signs of resonance in the upper midband (1-2kHz). Most of the work was done in a RB2000 on a Rega RP10, as the plan to try the Madake in a heavyweight 14in tonearm had to be scrapped, because we hadn't the correct tool to change the cartridge, and its owner was on holiday.

However, the sound quality was exceptionally beguiling, seeming to bring an unfamiliar but very welcome richness to the proceedings. We all know that Johnny Cash has a wonderful voice, but just how wonderful I hadn't realised until I spun *Girl from the North Country* (on *Nashville Skyline*) with the *Madake* on the end of my tonearm.

If the bass qualities of Cash's voice were wonderful, much the same applied to Ella Fitzgerald's rather higher pitched tones on her *Sings the Cole Porter Song Book* LP. Vocal tonality, articulation and expression are a major strength of this cartridge, but maybe that's because voices are rendered very obviously.

I actually played all sorts of music, ancient and modern, and was invariably very taken with the results, to the point where I seriously considered purchasing one. It may well come to that in the end, but for the time being I'll hold back and simply award a Audio Excellence flag.

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Manufacturer's Data

| | |
|-----------------------|----------------------------|
| Make | Miyajima |
| Model | Madake |
| Body | African blackwood (mpingo) |
| Frequency Response | |
| | 20Hz - 32kHz |
| Output level | 0.23mV |
| Impedance | 16ohms |
| Recommended load | 100ohms |
| Tracking force | 2.5g |
| Stylus type | Shibata |
| Compliance (at 100Hz) | 9cu |
| Weight | 9.7g |

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