

Equipment Reviews

X-quisite Voro Moving-Coil Phono Cartridge

Written by: Jason Thorpe

Created: 01 May 2024



This wasn't how a review process normally starts. I'd just received the Thales TTT-Compact II turntable for review and was rolling up my sleeves to dig right into this fascinating product. According to Wynn Wong, the Canadian distributor, the Thales ships to the dealer, and thus the customer, as a ready-to-go package, complete with their Simplicity II tonearm and—this is what threw me—the X-quisite Voro cartridge.

Here's the thing: the Thales package is a *unit*, an all-in-one solution that's intended to be plonked down on a stand, plugged in, and listened to. But when Wong and I discussed this review, we both thought it'd be better for me to receive the 'table, arm, and cartridge separately, so that I could assemble them and get my nose in there to see how it all works.



I first unboxed the Simplicity II and noted that the cartridge was at the top of the box. *Let's just give this little guy a quick listen first*, I thought to myself. It was the right thing to do, given that the Thales TTT-Compact is an ambitious turntable, and I wanted to get a feel for what the various parts of this package would bring to the show.

So I slammed the Voro onto the end of the VPI Fatboy Gimbal tonearm that recently replaced the JMW unipivot tonearm (complicated, convoluted story forthcoming) on my VPI Prime Signature turntable, and spun a record.

I didn't spend many cycles optimizing the Voro's alignment at that point, as I wasn't planning on spending much time with it on this 'table. I slapped on the Tragically Hip's *Fully Completely* (Geffen 4704109) and sat back with my jaded-reviewer mask covering my face.

What the hell? I'd listened to this album hundreds of times, and this specific LP, well, it's gotta be 50 times 'round the block. I'd rarely heard it sound this good. I started going back through my email correspondence with Wong—how much was this thing?

What. The. Hell.

Time to back up a bit. X-quisite is a fairly new company, formed in Switzerland in 2019 as a part of HiFiction, which also manufactures Thales turntables and tonearms and EMT cartridges. Concerning X-quisite, the company started with a small bang, registering a patent for a one-piece ceramic cantilever that goes right back to the coil structure. As you might think, this one-piece design totally eliminates all flex, being much more rigid than aluminum and notably more rigid than beryllium. Even ruby, sapphire, or diamond cantilevers are subject to flex where they join the coil structure. The one-piece construction of the X-quisite generator eliminates this junction and this potential for flex. All X-quisite cartridges employ the one-piece ceramic generator.



The Voro is the top model in X-quisite's line, retailing at \$8000 (all prices in USD). Its body is a minimal skeletonized aluminum chassis encapsulated by a ceramic web, based on a Voronoi diagram—created by scattering points at random on a Euclidean plane. It's an eye-catching design, one that's totally appropriate for the analog nature of the vinyl-reproduction ecosystem.

Some more details on that ceramic cantilever. It's hollow in parts, with an octagonal cross-section. The stylus, a Fritz Geiger Signature, is fitted into a recess in the tip. According to X-quisite, the total moving mass at the stylus tip is a very low 0.08mg.

The Voro's coils are 4N pure copper. The magnet is neodymium with an Armco core. At a reasonable 10.2gm weight and 12 μ m/mN compliance, the Voro should work with most modern tonearms. Internal impedance is 12 ohms, and output is a plump 0.7mV. X-quisite recommends 100–200 ohms loading and a tracking force between 1.9 and 2.1gm. I ran it at 2gm and it sounded great and tracked without issue.

Careful now

As it was part of the Thales pre-built package, my sample came in a generic plexi box. The retail version of the Voro ships in a seriously nice wooden box.

There's no stylus guard. I don't like that. Dealing with a \$9K cartridge is terrifying enough without having to worry about just picking up the damn thing.

The tapered body provides excellent sight lines, which made alignment simple. I fiddled with the tracking force a bit and settled on 2gm, which provided a nice balance between top-end extension and bass weight and definition. Running the Voro directly into my Aqvox Phono 2 CI via its balanced current-source inputs meant I didn't have to fiddle with impedance.



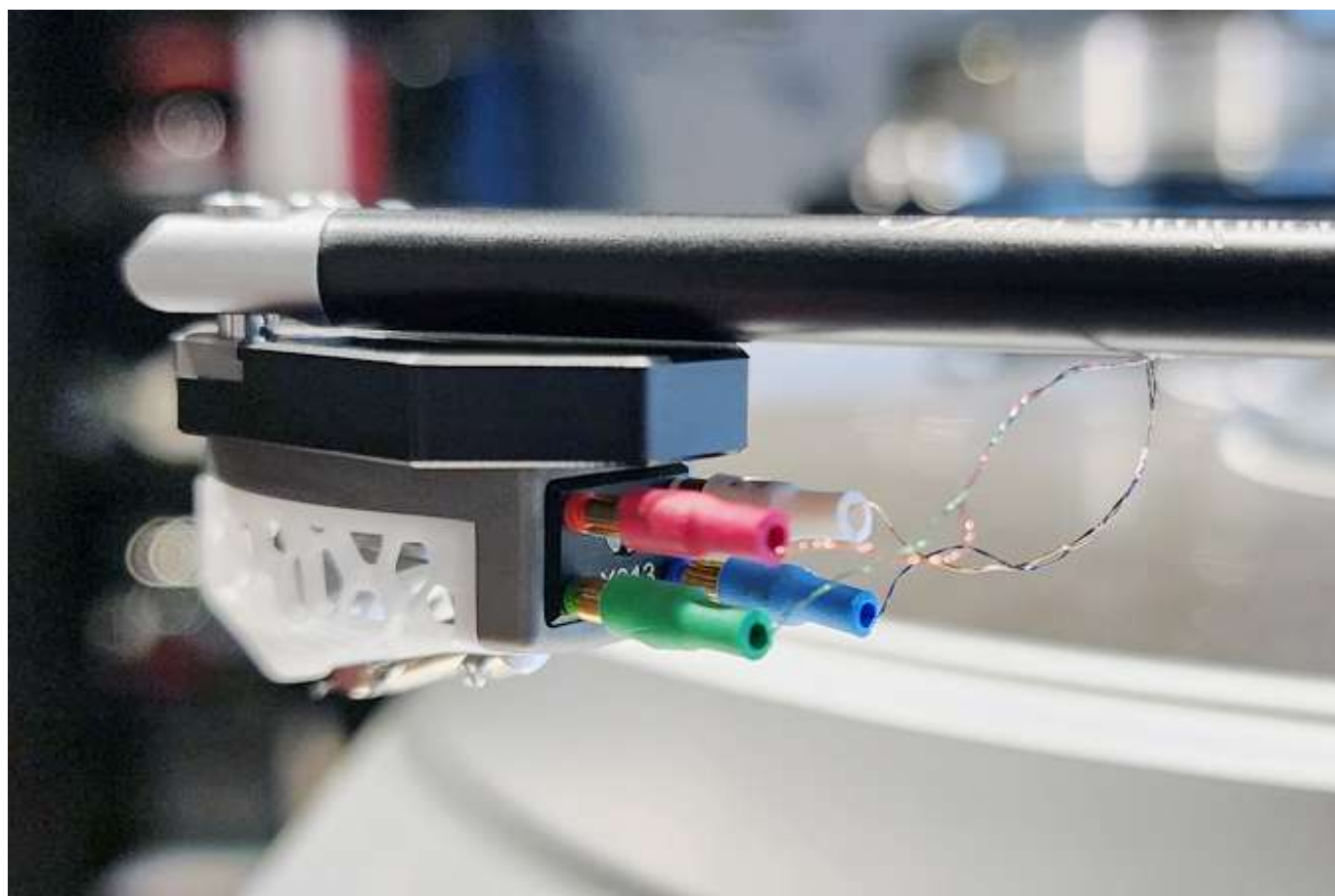
All of my listening for this review was done via the VPI. At the start of the review period, I test-fitted the Voro on the Musical Fidelity M8xTT, but didn't listen to it at that time as I hadn't yet built the spacers required to match it up with the very thick arm tube.

Very late in the review period—too late to actually get my thoughts down about how it all sounded—I moved the Voro over to the Thales Simplicity II arm on the Thales TTT-Compact II turntable. Stay tuned for the review of this combo. You can read about the installation process in this month's editorial.

The sound of luxury

Flipping over to the DS Audio DS 003 optical cartridge was an exercise in attitude adjustment. I've been quite vocal over the past year in my praise of optical cartridge technology, given its startling dynamics and insane sense of realism.

I've spent quite a while comparing high-quality digital reproduction via the Meitner Audio MA3 with the DS Audio cartridge running through the EMM Labs DS-EQ1 phono stage. The results have been startling, with similar masterings sounding more alike than different.



I have also stressed, several times, that some vinyl lovers may not be quite as enamored of optical cartridges as I am. A good moving-coil cartridge exudes a feeling of luxury, of richness. It's old-money class, not nouveau-riche flash.

Listening to the Voro on my VPI felt like coming home. Giant Sand's *Cover Magazine* (Thrill Jockey THRILL 104LP) is a spacious-sounding yet strangely intimate record. It's extremely well recorded, but the close miking of Howe Gelb's voice pulls you in while the rear-of-the-house backup singers make it feel like you're right in there where all the action happens. With the Voro as point man, the mashup of "El Paso / Out On The Weekend" just exuded charm, spirit, and soul, sounding like a supercharged version of my old Roksan Shiraz cartridge. The Shiraz was a master of boogie and jump, sounding lithe and quick while still managing to retain an open, clear presentation. The Voro had those attributes, accentuating the rise of the beat—a sense of slowing down on the uphill and accelerating on the downhill. Sort of a loping, roller-coaster feeling of dynamic shading.

When the band cuts in on the "Out On The Weekend" part, the Voro caught hold of the bass and sorta-kind of matched it up with the kick drum—not in a temporal way, but more like a sense of hooking the rhythm section together in an entangled relationship. It's one of those things a high-end moving-coil cartridge can make happen, almost like it's doing tricks down at the quantum level, imparting meaning into the music where it's *supposed* to be, not just where it actually is.

Perhaps a better example is on the other side, with "The Beat Goes On," a groove-happy exercise in rhythm. Listen to this when you're doing housework and the job will get done right sharpish. Played via the Voro, the kerplonking piano loped along, complementing, not fighting, the punctual bass and loose, floppy drums. This cartridge mastered the ebb and flow of this wonderful track better than anything I've had in my system. Better even than the frighteningly expensive Top Wing Blue Dragon, which I raved about a few years back, and still remember with tears of long-lost love glistening in my eyes.



The Voro is most expressive through the midrange. There's a very small amount of lushness from the lower midrange right up to the start of the treble region. It's not overt, and it's not a euphonic sweetening. Rather, it's best described as the Voro exposing the inner texture of the midrange. Carrying on with *Cover Magazine*, the abrasive "Red Right Hand" takes you on a journey of anger and sadness, and Gelb's voice is full of emotion. The Voro added a small, appropriate amount of grit to his delivery. Not *added* in the sense of distortion or coloration. It's more like, once again, the Voro dug down deep into the groove and pulled out every scrap of information, the overtones, the granularities that make this music so incredibly expressive.

This cartridge is an image monster. Huge, flouncy images with distinct, well-drawn edges just *flew* out of the speakers. As I've said before, my musical choices tend to be dictated by the component under review. After I slid Philip Glass's *The Photographer*, with Michael Riesman conducting the Philip Glass Ensemble (Music On Vinyl MOVCL005), onto the VPI, I noted that the last time I chose this album for a review was for the Top Wing Blue Dragon cartridge. How about that for a *birds-of-a-feather* moment? Listening to "Act I: A Gentleman's Honor," I could *see* the violins as they chirped along following Glass's momentum. The massed vocals in the center had a sense of corporeal body that I've rarely heard in my system. Along with that sense of body was a creaminess, a velvety richness, that I don't recall hearing in my system since . . . well, since the Blue Dragon fluffed up my front bottom.

The top octaves were also clear and open via the Voro. The high piano notes just *rang* out, biting as they should be, suspended in space but not disembodied. Suspended, I say, within the sphere of the monstrous recording venue. I did try to determine where this performance was recorded, but was unsuccessful. It sounds like a huge room though, and the Voro demarcated the boundaries with precision, working almost like sonar to present a map of what was happening where. It's the ability to throw down little cues such as these that separate a *very good* cartridge from a *world-class* cartridge.

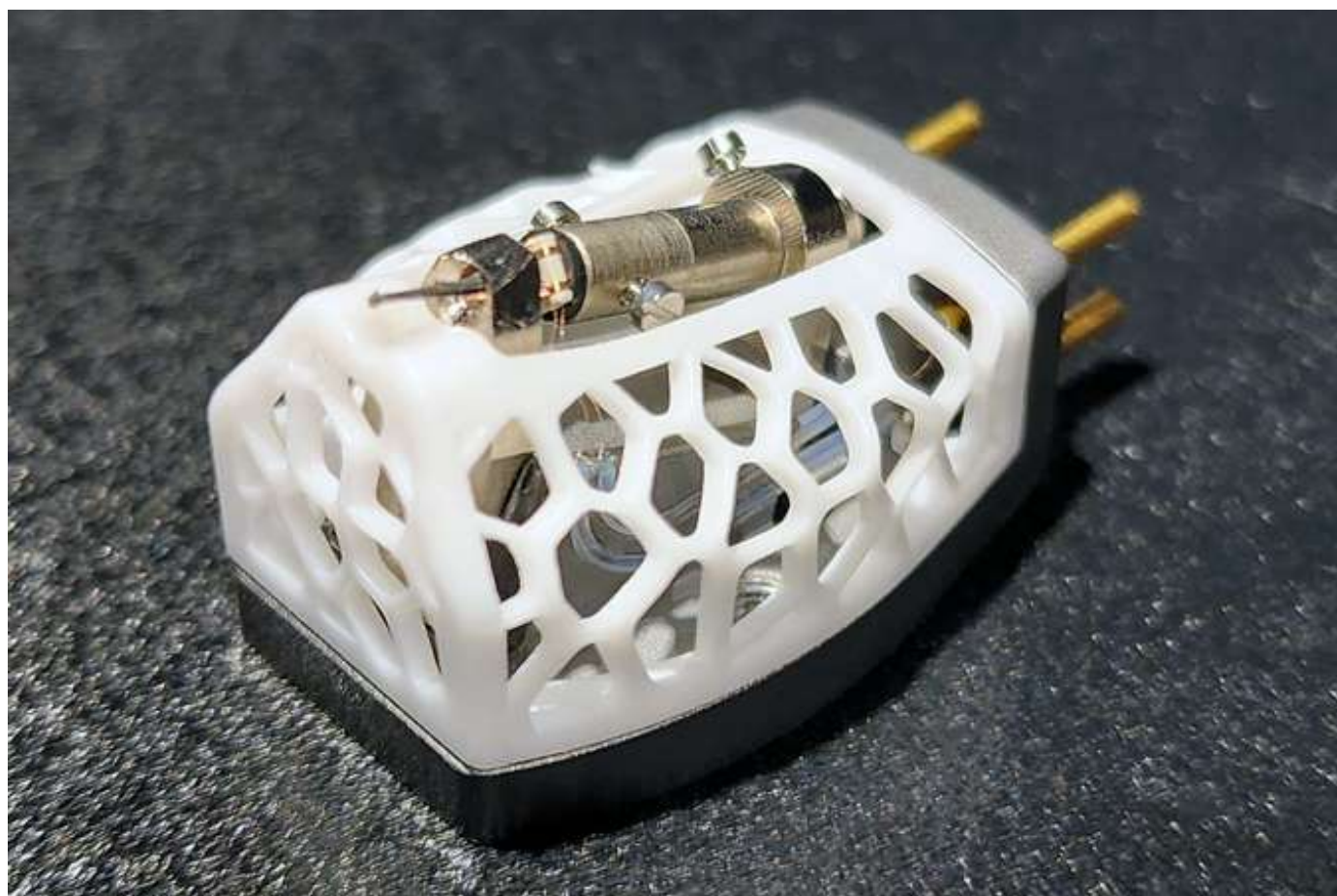


I hinted above that the Voro is a completely different-sounding animal than the DS Audio optical cartridge. The Voro has moving-coil warmth and humanity to it—it's tubes to the DS Audio's solid-state. That said, some aspects of the Voro's sound feel like they're borrowing from the DS Audio playbook. Perhaps it's due to that rigidity from the cantilever through to the coils, but the Voro had a sense of crispness and dynamics that echoes the benefits of optical technology.

I don't recall where I got it, but I am forever grateful that I ended up owning *Synchro System* by King Sunny Ade and his African Beats (Island Records, XILP 9737). This infectious Nigerian juju afro-beat music never seems to run out of steam. The songs are distinct enough, but the whole album is one long groove session, with all kinds of percussion jangling out from every orifice.

Played through the Voro, I was rewarded with superb definition on the percussion, with bongos and cymbals jumping in and out as if they were teleported into the soundstage. Superb definition—I'll say it again. On the tail end of "Maajo" there's a short, nutty percussion solo (I can't identify the type of drum), and the Voro yanked that thing off the record and suspended it right in the middle of the soundstage, with the best dynamics I've ever heard from a moving-coil cartridge, while still retaining the luxurious buttery overtones that are the hallmark of the species.

I'm loathe to mention it here, but I did hear a slight midrange prominence, a forwardness in certain passages, most noticeable on piano. I first pinned this trait down on the Thelonious Monk Quartet's *Monk's Dream* (Music On Vinyl MOVLP842), where those huge plonking piano notes, right from the start of the title track, just jump right off the record. The very top, the cresting wave of those notes, was just slightly elevated. It didn't get in the way, remaining well below the level of annoyance, but it was there.

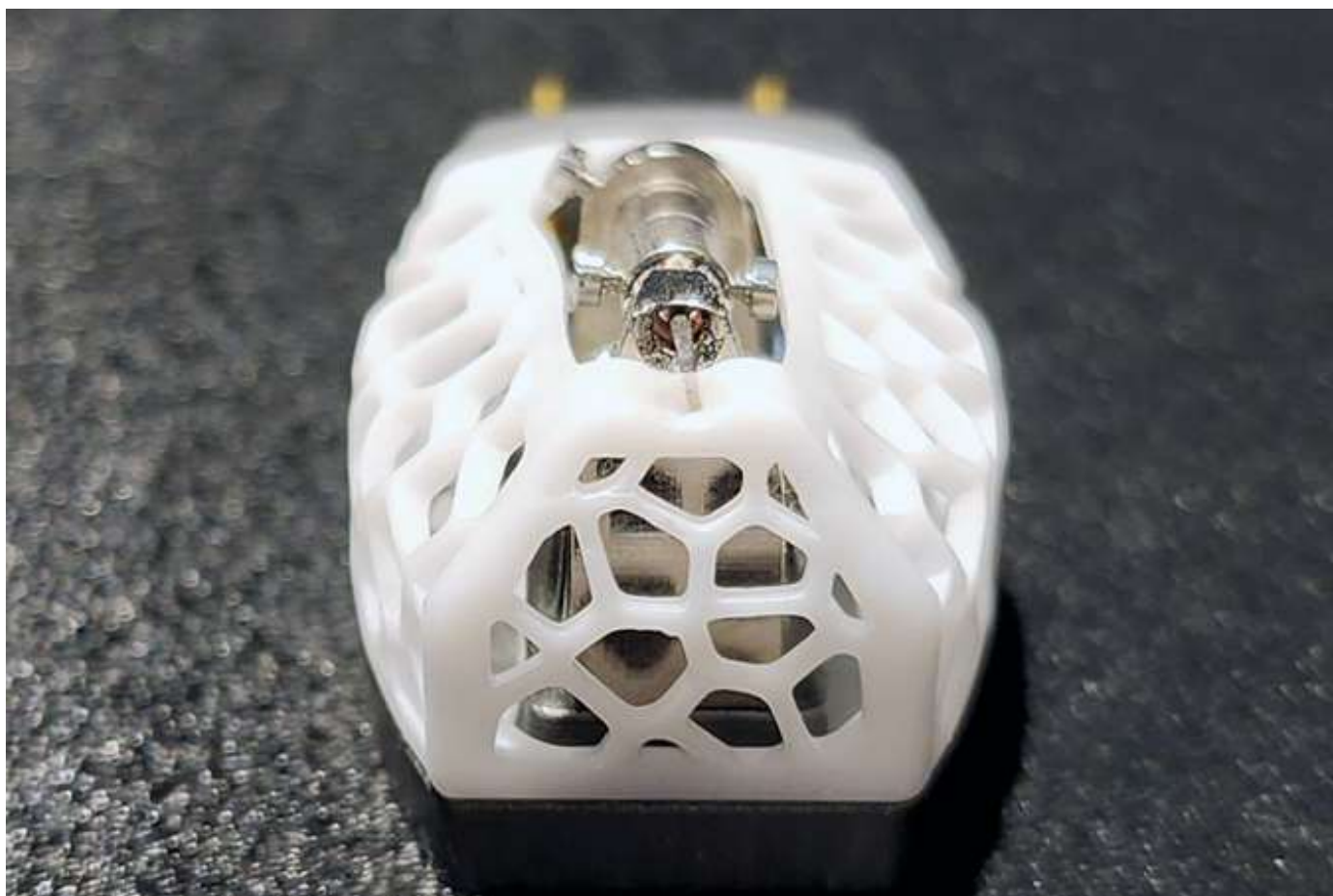


The reason why I don't want to make too much of this slight peak is that there are so very many variables to analog reproduction. There are so many pieces that have to work together with varying standards that a specific trait, such as this very slight prominence, may well not materialize in your system, with your phono cable, your phono stage. But still—it was there in *my* system and I have to report it, right?

I hate it when this happens

To get this quality of reproduction from a cartridge necessitates a substantial investment—which eight large certainly is. Such is life at the extremes in high-end vinyl reproduction. You can get close to this level of performance for much less—check my “For the Record” column where I reviewed the European Audio Team’s Jo N°8 moving-coil cartridge to see where price and performance meet below cloud level. But to ascend to where the sound is superlative requires a large outlay. And \$8800 is a large outlay for what’s essentially a wear item with a finite lifespan. That said, there’s definitely value baked into the Voro cartridge.

Once you accept the fact that *every* cartridge will eventually require replacement or a rebuild, you end up with a baseline for cost versus performance. Audiophiles outside of the vinyl clubhouse understandably mock the concept of value in high-end cartridges, but we can't be like those humorless digital-only buzz-kills, right? We suffer for our hobby, both in obsession over analog minutiae and in the end-game pocketbook—where we most definitely do suffer when an expensive moving-coil begins to fail.



Within that tightly wound universe though, the phono cartridge is a thing of wonder. It's a gemstone that can bring music to life like no other component. The Voro is a precious jewel, and if I swam in this sort of financial pool, I'd buy one for myself.

Associated Equipment

- **Turntable:** VPI Prime Signature with VPI Fatboy Gimbal 10-3D tonearm.
- **Cartridges:** EAT Jo N°8, DS Audio DS 003.
- **Digital source:** Logitech Squeezebox Touch, Meitner Audio MA3.
- **Phono preamplifiers:** Aqvox Phono 2 CI, iFi Audio iPhono3 Black Label, Hegel Music Systems V10, EMM Labs DS-EQ1, Meitner DS-EQ2.
- **Preamplifiers:** Sonic Frontiers SFL-2, Hegel Music Systems P30A.
- **Power amplifier:** Hegel Music Systems H30A.
- **Integrated amplifiers:** Hegel Music Systems H120, Eico HF-81.
- **Speakers:** Focus Audio FP60 BE, Estelon YB, Aurelia Cerica XL, Totem Acoustic Sky Tower.
- **Speaker cables:** Audience Au24 SX, Nordost Tyr 2, Crystal Cable Art Series Monet.
- **Interconnects:** Audience Au24 SX, Furutech Ag-16, Nordost Tyr 2, Crystal Cable Diamond Series 2.
- **Power cords:** Audience FrontRow, Nordost Vishnu.
- **Power conditioner:** Quantum QBase QB8 Mk.II.
- **Accessories:** Little Fwend tonearm lift, VPI Cyclone record-cleaning machine, Furutech Destat III.

X-quisite Voro Moving-Coil Phono Cartridge

Price: \$8000.

Warranty: Three years.

HiFiction AG
Tösstalstrasse 14
8488 Turbenthal
Switzerland
Phone: +41 44 533 88 99

Email: info@x-quisite.ch
Website: www.x-quisite.ch

Canadian distributor:
Wynn Audio
20 Wertheim Ct., #31,
Richmond Hill, ON L4B 3A8
Phone: (647) 995-2995

Email: info@wynnaudio.com
Website: www.wynnaudio.com