

Five Affordable Phono Cartridges

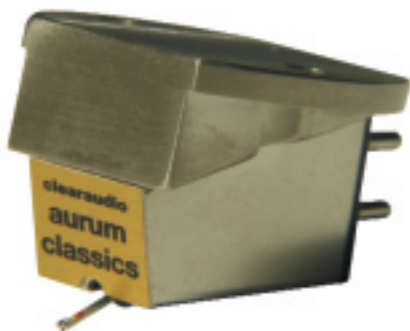
Chris Martens

If you have followed *The Absolute Sound's* coverage of emerging high-resolution digital audio formats you know that while DVD-A and SACD are getting better by the day, analog audio remains—for our editorial staff and for many audiophiles—the “gold standard” for realism and emotional expressiveness in music playback. Why? I believe it is because analog audio does three things well that digital audio either doesn't do well, or does well only at great cost—faithfully reproduce musical dynamics, timbres, and the three-dimensional qualities that define the sound of real voices, instruments, and acoustic spaces. Though digital has its strengths, the sheer realism of analog remains a huge draw.

Nevertheless, we know some readers do not presently own,

or perhaps *never* have owned, high-quality analog playback systems. This is a crying shame, because we have found music lovers are those quickest to grasp the benefits of vinyl playback once they've heard them. What is more, there's really no need to buy a high-priced, top-shelf analog rig to enjoy those benefits (unless you want to); good, moderately-priced analog components are more than adequate to show you what's so musically right about vinyl playback. To encourage our not-yet-analog-equipped brethren to take the plunge and get in the analog game, this edition of *Absolute Analog* surveys five affordable phono cartridges (priced from \$200 through \$800) that each have the potential to serve as the heart of a musically rewarding (yet not “crazy-expensive”) LP playback system.

CLEARAUDIO AURUM CLASSIC (WOOD) PRICE: \$199



The Aurum Classic is Clearaudio's entry-level model—a relatively low-output moving-magnet cartridge that, like all members of the Aurum family, is available with either a wood or stainless-steel mounting plate. The Aurum Classic is the least expensive model in our survey.

Three positive characteristics struck me about the Aurum Classic. First, it offered a neutral-to-very-slightly-warm overall tonal balance, which meant the cartridge worked well on reference recordings yet was tolerant of recordings with less than ideal upper midrange/treble regions. In short, the never-fussy Classic had an inviting, “play-whatever-

you-like” quality. Second, the Aurum offered terrific midbass heft and “punch,” and thus put a lively and robust foundation under the music. Third, the Aurum reproduced depth cues in the music unusually well, showing more three-dimensionality than cartridges that offered greater timbral purity. Through the Classic, for example, the Lehels/Hungarian orchestra recording of the Bartók *Cantata Profana* [Deutsche Grammophon] unfolds in glorious three-dimensionality, where other cartridges tend to compress its soundstage.

The Aurum Classic showed two shortcomings. First, it sounded somewhat “opaque” (at least by Clearaudio standards). It's not that the Aurum sounded grainy or gritty, but rather that its overall focus and resolution went only so far, stopping short of what better moving magnet and entry-level moving coils could do. Second, the Aurum Classic sometimes sounded audibly strained and unfocused on heavily modulated or complex recordings.

The Classic's wonderful balance, punchy bass, and three-dimensionality make it an enjoyable vehicle for getting started in analog audio, and a fine value for the money. However, I suspect some audiophiles would ultimately want more

transparency, openness, and tracking ability than the Classic provides, and for them a better choice might be one of the higher performance models in Clearaudio's Aurum range such as the (still affordable) Alpha, Beta, or Beta S. **PHONOSTAGE SETTINGS: 50KOHMS, 200PF, 40DB GAIN.**

LINN ADIKT PRICE: \$350



The Adikt (is that a cool name, or what?) is Linn's lowest-priced phono cartridge—a moving-magnet design that offers the twin benefits of high output and a convenient, user-replaceable “Gyger II” stylus.

The Adikt showed a brace of posi-

tive characteristics, the most important of which was its uncanny midrange lucidity—a quality that repeatedly drew my attention to the beauty and complexity of human and instrumental voices. On the “Private Investigations” track from Dire Straits’ *Love Over Gold* [Warner Bros.], the Adikt showed real timbral virtuosity, contrasting the smoky expressiveness of Mark Knopfler’s voice against the initially delicate and then later raw and biting tone of his guitar. More than once I thought to myself, “This Adikt’s midrange is so open it sounds more like what you’d expect from a moving coil.” The cartridge’s bass, though not as finely textured as its midrange, was solid and properly weighted—much more satisfying than the anemic bass heard from some of today’s overly lean moving coils. Treble response was clear and had good extension, though it was neither as grain-free nor full of life as the terrific midrange. Finally, the Adikt’s tracking capabilities were quite good (superior to those of the Aurum Classic) meaning it could play high-intensity recordings such as the Von Karajan/Berlin recording of the Verdi Requiem [Deutsche Grammophon] without musical textures fraying at the seams. Overall, the Adikt carried a slightly midrange-forward sound that proved alluring on many recordings, but that sometimes became too pronounced (approaching edginess) on complex passages.

The Adikt’s drawbacks are mostly sins of omission, sins easily overlooked in light of the cartridge’s affordable price. Mostly, I observed that neither its bass nor treble could equal the focus, resolution, and dynamic subtlety of its midrange, and that its soundstaging and three-dimensionality were merely good, but not great (the Aurum Classic offers better depth). Nevertheless, the Adikt’s timbral purity, breathtaking midrange openness, and appropriate bass weight should be more than sufficient to leave prospective buyers hooked.

PHONOSTAGE SETTINGS: 50KOHM, 200PF, 40DB GAIN

SUMIKO BLUE POINT EVO III PRICE: \$349



Sumiko’s Blue Point EVO III is an updated version of the firm’s popular Blue Point Special (BPS). The EVO III is a “naked” (i.e., exposed motor) high-output moving-coil cartridge with aluminum cantilever and elliptical diamond stylus.

The EVO III, I found, offered *substantial*, across-the-board improvements over the original BPS. Compared to the BPS, the EVO III’s tonal balance has become richer and more accurate, with greater bass weight and authority, and less upper midrange prominence. The EVO III showed a fundamental heartiness typical of live music, drawing out the natural warmth underlying even cool-sounding recordings such as the Jan Garbarek/Boho Stenson Quartet’s serene Nordic jazz album, *Dansere* [ECM]. Second, the EVO III offered very good resolution and focus that spanned most of the audio spectrum (by comparison, the Linn Adikt had superb midrange, but more softly focused bass and treble). This top-to-bottom consistency helped me hear the music *as a whole*, rather than becoming fixated on whatever frequency range was the cartridge’s “sweet spot.” Third, the EVO III tracked well and responded gracefully to heavily modulated passages. Where the original BPS sometimes turned strident when the going got rough, the EVO III reacted to tracking challenges in a forgiving and progressive way, only gradually losing focus and resolution as its limits were approached.

The EVO III struck me not so much as having drawbacks, but as having

made artful compromises. The EVO III, I noted, “trades off the ‘nth’ degree of moving-coil resolution and finesse to achieve a more forgiving, pleasing balance overall.” Can you find moving coils with more definition, better focus, superior three-dimensionality, etc.? Yes. (Sumiko’s new Blackbird is a good example.) But, be careful what you ask for; unless you are willing to spend considerably more money, you may find some of those “superior” performers carry unwanted baggage in the form of more glaring flaws.

The EVO III provided a big helping of moving-coil goodness, yet was refreshingly free of common moving-coil quirks and foibles. Enthusiastically recommended.

PHONOSTAGE SETTINGS: 50KOHMS, 200PF, 40DB GAIN.

SUMIKO BLACKBIRD PRICE: \$749



Like the Blue Point EVO III, Sumiko’s new Blackbird is a high-output moving coil with an exposed-motor design, but with a distinctive drive mechanism that features a very-low-mass elliptical stylus and a Boron cantilever rod terminated in a small resonance-controlling inertia block. Building on the EVO III’s core strengths, the Blackbird aims to raise the performance bar higher still, yet without becoming finicky (think, “Ferrari for the Common Man,” and you’ve got the idea).

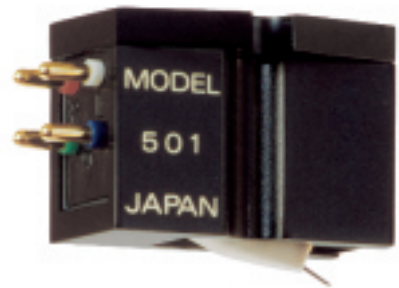
What sonic enhancements did the Blackbird provide? First, it offered superior resolution and focus from the midbass on up, capturing textural details with greater clarity than the EVO III. Second, the Blackbird’s

midrange had improved openness, three-dimensionality, and dynamic sensitivity. On the “My Funny Valentine” track from The Paul Desmond Quartet’s *Live* album [A&M/Horizon], for instance, the Blackbird revealed extraordinarily delicate shifts in phrasing from Desmond’s alto sax, as well as the intimate acoustics of a jazz club (complete with the murmur of patrons’ table conversations and the occasional “clink” of glassware in the background). Third, the Blackbird produced taut and articulate bass and midbass—with clearer textures (but a lighter balance) than the EVO III’s. Finally, the Blackbird tracked complex passages more gracefully than the EVO III (though when the Blackbird’s higher tracking limits were reached, the resulting loss of focus sometimes *seemed* more noticeable because of its midrange purity).

The Blackbird offered a host of musically significant improvements relative to the already good EVO III, with more resolution, better focus, and greater three-dimensionality—all while retaining crucial treble smoothness. Though the Blackbird’s balance at first seemed lighter in the midbass and ever-so-slightly more forward in the midrange than the EVO III’s, that balance could be “tuned” for more weight and warmth through careful VTA adjustment (and, Sumiko suggested, through use of mid-to-high-mass tonearms said to enhance bass solidity). The Blackbird supplied a full measure of the openness and resolution that music lovers crave, without the excess brightness that makes some moving coils sound too edgy for their own good.

PHONOSTAGE SETTINGS: 50KOHMS, 200PF, 40DB GAIN.

SHELTER 501 MK II **PRICE: \$800**




While Shelter cartridges only recently began to be distributed in the U.S. by Axis (the firm that also distributes Accuphase), they have been generating Internet “buzz” as potential price/performance leaders for well over a year.

Let me come right out and say it: The Shelter 501 Mk II is the best sub-

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\$1000 cartridge I've yet heard, and for more reasons than I have space to hint at here. Nevertheless, I'll try. First, the 501 Mk II offered remarkable three-dimensionality that unlocked hidden spaciousness both in good recordings and in those I previously thought lacked depth. Second, the Shelter offered wonderfully natural tonal balance, with a sound that always seemed cut from whole cloth. Third, the 501 Mk II's many audiophile virtues were exceptionally well-integrated; thus, I didn't hear a disparate collection of individual positive qualities but rather one unified, coherent, and compelling sound. This cartridge had treble air without brightness, transient speed without overshoot, definition without edginess, focus without sterility, and bass weight without any thick or syrupy colorations. Somehow, the Shelter revealed both the music and the

flaws in commonplace recordings without—how shall I put this?—*penalizing* the listener for those flaws. My only wish, really, was that the Shelter had a bit more bass definition and snap (much as the Sumiko Blackbird had), yet *without* losing bass weight. More than any cartridge I've heard in this price range, this one lets audiophiles have their cake and eat it, too.

Is the Shelter 501 Mk II a state-of-the-art cartridge? No, that title rightly belongs to a handful of models in the 4-figure (or even 5-figure) price range. But, is this cartridge as close as you can get to top-tier performance for \$800? I think it is, which is why this cartridge has me singing along with Mick Jagger, "Gimme Shelter." 

PHONOSTAGE SETTINGS: 1000HMS, 300PF, 60DB GAIN

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