

Musical Life Andante (£1290)

To match its hand-crafted turntables, this small German maker offers a Shibata-tipped, cryo-treated moving-coil pickup cartridge that belies its humble origins
 Review: **Steve Harris** Lab: **Paul Miller**

Call it the lure of the esoteric, but this ebony-bodied cartridge intrigued me from the start. It had a hand-made look about it and was clearly the work of an uncompromising enthusiast builder. But underneath that big, blocky wooden skirt, the disturbingly naked moving-coil generator looked rather familiar. As indeed it should, because it started life inside a cartridge that has been in production since 1962. Yes, the Denon DL-103.

When Michael Stolz of Musical Life told me that he rebuilds the Denon with a new cantilever and stylus, I imagined that this meant completely dismantling the generator. But it doesn't. It's done by cutting off the existing cantilever, then fixing the new one into the stump. Look through a jeweller's eyeglass and you can see the joint.

Even so, this is hardly an operation you could perform on your own kitchen table. The surgery is carried out for Musical Life by Martin Göttmann of Veitsrodt, also known as 'Der Nadelspezialist' or 'the needle doctor' (visit www.nadelspezialist.de if you can read German). His new, smaller-diameter cantilever is still of aluminium but carries a Shibata stylus.

Stolz says that the compliance is reduced slightly by adjusting the tension wire that holds the assembly together from front to back. Cryogenic treatment is the other vaunted feature of the Andante. Stolz

DON'T TRY THIS AT HOME

Thanks to the uncensored internet, if you want to view a helpless Denon cartridge being cut open with a craft knife, you can. Thomas Schick, unconnected with the razor company, slices through the glue to detach the plastic casing, then push-fits the DL-103 chassis to a wood body. Go to www.thomas-schick.com. He is one of many who have re-bodied the Denon, but another German specialist has done much more. With a change of stylus plus cryo treatment, Musical Life turns the classic Denon into something all its own.



ABOVE: Musical Life's wooden body had to be wide to enclose the original Denon chassis. Avoid using this cartridge with a record clamp that measures more than 83mm in diameter

claims that the process he uses is based on several years of experiments, but doesn't give away many details. He just says that it involves cooling to -190° Celsius and takes more than a day to complete. He adds that the cryo treatment affects the rubber suspension and all the other mechanical parts of the cartridge, but not the magnets. Claimed benefit is 'a more detailed and natural sound.'

DONOR DENON

Denon's standard DL-103 is chosen over the pricier DL-103R, as he doesn't think that the 6-nines copper coils of the 'R' makes any difference, but he does prefer the basic DL-103's slightly higher output [see Lab Report].

After all this, the cartridge is glued into its new body, which has threaded holes for the mounting bolts tapped directly into the ebony. This is a relatively hard and fine-grained wood, but even so you need to be careful not to overtighten the bolts. A Rega torque wrench would probably strip the threads instantly.

For this review, I used the Andante both in my SME Model 10 turntable and in the Musical Life Jazz Mk II Reference turntable with Fortissimo arm, still on hand after the February issue review. Setting up in the SME was easy, the cartridge tracking well at just over 2.5 grams. However, I found that the end of an LP side, the unusually wide cartridge body could actually touch the rotating SME record clamp, so this combination has to be avoided in normal use. Otherwise, I didn't have any problems.

PERFORMING ARTS

With the cartridge up and running, I found myself eagerly dipping into a huge range of music from the Gabrieli Quartet to the Grateful Dead and back. But for the record, as you might say, I made the cartridge perform on my usual series of test pieces, starting with Jennifer Warnes' contribution to Rob Wasserman's *Duets* [GRP 97 121].

Warnes' 'Ballad Of The Runaway Horse' vocal had a strikingly present and



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immediate quality, well separated in space from the background vocals when these loom up behind her. Wasserman's bass also had real presence and power, with a feeling that there really were strings being plucked here.

It seemed particularly easy to feel the underlying rhythms of the song, the bass effortlessly conveying a one-two-three feel over each long beat. Wasserman's overdubbed tremolandi-like accompaniment in a higher register seemed more rhythmically persuasive than usual.

I got another quick indication of the Andante's sturdy bass quality with Eric Clapton's 'Motherless Children' from *461 Ocean Boulevard* [RSO 2479 118].

Here Carl Radle's bass sound came over as truly propulsive, with a sense of actually moving some air, and there was a satisfying balance between his weighty bass and the busy drums. There was a nice sense of ease and freedom about the slide guitar sound, and Clapton's vocal was convincingly urgent. As for the mélange of backing guitars and organ sounds, you couldn't say that individual strands emerged with ear-catching detail, but everything bubbled along colourfully enough.

A BEEFY BASS

'Sultans Of Swing' [Dire Straits, Vertigo 9102 021] also revealed a strong and beefy bass quality, but this time there was some real shaping and harmonic detail in the sound of the instrument. Once again the backdrop of rhythm guitars seemed not to draw attention, but to stay quietly in their places.

The Andante gave a pleasing, open view of the Harry James band [King James Version, Sheffield Lab LAB-3], with a good feeling of the section men spread behind the speakers right and centre. To the left, James's trumpet solo on the opening 'Corner Pocket' had ease and a sense of real positioning in space, crackling convincingly without a hint of mistracking.

Then I moved on to Mozart, the familiar piano concerto K467 as recorded by Barenboim and the ECO in 1967 [EMI ASD 2465]. Here

the Musical Life MC showed itself capable of portraying the piano hanging in space in front of the orchestral background, placed with stability like a curtain behind. The piano never seemed to obscure the detail in the accompanying orchestral sounds, and it always seemed easy to home in and focus attention on any part you could hear.

IT'S A MUSICAL LIFE

By now, as you will have gathered, I was pretty much in favour of the Andante, and it seemed very comfortable in the SME setup. I wondered whether it would seem even more at home in Musical Life's own turntable and arm.

This time, starting again with *Duets*, Jennifer's voice was sweet, and I think a little less tightly focused. While the lead vocal was well

enough separated from the backing vocals, for example, I didn't get quite such a clear sense of depth layering and perspective as I had done with the cartridge installed in the SME.

With Clapton's 'Motherless Children', I felt that that the Musical Life combination presented the thing as a complete entity, a burst of energy and feeling where details of backing instruments would slip by unnoticed as the track rocked along smoothly. On both these tracks the bass seemed less well-shaped and defined than with the SME, but this didn't seem to matter too much. This was still a fine, enjoyable sound. ☺

'It was particularly easy to feel the underlying rhythms of the song'

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

Looking crude against the obvious engineering quality of an Ortofon, or the inscrutable craftsmanship of a Koetsu, this cartridge still offers an alluring sound. It has coherence, sweetness, unflinching rhythmic integrity. On the minus side is a greater-than-usual emphasis of surface noise and a sense that there could be more detail. But if you feel brave and don't use a too-wide record clamp, you might take the plunge.

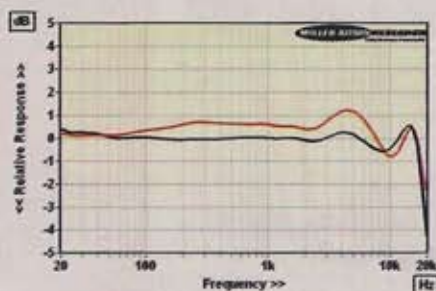
Sound Quality: 75%

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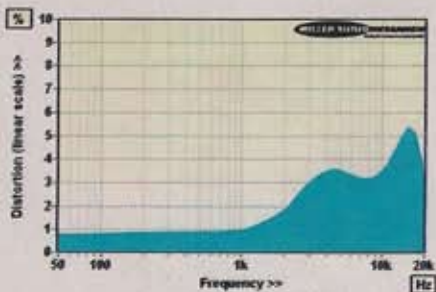
Thanks to its substantial wooden carcass, the Andante weighs in at an equally substantial 12g. This, plus the weight of bolts, might have posed an issue with arm/cartridge matching if it were not for the low-ish 12/10cu vertical/lateral dynamic compliance – a more realistic figure than the ultra-stiff 5cu suggested on Musical Life's website. Furthermore, the Andante's tracking performance is rather better than we might have expected for a low compliance MC. Assisted by the high 2.6g tracking weight, the cartridge very nearly met 80µm on both channels with distortion at 300Hz increasing from just 0.1% at +6dB to 0.35% at +12dB and finally to 0.7% at +18dB (all re. 5cm/sec). Few such MCs successfully navigate the +18dB modulation, it must be said.

The Andante's response is within ±1dB from 20Hz to 18kHz [see Graph 1, below], a flatness aided by the accurate 22° VTA, while the standard 5cm/sec output is rather higher than specified (0.3mV) at 535µV into a high impedance load and 430µV into a 100ohm load. The L/R channel imbalance is acceptable at 0.35dB but stereo separation is usefully wide at over 30dB through bass and midrange. The lateral distortion test [see Graph 2, below] shows the idealised result for the left channel, rising to just over 5% at 15kHz but hovering <1% below 1kHz. Note how the slight variations in distortion versus frequency are also reflected in the frequency response.

Readers are invited to view a QC Suite test report for the Musical Life Andante pick-up by navigating to www.hifinews.co.uk and clicking on the red 'Download' button. PM



ABOVE: Left (black) and right (red) frequency responses, lateral groove modulation at -8dB re. 5cm/sec. Flat to within ±1dB up to 18kHz



ABOVE: Tracing and generator distortion (2nd-4th harmonics) versus frequency from 50Hz-20kHz (1kHz, -8dB re. 5cm/sec)

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

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|-----------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Generator type/weight | Moving-coil / 12.0g |
| Recommended tracking force | 2.4-2.6mN |
| Sensitivity/balance (re. 5cm/sec) | 535µV / 0.35dB |
| Compliance (vertical/lateral) | 12cu / 10cu |
| Vertical tracking angle | 22 degrees |
| L/R Tracking ability | 80µm / 76µm |
| L/R Distortion (-8dB, 20Hz-20kHz) | 0.90-3.2% / 0.65-9.8% |
| Frequency resp. (20Hz-20kHz) | +0.7dB to -1.7dB |
| Stereo separation (1kHz / 20kHz) | 32dB / 25dB |