

Charisma Audio Reference One

Grace and Distinction

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A little less than two years ago, in volume 16 no. 2 of this magazine, we reviewed Charisma Audio's first moving coil cartridge: the MC-1, mounted on an Acoustic Signature Wow XL turntable. Among other things, the reviewer stated that *The Charisma Audio MC-1 reaches deep into the grooves and can pick up, down to the smallest detail, all the music an LP contains without adding any noise*. Armed with this discovery, we wanted to appraise this Canadian maker's cartridges further, and we chose a model in the range above the MC-1's. This was the Reference series, and the model was the Reference One. It comes in a solid wooden box.

The Reference One's characteristics make it appropriate for a medium-mass tone arm. It weighs 7.1 grams, less than the 12 grams of the MC-1 and MC-2 from the same maker, and has a compliance of 10 $\mu\text{m/mN}$. Its channel separation is 30dB, its frequency response is 20 to 25KHz $\pm 1\text{dB}$ and its internal impedance is 14 ohms. Loading range is given as between 100 and 1000 ohms, with 250 to 350 ohms suggested. It is not too sensitive to capacitance (we used 100pF). Output level is 0.42mV at 3.54 cm/sec. With this output, the Reference One cannot be considered a low- or very low-output cartridge, but rather a moving coil with a normal output level which requires a compatible preamplifier or phono stage, one likely to make it sing.

A little further on, we'll see that the Charisma Audio Reference One isn't hard to match with an appropriate phono section. Delivered in a solid wooden box and accompanied by a driver and Allen bolts of different lengths for mounting the cartridge on the tone arm, a bubble level and a spec sheet, the package breathes quality and underlines that we're dealing with a high end cartridge.

The moving coil cartridge was popularized by the Danish company Ortofon. Unlike the moving magnet cartridge, whose coils are fixed and whose magnet is moved by the stylus/cantilever assembly, which can be removed and replaced, the coils of a moving magnet cartridge are attached to the end of the cantilever between two powerful magnets. This configuration makes it impossible to change the stylus assembly, because it is an integral part of the cartridge. Manufacturers generally offer a replacement service at a discounted price. The advantages of the moving coil design are reduced distortion, linear transient response and improved tonal balance and dynamics, all allied to a sweetness of sound and music reproduction. The moving coil design, relative to the moving magnet, is more difficult to make and more rare, and its price is correspondingly higher.

The design and manufacture of a high fidelity cartridge, a moving coil one especially, is in some ways like the work of a fine watchmaker. The appropriate parts and materials have to be assembled with a meticulous attention to detail. As an example, the Charisma Audio Reference One has a body of high-density exotic wood (amboyne burl, from southeast Asia), a superhard ruby cantilever and a nude diamond stylus with a super fine line profile. In this decidedly small domain, everything must be put together with assurance and executed according to high professional standards — which of course is what we have a right to expect when we acquire a product in this price range.

In an audio system the source is the first priority because it is what sends the signal to the rest of the system. In view of this, there is a lot to gain by choosing the turntable, tonearm and cartridge carefully for the synergy between the elements which make up the ensemble. In view of this, the choice of a phono cartridge deserves time, consideration and careful attention to matching with a preamplifier or phono stage.

Using a tracking force of 2.0 grams, which ensures that the stylus follows the groove properly, and after a running-in period of 50 hours, the Reference One was connected to various phono preamplifiers (see the list below) with a load of 100 ohms and a gain setting of 63dB. Our first observation was that there was no background hum or hiss at medium volume. This is worth mentioning because if there is one important factor in listening enjoyment, apart from the quality of sound and music reproduction, it is the quiet background which comes from the silence we hope to get from a cartridge whose output is still relatively low, specified in this case at 0.42mV.

System used for this review

Turntable: Acoustic Signature WOW with TA-1000 arm and Funk platter mat

Phono preamps: Benedict Audio C, Trichord Research Dino Mk3, Dynavector P75 mkII

Integrated amplifiers: Brinkmann, Jadis DA88S

Speakers: Harmonie Audio 3-way

Cables: Bis Audio Maestro/Vivat, Nordost Heimdall2, Audioquest Castle Rock, DR Acoustics

Audio Furniture: Sound Momentum Eclipse, Solid Tech

AC outlet: Furutech GTX-D NCF (R)

The appreciation of a cartridge installed on a turntable is, for a vinyl lover, an exercise which aims to reveal the component's potential for extracting the information on the black disc and reproducing it in its own special way. If there is one unit in a system which can add a personality to the listening experience, it is this kind of analog component. There may be some apprehension, but the experience can turn out to be appealing, revealing happy discoveries, and in fact the Charisma Audio Reference One invited us, with grace and distinction, to such an experience.

Touching down on the Diana Krall album *Wildflower* [sic] on Verve (an album of pop hits from the 60s and 70s), the Reference One transmits these standards with transparent

clarity and a warm and musical sonic rendering, accompanied by a soundstage which is quite exceptional in its amplitude, yet without any feeling of forwardness. Diana Krall's voice sounds good, just right. The megahit *California Dreamin'*, arranged so idiosyncratically by David Foster and William Ross, is worth the trip, and the Reference One comes along.

On Oregon's *Out of the Woods*, an instrumental which is not particularly easy to reproduce well on account of the legendary group's slightly acidulated clarinet, the sound was recreated in exemplary manner, the acoustic instruments' timbres reproduced without colouration and with authenticity. Clearly the Charisma Audio Reference One does exemplary work, combining the whole with sweetness and neutrality within a rendering that draws the listener in to play an active role.

Let's continue with a period piece of vinyl, *Something Else* on Blue Note, with, among others, Julian Cannonball on the alto saxophone, Miles Davis and Hank Jones on the piano. The *Autumn Leaves* track, signed Mercer-Prévert-Cosma, the long version, is as smooth as you could wish. It's as though the Reference One took pleasure in making an in-depth, exacting search of this disc's grooves, with all possible respect for the instruments' inherent timbres, and all of it faithful to the musical groove so characteristic of this jazz classic.

We'll wrap up in another musical style with *Famous Blue Raincoat*, songs by Leonard Cohen interpreted by Jennifer Warnes. They were reproduced this time with great pleasure interwoven with solid bass and guitar solos that were no less than inspired, all of it on a background of almost absolute silence. The level of refinement, sweetness and attack, the ease at extracting microdetails, the silent operation and the ease in terms of sonic and musical reproduction, which emanated from The Reference One, are some of this cartridge's characteristic strengths. It may not have all the dynamic impact and punch, in the bass among other things, associated with other cartridge brands such as some Dynavector moving coils in this price category, nevertheless it has the advantage of exemplary linearity in tonal balance and the absence of any listening irritation. These are not qualities typical of all the Reference One's competitors.

Comfortable in the Acoustic Signature Wow and its brandmate tone arm, this Charisma Audio Reference One cartridge could easily go with a turntable twice the price. Its qualities of transparency, openness, tracking and stereo image, coupled with its finesse and sweetness when paired with an appropriate phono preamplifier, make it a component which, in its class, has a place in the relatively small circle of moving coil cartridges with a value for money that makes them worthy of consideration by any music lover serious about vinyl.