



## Benz Micro Ruby Z Moving-Coil Cartridge

### Wholly Immersive

Wayne Garcia

**I**t's no coincidence that many of the world's finest phono cartridges come from countries whose names are essentially synonymous with precision craftsmanship: Japan, Germany, and Switzerland. The latter is where the late Ernst Benz, an aviator and multi-disciplined inventor, founded the Benz Micro audio-manufacturing company in the 1980s. In 1994, Albert Lukaschek acquired Benz Micro, dedicating his company to developing meticulously hand-built high-end phonograph cartridges.

As the company website proudly states: "Coils are wound by hand under intense magnification; cartridge bodies and chassis parts are constructed and assembled in-house; and each cartridge is carefully listened to by Mr. Lukaschek himself. Any cartridge that does not meet his strict criteria will go back for adjustment until it is perfect."

Benz cartridges are well known for combining excellent detail with a warm, sweetly musical sound, and the \$4000 Ruby Z upholds that tradition. Housed in a handsome Zebra wood body, the Ruby's name is more than a pretty tag; it refers to the ruby square plate at the core of the coil winding, which has the advantages of being both lightweight (hence, ultra-fast and responsive) and non-ferrous (so magnetic interference is rendered moot). Benz also uses this ruby-plate generator in its other top models, the Gullwing, LP, and LP-S.

Weighing in at just 10.6 grams, the Ruby Z was designed to be compatible with a wide range of tonearms, from the best of today's offerings to what the company tactfully describes as "older models lacking the energy control, bearing designs, or counter-weight range" of contemporary arms.

I auditioned the Ruby Z with two turntable rigs from Basis Audio (the company's newest model, the Bravo with Vector arm that I reviewed in Issue 341) and my own Basis 2200/Vector 4 setup. Benz's U.S. distributor, Michael Fajen of Sierra Sound, recommended 500-ohm loading, and as my Sutherland N1's phono-stage offers a 475-ohm option, that's what I used, to excellent effect.

Spinning Yarlung Records' outstanding 45rpm pressing of Bach's Partita No. 2 in D Minor for solo violin revealed the Ruby Z's inherent musicality. If you don't know this LP, I urge you to grab a copy. It's about as natural a rendition of a violin captured in real space as you're going to hear, and Petteri Iivonen's playing is first rate—sensitive and nuanced far beyond what one would expect from a 20-year-old (which he was in 2008, the date of this recording).

The Ruby Z did a lovely job recreating the ambience of the Alfred Newman Hall in L.A., where the recording was made, and its reproduction of the bloom of air around the violin, the timbre of Iivonen's 1767 Gagliano fiddle, the texture of wood and strings—like a fine Tequila, warm and semi-sweet but with the right balance of toothy edge—the harmonic overlay, the micro-dynamics, the dancing vi-

brancy of Bach's masterwork were wholly immersive.

In a nutshell, this record nicely encapsulated the Ruby Z's personality, which was given further room to roam when I played Joe Henderson's *The State of the Tenor Vol. 1: Live at the Village Vanguard*, one of the great gifts of Blue Note's Tone Poet series.

Recorded in 1985 and originally released the following year, this recording had eluded me until the Tone Poet reissue. *The State of the Tenor* finds the then 48-year-old Henderson in peak form, with a marvelous pair of bandmates—Ron Carter on bass and Al Foster on drums—as musical brothers-in-arms.

More closely miked than some live sets at the Vanguard, *State of the Tenor* nevertheless captures the intimacy and warmth of this small, fabled venue. Henderson's tenor and the drums occupy the center space, sax up front, drums riding behind. Ron Carter's throbbing, driving bass sits left of center. Again, the Ruby Z delivered a finely nuanced balance, comprising the natural warmth of the tonal, textural, and tactile elements of each instrument along with excellent detail, dynamic snap, and a rollicking verve that makes this set sizzle with life.

Like many of us, I'm a fan of much of DG's back catalog, with its exceptional roster of artists and performances, while frequently lamenting the less-than-stellar sonics of older pressings, especially those from the 70s and beyond. Given that, I was excited to check out a few titles from the label's recently launched Original Source Series, in which, DG proclaims,

## Benz Micro Ruby Z Moving-Coil Cartridge **Absolute Analog**

### Specs & Pricing

**Type:** Low-output moving coil

**Output voltage:** 0.35mV

**Body:** Vented, machined Zebra wood

**Cantilever:** Solid boron rod,  
0.28mm diameter

**Stylus:** Micro-ridge

**Coil:** Square ruby jewel plate

**Weight:** 10.2g

**Recommended tracking force:**

1.8–2.0g

**Recommended tonarm mass:**

Medium to high

**Recommended loading:** 500–47k

ohms

**Price:** \$4000

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the Ruby Z rendered a fine sense of the venue's ambience from this live recording, with an excellent "bloom" of air surrounding the piano. There was also fine tonal coherence across the spectrum.

The second movement's more delicate passages reveal the fine harmonic layering the Benz can deliver. As Kissin works his way into and then away from the jazz-like passage that bridges the movement, one really senses Beethoven's architectural chops in action. The

denouement is one of music's sublime passages, and here the Benz took my breath away with its whisper-like delicacy and sheer beauty of tone.

Comparisons to my reference My Sonic Lab Signature Gold speak well of the Ruby Z. Although it might not take you quite as far regarding the nth degrees of, well, everything, and bass notes may not have quite the punch or richness of the My Sonic, for less than half the price one could say the Ruby Z is twice the value. **TAS**

"no tape copies [were] used, no unnecessary devices [were] in the signal path, and, of course, [there was] no digital sound processing: pure analogue. This is the shortest possible way from the original master to the cutter head."

Listening to the new edition of the Karajan Mahler Symphony No 5, a recording I purchased on release in 1975, I was bowled over by the huge improvement this reissue offers over that now almost 50-year-old edition. Rather than the cool, compressed, two-dimensional sound that caused me to shelve this LP for ages, the Original Source release sounds enveloping and warm, with lush string tone and dynamics like we've never heard before from this disc—explosive brass and percussion and a natural sense of orchestral weight. Note, as well, there is far greater instrumental detail in tone and texture. During the famous Adagietto, massed strings sound sweet and silky with rosin, the French horns warm, mellow, and rich. The entire orchestra held together very nicely during massively complex passages, as the Ruby Z tracked the grooves with no-sweat aplomb.

Finally, to an LP I play with some frequency, Evgeny Kissin's deeply felt reading of Beethoven's Piano Sonata No 32, where

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