

Analog Relax EX500 moving coil cartridge

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How we make things often follows country stereotypes. Americans make 'em 'big.' The English... 'quirky.' Germans... 'reliable.' Russians... 'can be repaired with hammers.' And a big part of the Japanese manufacturing zeitgeist is 'artisan.' It's hand-crafting sword-making or pottery for the last 700 years, handing down the skills through the generations. Analog Relax is a part of that artisan tradition, yet it is not bound by it, making it one of the exciting newer brands on the vinyl scene. That is ably demonstrated by the Analog Relax EX500 moving coil cartridge, a perfect blend of traditional and modern cartridge design.

There's also a wider sense of a baton being passed here. Yasushi Yurugi of Analog Relax is a generation or two younger than most other Japanese cartridge masters. This is a major concern; Transfiguration cartridges ended with Seiji Yoshioka's passing in late 2018. Meanwhile, Jelco arms ceased production in 2020, the parent company deciding that elderly engineers operating ancient machinery were not a good mix with COVID-19. And when Koetsu closed its doors following the passing of Sugano Fumihiko on August 21, 2023, the brand's longest-serving distributor, Absolute Sounds, found itself in a tough spot. The company needed a replacement cartridge brand, but Koetsu left some big shoes to fill. However, if any new cartridge maker could fill that void, it would be Analog Relax.

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» The Fab Four

Analog Relax has four moving coil cartridges in its range. The EX500 is the second rung on the ladder, with the EX300 beneath it and the EX1000 and EX2000 above. The EX300 and EX500 share an elliptical diamond stylus profile, although the profile design is enhanced in the EX500. The cantilever in both the EX300 and EX500 is aluminium, but a thicker design than used by most cartridge builders. The company also uses what is claimed to be a new bonding material between cantilever and diamond. It tracks at around 2g. The more up-scale models use the company's own Super Line Contact stylus, with a ruby and diamond cantilever, respectively.

The other important change as you move up the range is the wood choice for the cartridge body, moving from a beeswax-finished walnut (popular with high-end luthiers) through 2,000-year-old Yakusugi cedar and up to the same Southern Tyrol spruce that Stradivarius favoured. In the EX500, the choice of wooden body falls to a Romanian maple that violin makers also favour. In all cases, the body itself is carefully carved to create a shape with almost no parallelism, making the cartridge look very different from the slab-sided Koetsu and Kiseki designs. In fact, it looks a little like a tiny Avalon, Tidal or Rockport loudspeaker, turned through 90°.

In listening to the EX500, it's perhaps no surprise that the parent company of Analog Relax is called ZOOT Communications and the founder is also the president of the Zoot Sims fan club. Zoot Sims was one of those effortless, legato saxophonists whose range spanned big band to cool jazz. And, while the EX500 is more than just some smooth sounding jazz, the creamy midrange and enticing presentation – just the right side of soft and relaxed – is absolute perfection when playing something jazzy. It needn't be saxophone-based; I played the near ubiquitous *This Ones For Blanton!* [Pablo], which is just piano and bass, but Ellington's strident tone and Ray Brown's playful bass are given all the space to spring to life between the loudspeakers. It's the wonderful harmonic charm of the EX500 that just draws you deeper into the music.

If it were a cartridge optimised for jazz that would be fine for some listeners, but too limiting for wider use. Fortunately, the Analog Relax EX500 has a broader spread of benefits that extend beyond one genre. This was a surprisingly adept cartridge whatever the music you placed on the platter. The name implies a laid-back presentation, but it's not as 'relaxed' as the name suggests.

In fact, I found the Analog Relax EX500 a fine all-rounder. It's more about the tonality and easy dynamic range than edgy detail and attack, but put something with some energy on the record and it resolves it well. For example, it powered its way through Frankie Goes to Hollywood's 'Two Tribes' (ZTT), presenting all those early samples, analogue synths, powerful bass lines and rim-shots with aplomb. Yes, I found it led me more toward the Nils Frahm end of my record collection and away from Sleaford Mods, but this was less 'forced' and more of a gentle nudge.

The cartridge's tonal balance is extremely even, with an especially strong midrange. This makes for outstanding vocal clarity and harmonic richness. This extends down into the lower bass and especially the high-frequency range. The stereo separation and spacial properties of the cartridge is also first-rate with an ability to create a good soundstage with the majority of recordings. I expect the more high-end Analog Relax cartridges give even better separation, ensuring even large orchestral passages receive the same stereo staging treatment. Regardless of musical 'complexity', the stage depth of the EX500 is excellent.

There are two types of good cartridge at this price. The first is the 'does everything really well' class, which are inevitably well-balanced but sometimes a little too uniform for seasoned listeners. There's the 'do one thing brilliantly' squad. The EX500 is joyous exception; it does midrange brilliantly, *and* is also extremely well-balanced. That makes it a rare jewel in cartridge making!

Midband richness

If you are looking for a like-for-like Koetsu replacement, this isn't it. But, it's likely that everyone who lusted after a Koetsu back in the day already has one. What we need today is something that has the midband richness and verve of those classic cartridges with all the grace of the classics with a little more. The Analog Relax EX500 does just that. So long as your tastes don't begin and end with flat-out rock, there's something to love here. +

Price and contact details

Price: £4,998

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