

Analog Relax EX700

Japanese moving-coil artisan Yasushi Yurugi proposes 'an analogue life that will make you feel "at ease" from the bottom of your heart'. Will the EX700 set pulses racing? Review: **Ken Kessler** Lab: **Paul Miller**

Perhaps hoping to replace the much-loved but-now-in-limbo Koetsu, fellow Japanese brand Analog Relax has developed into a range of five 'artisan' moving-coil cartridges. The EX700 sits exactly in the middle, above the EX500 and below the EX1000, at a no longer shocking £7288. Stop here if you find the pricing of cartridges (and cables) has no bearing on reality, but that's now mid-priced for the high-end, whether we like it or not.

SIBLING RIVALRY

What £7288 gets you in a cartridge is exclusivity, a sense of the hand-built in terms of construction and presentation, and – all things being equal – exceptional performance. To position the EX700 above the EX500 and imbue it with next-level desirability, Analog Relax has followed the formulae employed by every cartridge manufacturer with a family of models established in ascending order. The modifications or upgrades from cartridge to cartridge have to account for a leap from the EX500's £4998 asking price, and the company is making sure you get your money's worth.

Yes, this includes the now *de rigueur* change of cantilever. We've been here

'I'd seen and heard him "solo unplugged" at Ronnie Scott's'

before in that there are entire ranges based on changing either body material [see PM's boxout, p63], cantilever material, the metal for the coils, the stylus profile or a mix of the four while the motor remains essentially the same. If you have read this far then clearly you are one of those who accepts that cantilever material is a crucial consideration. Whether there's an agreed hierarchy as to which

is more important in changing the sound – body material, cantilever material, coil wire or stylus profile – I think the jury is still out, but for me it's the stylus shape.

In the move up to the EX700, the cantilever has been changed from aluminium to solid boron, the wooden body from hard maple to the 'finest spruce' from northern Italy, the coils from high purity silver to 'pure copper' and the elliptical stylus to a line contact profile. In changing all four parameters, Analog Relax has ensured that the customer is undertaking a major, rather than merely incremental, leap. All the Analog Relax models employ the same faceted body shape. PM has pointed out that this does not make more difficult the task of installing the cartridge compared with, say, a Koetsu or Denon model with parallel sides, because the front is flat and it easily lines up in any

LEFT: Analog Relax's soft-covered case and alloy cartridge body cover offer protection when the EX700 is not mounted in an arm.

However, there is no 'in headshell' stylus guard



ABOVE: Boron cantilever is clear to see here while the coils and magnet yoke are screened from dust, and more, behind an impregnated fabric cover [see Lab Report, p65]

protractor or setup gauge. What Analog Relax needs to rethink is the protective cloth covering underneath, at the back of the cantilever, because it can hit mildly warped records if you don't set this cartridge up with surgical precision.

LOW RIDER

That is the only thing that upset an otherwise near-perfect setup regimen: four widely spaced, colour-coded pins, a flat metal top that accepts bolts with confidence to inspire a sense of security, and a visible cantilever. All of that was a doddle, but the problem is the high compliance-vs-recommended tracking force-vs-VTA [see PM's Lab Report, p65].

With the EX700 set at Analog Relax's recommended 2.2g tracking force, I could see the cartridge bottoming out because that cloth cover over the underside is simply too thick. Indeed, even though I didn't see it lift off any of my LPs, after ☞

'The EX700 employs a rigid boron cantilever with a fine diamond bonded into place via an ultra-thin "hold plate"'



CARTRIDGE

three or four had been played it picked up dust like the old Shure V-15 brush.

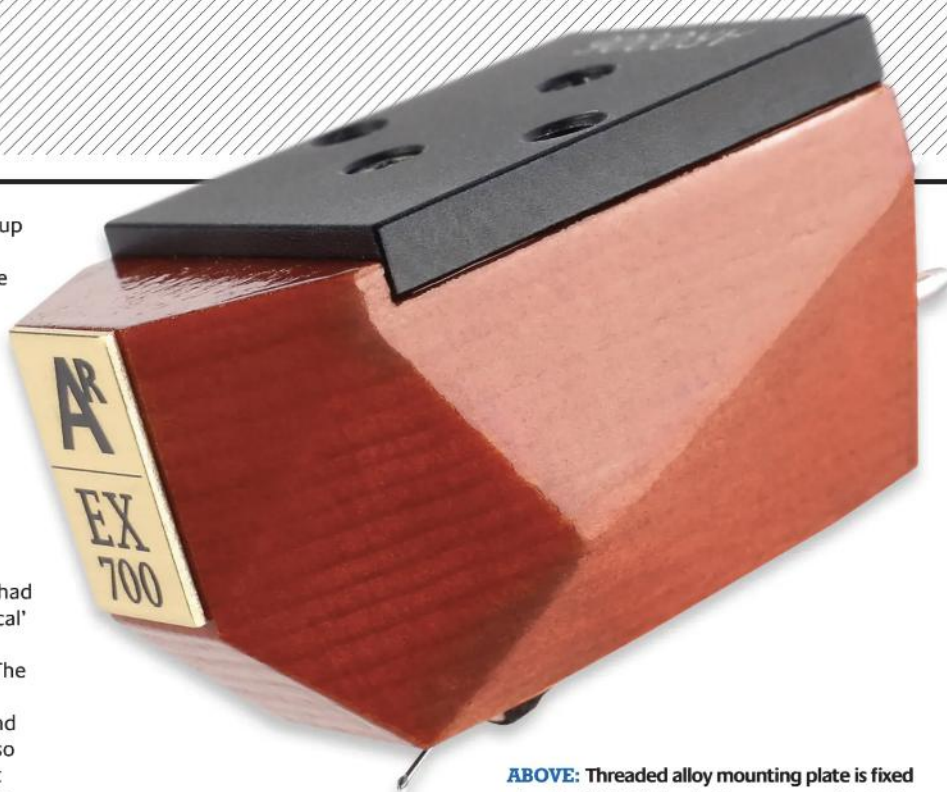
I ended up backing off the downforce to 2g while raising the rear of the arm slightly – this afforded just enough clearance to avoid the dust gathering and without any detriment to the EX700's tracking performance. Lifting the arm also tweaks the VTA, providing a boost to the MC's treble 'brilliance'.

ALL THAT JAZZ

We're a half-century away from the era where hi-fi equipment was described according to musical genre, where you had 'rock' speakers, 'jazz' speakers or 'classical' speakers. Back in the day that was a perfect selling tool because it worked. The dealer sold JBL horns to a head banger, Quad electrostatics to an opera lover and Spondors to a jazz fan. The EX700 cart so suited my repertoire of jazz albums that I gave up on the rock titles and settled in with Miles Davis, Thelonious Monk, John McLaughlin and others of that ilk.

That's not to say that it cannot 'rock' when called upon, as I found out with a Nick Lowe album, just as it certainly suited the blues when I dug out some superbly recorded Dinah Washington. But this cartridge has a distinct personality, not unlike artisan pick-ups of the past – led by Koetsu – which defined the MC genre for a whole generation of high-end consumers.

I'll admit to being concerned about the EX700 bottoming out at 2.2g so, by way of experiment, I ran it in two different turntables and three different tonearms



ABOVE: Threaded alloy mounting plate is fixed atop the EX700's faceted spruce wood body for a secure connection to the headshell. The boron cantilever is sufficiently exposed to aid cueing

at this recommended downforce. It did encounter some of the difficulties pointed out by PM so, as already mentioned, I reduced downforce by 0.2g and it changed everything. As for the partnering phono stage, I employed three – one solid-state, two valve – and in every case 100ohm proved the ideal loading.

Although I had started out with the quasi-country/rockabilly/Latina of Nick Lowe's mini-album *Love Starvation* [Yep Roc Records YEP-2646], it swiftly dawned on me that the

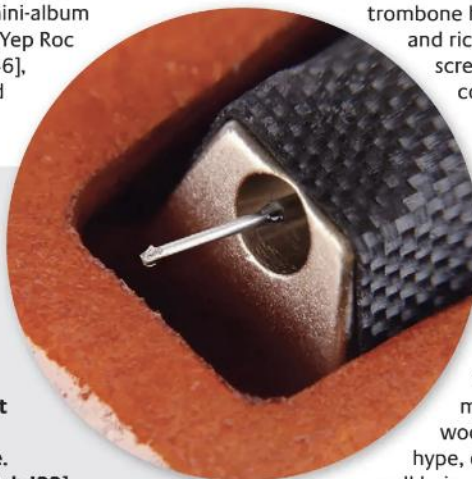
track 'Trombone' was the one that was repeatedly impressing me. The instrument features throughout and, although in a rock milieu, it remains as much a part of the jazz repertoire as trumpet or anything else with a bell at the end. In the context of the Nick Lowe songs, the trombone had a resonance, body and richness that positively screamed 'vintage moving-coil pick-up'. I loved it.

This, however, was misleading because Analog Relax cartridges are not voiced to replicate the fatness or the overly warm sound that made Koetsu so moreish and ear-friendly. The EX700 is a decidedly modern moving-coil despite the wooden body, the artisan hype, or the business about well-being, as if the cartridge is related to hot stone therapy or yoga.

SPRUCE SOUNDS

MC phono cartridges tread a tightrope – they employ a stylus and cantilever to deflect coils within a magnetic field, generating a current, but this action is never entirely free of other micro-vibrations within the mechanism itself, either from component resonances or acoustic coupling. These resonances feed back into the pick-up process, adding subtle colour to the reproduced sound. Unsurprisingly, the properties of the materials that hold and surround the mechanism can be instrumental in 'tuning' the sound character, or 'voicing', of the cartridge.

Skeletal designs from vdH [HFN Jul '17] and Lyra [HFN Feb '23] avoid bodies altogether while others employ very dense and essentially inert shells – the SLM metal composites used by Ortofon [HFN Sep '09, Oct '12, Oct '19, Jun '25] being very advanced and successful examples. Analog Relax, by contrast, crafts very individual shells that inform both the aesthetic and subjective (musical) experience. On one hand the EX700 employs a rigid boron cantilever with a fine diamond bonded into place via an ultra-thin 'hold plate' [see inset picture] while, on the other, its surrounding wooden body is fashioned from the 'finest spruce from the South Tyrol region of Northern Italy'. Likened to the top material of a violin or the soundboard of a guitar or piano, even the grade of 'Violin Varnish Finish' influences how the EX700's wood shell channels both the desired and incidental movement within its magnetic field. PM



PICK-UP WITH PRESENCE

Before leaving rock music for other pastures, I noted that the guitar work was particularly crisp but – best of all – that Lowe's distinctively warm voice came through with a presence that reminded me of the time I heard him 'solo unplugged' at Ronnie Scott's during a promo tour. As much as I've suggested this is a jazz-lover's cartridge, it's also a vocalist's cartridge. ↻

CARTRIDGE

RIGHT: Well spaced and clearly colour-coded cartridge pins make for a secure connection with your headshell leads. Although the body has numerous angles, setup and alignment is not difficult

This was rendered even more vividly by Dinah Washington in one of her forays away from jazz, *Back To The Blues* [Pure Pleasure PPAN SR25 189].

Unlike the more purist Chicago blues or gutbucket Delta blues, Dinah's take was far more uptown and included orchestral backing which did not diminish the 'bluesiness' of her vocals. If anything, it reminded me of late-1950s B.B. King albums when he was working with big bands and brass. The EX700 had so much life and (again) warmth that, as much as I didn't want to liken it too much to its 1980s Japanese antecedents, I kept drifting back to the sound of classic carts like the Goldbug Brier [HFN May '83] and Koetsu Rosewood [HFN Jun '90].

BECK AND CALL

Prior to succumbing entirely to the lure of vintage jazz, I put on John McLaughlin's *Music For Abandoned Heights* [Impex IMP6065]. Although paying homage to a soundtrack by Miles Davis from the 1950s, the album was composed for a new film coming out this year. The playing is less of the jazz which the guitarist performed with Miles than of, say, late-period Jeff Beck. Here I had to modify my impressions of the EX700 as a romantic performer and acknowledge that it had both speed and attack on McLaughlin's fiery picking. And this reassured me that backing off to 2g did not unduly compromise its tracking ability.

Next up came Thelonious Monk's *Straight No Chaser* [Impex IMP6020] and here I was focusing primarily on the piano. Again, I have one to my elbow so that I can tinkle a few keys for reference, and no, I'm not saying that my aged Chappell & Co upright has a tonal relationship to Monk's Baldwin baby grand, but it provides perspective. The Impex transfer is sensational, so I knew it was as fine a piano recording as I would find, and the entire four sides flew past before I knew it. As whoo-whoop/hippy-dippy/airy-fairy/kumbaya as the Analog Relax shtick may be, this cartridge certainly delivers involving, almost transcendent sound.



Between bouts of nostalgia for my long-lost youth and the pending centenary of Miles Davis, I couldn't resist listening again to Miles' *Sorcerer* recording [Mobile Fidelity MFSV 1-5 19] as it was the lineup I heard when I was 15. Obviously, the main draw is the peerless trumpet playing, but Ron Carter's double bass and Tony Williams' drumming were the focus for me here.

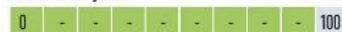
SEAL OF APPROVAL

Forget the pace-rhythm-timing (aka PRAT) which now-discredited Flat Earthers used to bellow about. If your system affects that, check your turntable speed. No, this was about mass, weight, slam – but with authenticity. It was this album even more than Monk's that had me thinking 'jazz cartridge'. Feed the EX700 through some 300B triode amps into sensitive DeVore loudspeakers [HFN Apr '21, Mar '23, Aug '23 & Mar '26], and you'd think the album was a month old. It was released in October 1967. ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

The Analog Relax EX700 isn't just a reminder of genre-focused hi-fi or vintage gear, it's also an example of a precision component that demands carefully considered matching and installation. But then doesn't being an audiophile mean surmounting challenges in the quest for superlative sound? Set-up an EX700 with due deference and you just *might* be able to retire your Koetsu Rosewood.

Sound Quality: 86%

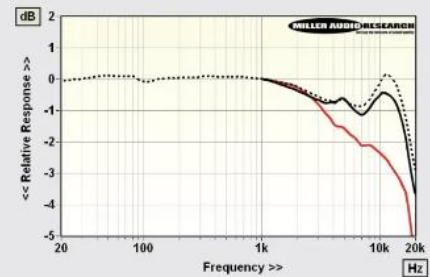


LAB REPORT

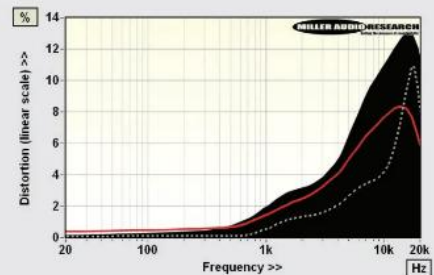
ANALOG RELAX EX700

While the EX700 is equipped with a superior boron cantilever and 'custom line contact' stylus, its response profile [Graph 1] is slightly more extended but otherwise very closely mirrors that of Analog Relax's 'starter' EX300 model [HFN Apr '25] with its alloy cantilever and elliptical diamond. The EX700's diamond is aligned to achieve a 20° VTA but, like the EX300, and even at the higher recommended 2.2g downforce, tracking is sufficient rather than super-secure, achieving 60-65µm via the left/right channels and just letting go at the penultimate +15dB groove modulation (re. 315Hz/5cm/sec) at 1.2% THD. Ideally the tracking force should be reduced to 2g – compliance is a little too high at 14cu, so the black fabric [see picture, left] touches the LP surface. The EX700's 516µV output (re. 1kHz/5cm/sec) is lower than the 616µV recorded for our EX300 but then it has fewer coil turns and a lower 4.5ohm impedance. In all likelihood, setting +65dB gain on your phono stage along with a 50-100ohm load impedance will achieve good results.

The stereo HF response [dashed trace, Graph 1] rolls away above 13kHz while the difference in presence band output on vertical (L-R) grooves versus lateral (L+R) cuts [red vs. solid black trace] will emphasise centrally-focused images over instruments and performers ranged to the left and right of the soundstage. For listeners 'of an age' the -3dB to -4dB/20kHz dip will be inaudible. Distortion, meanwhile, holds to a low <1% from 20Hz-1.5kHz [-8dB re. 5cm/sec; dashed trace, Graph 2] while the increase to ~13%/15kHz on lateral cuts [black infill, Graph 2] simply reflects the EX700's more extended response with in-phase (L+R) signals. Treat this one with care... PM



ABOVE: Freq. resp. curves (-8dB re. 5cm/sec) lateral (L+R, black) vs. vertical (L-R, red) vs. stereo (dashed)



ABOVE: Lateral (L+R, black), vertical (L-R, red), stereo (dashed) tracing and generator distortion (2nd-4th harms) vs. freq. from 20Hz-20kHz (-8dB re. 5cm/sec)

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Generator type/weight	Moving-Coil / 10g
Recommended tracking force	22mN (20-22mN)
Sensitivity/balance (re. 5cm/sec)	516µV / 0.25dB
Compliance (vertical/lateral)	14cu / 13cu
Vertical tracking angle	20 degrees
L/R Tracking ability	65µm / 60µm
L/R Distortion (-8dB, 20Hz-20kHz)	0.7-11.8% / 0.15-10.8%
L/R Frequency resp. (20Hz-20kHz)	+0.1 to -4.7dB / +0.1 to -2.9dB
Stereo separation (1kHz / 20kHz)	38dB / 24dB