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DaVinci Audio Labs Reference Grandezza Phono Cartridge

Making Transparent Musical Sense

Jonathan Valin

Just a couple of issues ago I reviewed the AAS Gabriel/DaVinci turntable with DaVinci's Grandezza tonearm (which, out of pure sloth, I've been persistently misspelling as "Grandeeza"). Part of that package included the moving-coil cartridge I'm about to talk about—the \$7300 Reference Grandezza.

Designed (like the table and arm) by DaVinci's Peter Brem, the Reference Grandezza is a very-low-output (0.17mV), very-low-internal-impedance (<3 ohms) moving coil. Its samarium-cobalt magnetic engine is built to DaVinci's specifications by the Swiss company Benz Micro; everything else is assembled by DaVinci, including the cartridge's massive (20-gram) gold-plated body in which the stylus and magnetic engine are mounted "nude."

Over the last year or two I've heard a number of cartridges that I consider world-class—the Goldfinger v2 (reviewed by me in Issue 173), the Koetsu Onyx Platinum (reviewed by me in Issue 185), and the Air Tight PC-1 Supreme (reviewed by me in Issue 190) chief among them. The Reference Grandezza now joins that select group.

To hear it at its best you really need to mount it in the DaVinci Grandezza or the Walker Black Diamond tonearm (although I would imagine it would do beautifully in any arm of sufficiently high mass and stability). More critically, you need to hear it in a system that is as utterly transparent as it is, for this is a cartridge that has next-to-no sound of its own. Indeed, mounted in the DaVinci record playing system and feeding Soudation electronics and MartinLogan CLXes, it has less "character" than any phono cartridge I've heard. It seems to sound as good or bad, as natural or artificial as the LP it is playing back, with only the slightest hint of forgiving sweetness in the treble to give away the fact that you're listening through a transducer rather than directly to what's in the grooves themselves.

As I've said about the equally transparent MartinLogan CLXes (and will say about the Soudation 700/710 amps and 720/721 preamps), the sound of next-to-nothing takes a genuine mental adjustment. We are so used to components that fall into the usual dichotomous categories (warm/cold, bright/dark, aggressive/polite, etc.) that hearing one that doesn't is unsettling. Nonetheless,

here is one that, for the most part, doesn't. A cartridge that just doesn't seem to be "there" in the way cartridges, particularly moving-coil cartridges, always are.

What this clear-as-glass vanishing act buys you is: 1) higher-fidelity timbres (with little to no color cast or warmth or coolness being added by the transducer itself, instruments sound more like themselves in tone color, assuming, of course, that they were recorded with high fidelity); 2) higher resolution (with no audible grain, darkness, or brightness obscuring or selectively exaggerating low-level detail, usually-hard-to-discern pitches, timbres, durations, and intensities are reproduced with extraordinary clarity); and 3) higher transparency to sources (records sound the way they were recorded).

In practice, this last may be a mixed blessing because poorly engineered or heavily multimed recordings will sound poorly engineered or heavily multimed (although thanks to the

Grandeza's sweetness they won't sound outright terrible). Yes, you will hear every overdub of Joni Mitchell's voice on, oh, *Blue* [Warner], but you will also hear the entire overdub sound (as I noted in my reviews of the MartinLogan CLXes and the Da Vinci record player) the way a photographic double or triple exposure looks—the spot at centerstage where Joni's overdubbed voice has been potted in will pop up distinctly, as if an oval window looking out on a different time and space has been installed in the middle of the soundstage, as, in fact, it has. (You will hear this same effect on overdubbed instrumentalists.) You will hear every lyric (or at least every lyric that *can* be heard) with newfound clarity. On a grumbly, mumbly, previously indecipherably fog-hornish Leon Redbone album like *Branch to Branch* [Warner], what this will buy you is the clear articulation of delightfully sardonic lines like this one from "Sweet Mama, Papa's Getting Mad":

*You flirted with the butcher,
You flirted with the baker,
Now, you're flirting with the undertaker.*

But you will also hear Redbone or his instrumentalists produce a cracking sound on several tracks that I used to think was mistracking but which turns out, in fact, to be the microphone preamp clipping. You will hear low notes like the plucked doublebasses that announce the rush to the finish of the last movement of Bartók's *Divertimento for String Orchestra* [Decca] as if they are in the room with you, but you will also hear the cavernous chamber in which the doublebasses were plucked sound as if it's in the room with you too, adding volume and reverberation to the pizzicato and shall brightness to the strings. In short, you may not want a cartridge that is this scrupulous.

On the other hand, if you want to hear a well-recorded piece like Bruno Maderna's *Serenata No. 2* [Hungaroton] make not just transparent sound but transparent *musical* sense, then the Reference Grandeza is your ticket to bliss. In the first section of the *Serenata*, Maderna lets the freshly sounded timbre of one instrument (like a flute) harmonize with the decaying overtones of the previously sounded timbre of another instrument (like a violin) making a kind of a gentle, magical, melting sound world in which eleven disparate instruments seemingly "complete" each other's utterances in *almost* the same voice. To appreciate this serenade-like effect, you need to be able to hear the partials of the first instrument clearly enough to appreciate that the pitches and intensities of the subsequent instrument have been carefully and deliberately set to harmonize with these overtones. The Reference Grandeza does this—beautifully. BTW, if you think that the DaVinci's transparency to sources (and musical meanings) makes it more an "analytical" than a "musical" cartridge, let me repeat: The old dichotomies just don't apply here. The Reference Grandeza sounds voluptuously beautiful on great recordings like the Maderna, and not so hot (albeit a touch forgiving) on poor ones.

Though you can't go wrong with the somewhat darker and richer Air Tight PC-1 Supreme or the more spacious, electrifying, but somewhat brighter and grainier Goldfinger v2 or the uniformly *gemütlich*, never-less-than-gorgeous-sounding Koetsu Onyx Platinum, if you prefer to hear what's actually on your records rather than a more bespoke version of same this may be the cartridge for you. It is for me. The DaVinci Reference Grandeza is my new reference. **TAS**

SPECS & PRICING

Type: Low-output moving-coil cartridge
Output: 0.17mV
Coil impedance: 3 ohms
Matching impedance: 3 ohms
Recommended stylus force: 2–2.2 grams
Weight: 20 grams
Price: \$7300

**DAVINCIAUDIO LABS
GMBH**
Derrière les Maisons
2716 Sornetan BE
Switzerland
+41 (0) 32 484 0175
da-vinci-audio.com

JV's Reference System
Loudspeakers: Magico M5, MartinLogan CLX
Full-function and linestage preamps: Solutio 720, Audio Research Reference 3, Audio Space Reference 2, Parasound JC-1
Phonostage preamps: Audio Research PH-7, Lamm Industries LP-2 Deluxe, Audio Tekne TEA-2000
Power amplifiers: Solutio 700, Audio Research Reference 610T, Lamm ML-2
Analog source: Walker Audio Proscenium Black Diamond, AAS Gabriel/DaVinci with DaVinci Grandeza tonearm

Phono cartridges: DaVinci Reference Cartridge Grandeza, Air Tight PC-1 Supreme, Clearaudio Goldfinger v2

Digital source: dCS Scarlatti, dCS Puccini, Solutio 740, ARC Reference CDB

Cable and interconnect: Tara Labs "Zero" Gold interconnect, Tara Labs "Omega" Gold speaker cable, Tara Labs "The One" Cobalt power cords, Synergistic Research Absolute Reference speakers cables and interconnects

Accessories: A/V Room-Service "Metu" Wall Panels and Corner traps, Shakti Hallographs (6), Symposium Acoustics Isis stand and Ultra platforms, Walker Prologue Reference stand, Walker Prologue amp stands, Shunyata Research Hydra V-Ray power distributor and Anaconda Helix Alpha/VX power cables, Shunyata Research Dark Field Cable Elevators, Walker Valid Points and Resonance Control discs, Odyssey RCM Mk V record cleaner, Clearaudio Double Matrix record cleaner, HiFi-Tuning silver/gold fuses

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