

Analog Relax EX300 MC cartridge

Ed Selley



Modern audio equipment is, for better or worse, heavily specification-driven. You can argue that things have improved since the early years of this century, when it became almost impossible to sell a DVD player, regardless of how good it was at playing DVDs, unless it also supported multichannel audio formats that had next to no commercial traction. Nevertheless, there is an expectation that the more you spend on a piece of equipment, the more features it should have or the greater its capability to perform its principal function.

This perception makes the Analog Relax EX300 a momentarily head-scratching device to encounter. As the 'entry-level' model of the Analog Relax range, it will still set you back over two and a half grand, and, as is often the case with the bill of materials of any phono cartridge, you might reasonably ask why. At its core, the EX300 uses an aluminium cantilever that mounts an elliptical stylus bonded to the cantilever rather than being mounted in a 'nude' fitting. It is fair to say that rather more exotic materials and design practices are available for the same money, and that the same specification can be achieved with models that cost rather less. >>



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» Nude benefits

Analog Relax argues (not without merit) that to truly reap the benefits of nude and fine-line styli, you need to put more effort into the business of alignment than some companies would have you believe. In many cases, a bonded stylus can be better aligned, and the way they achieve the bonding is rather more elegant than a single hefty shank wedging everything in place. To this end, Analog Relax uses its proprietary 'IF' adhesive, which includes ground diamond, to create a truly firm mount between the cantilever and stylus.

The cantilever is connected to a generator with 6N pure copper windings. However, the on-paper measurements are not a complete reflection of performance, with impedance quoted at a rather low 15 ohms and output as 'more than 0.5mV.' Based on levels from other cartridges here via the same multi-input phono stage, I would suggest it is not radically higher than the 0.5mV figure quoted, but still usefully healthy. These two measurements do suggest that the EX300 would be a strong contender for people using a combination of a moving-magnet phono stage and an external step-up transformer.

In keeping with some of its pricier stablemates, the body of the EX300 is made from hand-finished walnut and starts life as a solid block, which is then hand-cut to fit the generator and stylus and to give the cartridge its distinctive shape, before receiving a layer of beeswax to seal it against the outside world. I prefer the EX300's darker finish to the EX500's, and despite the two-thousand-pound price difference between the two, there is precious little difference in how they look and feel. I think the result looks elegant yet subtle.

Japanese tradition

Perhaps more importantly, the EX300 doesn't feel or install like a low-volume artisan product. It's beautifully made and finished in the great Japanese tradition, but the body is threaded (and proved perfectly amenable to the thumb-bolt-style fixings that I have come to prefer) and the pins on the back are well spaced and sensibly sized. A large, usefully protective metal stylus guard is also supplied. At no stage during testing the EX300 have I experienced any genuine sense of frustration, let alone the stomach-knotting terror that can accompany the fitting and day-to-day use of some low-volume designs.

This is not to say that the EX300 is completely free of foibles. The body is relatively tall and will benefit from

adjustable VTA on most turntables, though this is not present on all of them. It's not unmanageably heavy at 10 grams, and the tracking force of a little over 2 grams isn't too tricky to work with either. I did the bulk of listening with the EX300 installed on a Vertere SG-1 HB tonearm, and it didn't struggle at any stage. An Audio Origami PU8 was similarly accommodating.

I will confess at this point that I have been specification-driven in choosing cartridges on more than one occasion. There is something comforting about knowing you have a well-aligned line contact stylus buried deep in the groove of the record, extracting everything that lurks within. The EX300 isn't the first cartridge I've used that firmly challenges those beliefs; the Vertere Mystic I have used for some years is also an example of a bonded elliptical stylus, but it is the most profound.

This is because there haven't been many moments when the notional disadvantages of a bonded elliptical stylus have been apparent in the presentation the EX300 offers. Listen to the opening *Berlin Sunrise* on *Fink Meets the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra* [Ninja Tune], and all the tiny details of the mass of musicians playing in a way that builds from silence are apparent. There is nothing that any other cartridge in attendance (or the same track played via Roon) can find that the EX300 cannot.

Scoring

This is impressive, but it's essentially a form of running to catch up. Where the Analog Relax begins to score over rivals, even seriously talented ones, is in the way it balances tonal richness and vividness in the vocals and key instruments, with an unflinching sense of accuracy. The way it handles *In the Morning (Grandmother Song)* on Eliza Shaddad's *The Woman You Want* [Rosemundy] is truly outstanding. This is not a track that needs embellishment; Shaddad's genuine grief is there for all to hear. What the Analog Relax does with exceptional effectiveness is capture that emotional content and deliver Shaddad as a living, breathing presence standing between the speakers. There is a balance between something sounding real and sounding unnaturally hyperreal, and the EX300 threads it perfectly. Once again, the way it builds from silence to the track's crescendo is absolutely effortless, never sounding anything other than completely in control.

No less impressive to me is that this has been achieved without leaving the EX300 sounding all at sea when the tempo increases and the big electronic noises come out. »



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» The eponymous debut from Charlotte De Witte [KNTXT] rarely strays below 140 BPM and is intended to hit hard and keep on hitting. The EX300 relays those deep bass impacts with impressive agility while ensuring that fine detail and the overall stereo image remain extremely convincing. Then, when Lisa Gerrard of Dead Can Dance fame pops up in *After the Fall*, the EX300 ensures that her distinctive and spellbinding vocal style is faithfully reproduced. There are cartridges at this price that can reach deeper still, but you would need to be listening side by side to hear the difference.

Balancing act

It's worth noting that, while extremely capable, the EX300 is not a completely transparent device. Moving it from the Vertere to the GyroDec and PU8 combo allows it to continue performing admirably, maintaining a balanced set of abilities, but there is an indisputable sense that some of the sheer stereo width and exceptional resolving power of the PU8 have been gently blunted by the EX300's arrival. Cartridges are transducers and will exert more influence over the sound of your system than most other components, but the EX300 will have more of an effect than some alternatives.

I suspect that the people who fall for the EX300 won't be unduly bothered by that, though, because the Analog Relax makes no secret of its presentation. There have been moments while testing it when the business of critical

listening has gone out of the window because I have been entirely lost in what it is doing. I have been consistently impressed by how many of the qualities that so impressed me about the EX500 have remained in a design that is getting on for half the price. It is an impressive lesson that there is a story behind the on-paper specifications that can go against preconceived notions, and that sometimes we are better off having a listen and deciding on merit. +

Technical specifications

Type: Moving coil cartridge

FEATURES

Walnut body

6N Copper coils

Bonded elliptical stylus

Aluminium Cantilever

Origin: Japan

Weight: 10g less fittings

Price: £2,698

Manufacturer Analog Relax

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