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RAY SAMUELS AUDIO SHELTER 90X AND MICROMAGIC MAGIC DIAMOND CARTRIDGES

Equipment report by Wayne Garcia | Dec 09th, 2008

Shelter's 90X has deservedly garnered reams of praise from the audiophile press for its outstanding performance and relatively affordable price. (At \$2700 it is Shelter's top model and competes with moving-coils at the highest levels.)

Another cartridge, albeit one at nearly double the cost, has been generating its own buzz for a while, and that's the Magic Diamond from the Swiss maker Micromagic.¹ Since AXISS distributes both in the U.S., and since I'd been using the Shelter on my Tri-Planar/Redpoint rig for many months, AXISS' Arturo Manzano and I agreed that I should also try out the Magic Diamond. The result was a fascinating look at two cartridges, each with strengths and tradeoffs that practically mirror each other.

As Jonathan Valin noted in last year's Golden Ear and Product of the Year Awards, Shelter's 90X combines transient speed with rich and fully articulated timbres, which reach deep into the bass. So, for example, if you were to put on a fine jazz record, like The Sonny Clark Memorial Quartet's Voodoo [Black Saint], the Shelter is going to fully flesh out this recording's huge, warm-sounding bottom registers. From Ray Drummond's bass to Bobby Previte's drums and Wayne Horvitz's piano, the 90X puts meat on the bones in a way that few moving-coil cartridges can. And yet that meat isn't mere fat— all weight and no definition. No, the Shelter brings plenty of muscle and definition to each of these instruments, with a body, power, and all-enveloping warmth that border on the sensual. It does the same with higher-register instruments, too: John Zorn's screaming, skronking alto sax, Previte's cymbals, the piano's treble range—all display the body of the real things, and yet nothing lags or gets masked by sheer power. Like one of those great syrah's from the Northern Rhône, the 90X is loaded with finesse and complexity, and yet its bigness can wow you.



By contrast, and while we're on the wine analogy, the Micro Magic is more Burgundian. A few seconds is all it takes before this cartridge displays its refined nature, its touch of class. Where the Shelter makes Voodoo tremendously exciting and almost intoxicatingly rich, the Micro Magic brings forth subtler distinctions. The most fleeting events—a barely tapped rim shot, softly swooshed hi-hat, or a ride cymbal's decaying shimmer, leaving its sonic trails floating in air just a wee bit longer—come across as closer to the real things. Zorn's alto really wails (he rides the edges here), and the Magic never gets flustered, never cracks or gets harsh. Where the 90X brings a hint of a hooded quality to his horn, the Magic never does. Along with this refinement, though, the Magic can lay a most solid foundation. Bass notes, while exquisitely defined, are not as rich as they are with the Shelter, and yet they remain as rooted as an ancient oak. But while the Shelter shows almost reckless disregard for any and all dynamic extremes, the Magic holds back a bit, is so controlled as to be almost buttoned-down- sounding.

On a rock record like the Wilco, the Magic is notably beautiful. It brings out gorgeous textures from the band's multi-layered instruments—ringing acoustic and electric guitars, organ, piano, complex drum patterns, even a simple bass line. By contrast, the Shelter is not as defined and inherently lovely, but it's got more rhythmic drive, more of the music's pulse.

Because the Magic is so refined, natural, and lovely sounding, with less of the rollin' and tumblin' rock and jazz enthusiasts may prefer, classical music would seem to be its home court. And indeed, with the Mahler Third [Horenstein/LSO, Nonesuch] the Magic came across as incredibly effortless and easy, with a terrific sense of transparency that allows you to hear deep into the orchestra, and little if any sense of electromechanical detritus around the players. There's great detail and clarity, yet not a hint of sterility or other hi-fi artifacts. The symphony's wide dynamic range was impressive in scale, massed strings truly beautiful, shimmering in unison to Mahler's passionate score, while the many and brief solo passages (French and English horns, oboe, a hesitant violin, or the softest tap on a tympani) emerged from their own specific spaces, against a deeply ambient background.

By now you can probably guess how the Shelter "interpreted" this piece. It wasn't as detailed or as exquisitely beautiful, but it was more dynamically explosive (as heard in the final movement's tympani thwacks and brass choirs). But if the Shelter's soundstage is wider, the Magic's is deeper; and while the Shelter is the more dramatic performer, it can't ride the music's most rolling dynamic waves the way the Magic can.

And so it goes, from Nirvana's Unplugged [Geffen] to Starker's famous Bach Suites [Mercury/Speaker's Corner], the Shelter is more sinewy, funky, less pretty, and more exciting; the Magic is sophisticated, seductively beautiful, and more detailed. Different strokes, folks.

High-end audio is in the midst of another one those occasional "golden" periods where design advancements, better component parts, the birth of new companies, and the rejuvenation of the old guard (witness Audio Research's newest Reference gear as reviewed by Jonathan Valin in our last issue) are resulting in a plethora of exciting new products. And yet, if anything, today's offerings are more diverse than ever, which just goes to show that there are any number of ways to reach the absolute sound.