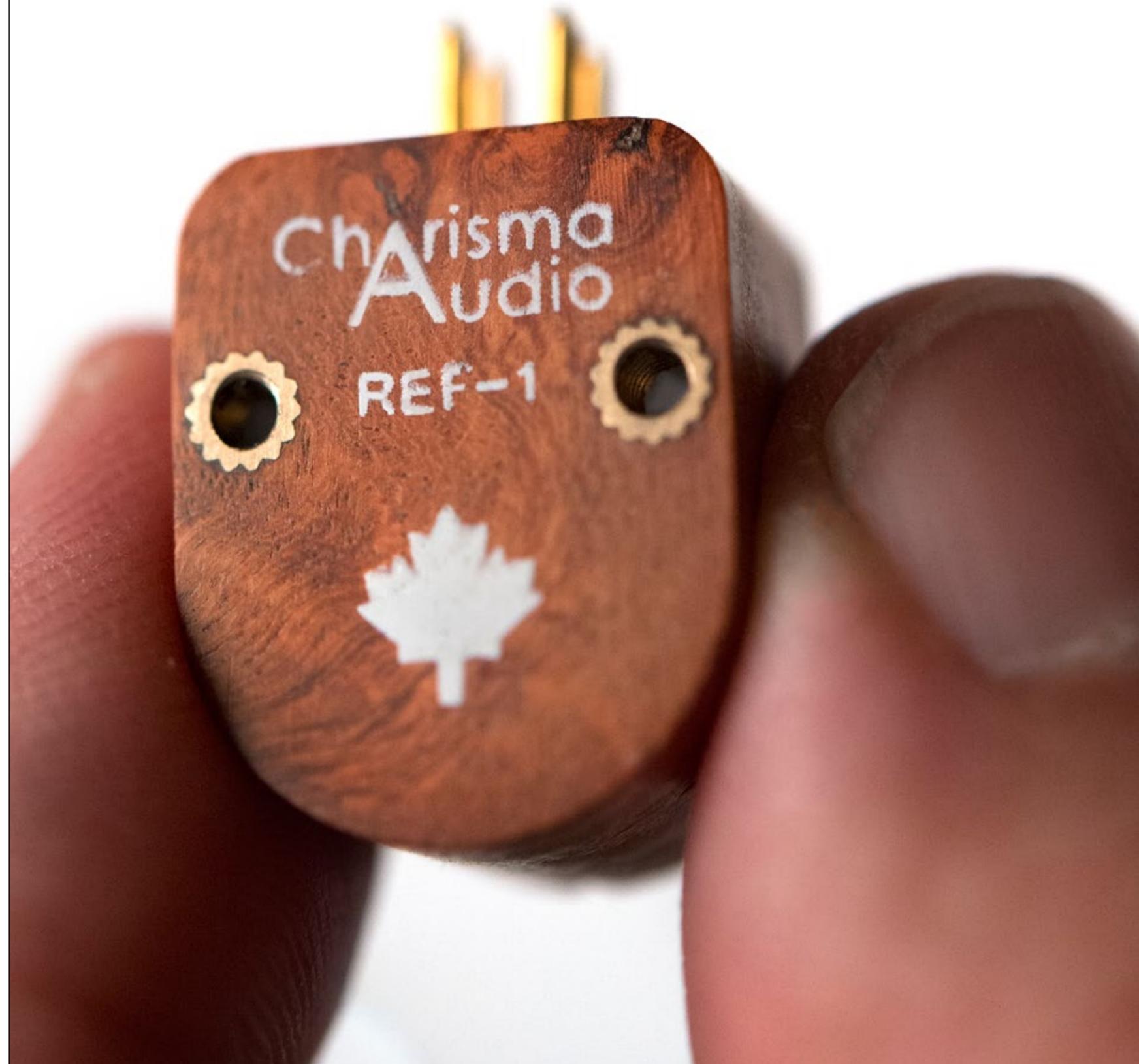


Charisma Audio Reference One and Two Cartridges

By Richard H. Mak

Canadian audio manufacturers are no strangers to *TONEAudio*. From exotic turntables to speakers, we have reviewed Canadian-made gear in all equipment categories, ranking high in their class in quality and performance. Yet they have never really made a serious effort at a phono cartridge. Other than a gentleman briefly marketing a Japanese cartridge under the brand name “Shinon” in the early '80s, there has not been a single brand of cartridge from Canada. This changed in 2013, when Bernard Li, president of Charisma Audio, turned his attention to phono cartridges.

The first thing you see when you remove the the cartridge from its snappy wooden box is the white Canadian maple leaf logo printed on top, paying proud homage to its home. Li emphasizes that these cartridges are *not* rebadged OEMs from abroad. The bulk of the design, engineering and quality control work is done in Canada and is declared thusly on the “country of origin” box on the customs documents. Li meticulously specifies everything from body and cantilever material, right down to the number of coil windings.



A one and a two...

The craftsmanship in these wooden bodies is extraordinary at this price, reminding one of more expensive models. The \$1,975 Reference One is housed in an Amboyna burl body, while the \$2,695 Reference Two is a semi-nude design housed in Bocote wood. Li points out that the strongest wood does not always produce the best sound and he's chosen these body materials for their specific density and bending strength (modulus of rupture), aided by his panel of trusted audiophiles.

Cantilever materials are given the same scrutiny, choosing ruby as it is hard enough to maintain rigidity and light enough to have a quick transient response. In this case, minimizing the diameter to a mere .29mm. The specially formulated rubber suspension will not harden with age or humidity changes, assuring long life. Lastly, the cross-wound coils use single crystal ultra high purity copper, and both have an output of .4mv, making them compatible with MC phono stages having 60dB or more of gain.

Li's goal is to make a tonally neutral cartridge and while he feels accuracy is important, he feels it can be taken too far, producing a cartridge that ends up being cold and analytical, like turning the sharpness of your TV to the max. Not enough and the opposite occurs, resulting in a laid-back sound, overly colored at its worst.

Listening sessions began with the cartridges mounted on a 9.5" Jelco tonearm and a Michell Engineering Gyro Dec turntable. True to Bernard's design goals, the Reference One is quite neutral sounding, reminiscent of my experience with the Ortofon Per Winfeld cartridge, with the midband a tad warmer than the Per Winfeld – almost like a Benz Micro Ruby, but not as much as a Koetsu. The manual suggests a very conservative 50 hour break in period, as straight out of the box both of these cartridges lack the last bit of rhythm, excitement, and a sense of openness.



Time marches on

After playing the first 20 LPs, fine tuning the vertical tracking angle to a level slightly higher than normal (18°–20°), with the tail of the tonearm pointing higher than front, the sound opens up and blooms nicely. After break in, the Reference One does not change tonally, but the excitement and liveliness improves dramatically, with the lowest frequencies tightening up and the top end becoming more extended. Optimum tracking force was 1.95g on both the One and Two, well within the range specified in the owner's manual.

A Lyra Delos cartridge mounted on the exact same 9.5" Jelco tonearm sitting beside the Reference One on the same table proves interesting. Alabama Shakes lead singer Brittany Howard's voice on their *Sound and Color* album projects with warmth and intimacy, somewhere between Prince and Bobby McFerrin. Further comparisons reveal the Lyra's reproduction of the vocals to be leaner and cleaner with more ambience and HF extension than the Charisma, but the biggest difference between the two is the focus of the tonal sweet spot.

If you want clarity and sharper lines, you will love the Delos. If you want warmer mids and fuller bass, the choice would be the Reference One. Bass-heavy tracks is where the fun begins with the Reference One. The ever popular classic, *Dark Side of the Moon* is immediately telling with the Canadian contender rendering the heartbeats in the beginning of the record with prodigious pounding, as you'd expect – yet bigger, fatter, and with more reverberation than the Lyra. This same heartbeat has crisper lines and better defini-

tion via the Lyra Delos, but with less weight. Enjoyable with both cartridges, again the Delos is more clinical, with the Reference One warmer and more full of body.

On Rosa Passo & Ron Carter's album *Entre Amigos*, the double bass which sets the mood for the entire song, "Insensatez," is truly where the Reference One excels. The rhythmic pace and musical flow of the song would be undermined if the plucking of the bass strings were any less affirmative, or the bass notes any less extended. Image size is projected correctly, with just enough resonance to make the double bass feel real, but not so much that it becomes boomy or voluptuous – a tough dance to follow that the Reference One aces.

So which one do you want?

How does the Reference One perform in comparison with its more costly sibling, the Reference Two? Surprisingly, the Reference Two carries almost remarkably similar tonal characteristics as the Reference One, but sweeter, more natural and with a slightly warmer tone. You also get more of everything, as beautifully demonstrated in Oscar Peterson's *Night Train* album. The small number of instruments in this jazz album makes it easy for each instrument to stand out. With the Reference Two, mid range carried more articulation and definition; bass goes deeper and is more refined; and the overall sound exhibits a higher contrast and is less compressed. The biggest difference is with the piano which appears more velvety on the hammer, and with more body, as if the piano has gone one size up. (continued)



Rachmaninoff's *Symphonic Dances* on Reference Recording, as directed by Eiji Que, reveals the subtle difference between the two cartridges in terms of sound staging. The Reference Two presents the orchestra with a larger soundstage, projecting a greater sense of width and depth; instruments also carried more weight which makes the performance ever more realistic.

Moving onto symphonic music on an even larger scale, Beethoven's *Symphony No. 9* on RCA, with Fritz Reiner directing the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, is a perfect example of a performance which captures all the qualities that constitute the essence of this historic masterpiece. From the sheer

size and scale of the orchestra and the concert hall, to the soul-captivating chorus of the "Ode to Joy" final theme, the entire recording will put the best of cartridges through an ultimate test on every imaginable criteria for judging a cartridge as well as an audio system. Both the Reference One and Reference Two fare remarkably well, keeping up with the right tempo and rhythmic pace of Reiner. Neither cartridge ever sounds harsh or sibilant. On demanding passages, however, the Reference Two fares better than the Reference One by offering more resolution, better separation on the mass strings and bass drums, as well as in the all-important chorus finale. *(continued)*

Where Have all the Good Stereos Gone?



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Two great Canadians indeed

The Reference One and the Reference Two cartridges both give involving performances, but neither represents the last word on the subject when it comes to dynamic contrast and transient response, as it is with all cartridges in this price category. Percussive instruments are well rendered on the Reference Two, but lack the chest pounding impact of the higher priced cartridges such as the Phasemation PP1000. Mass strings and choruses are not harsh or sibilant, but lack the cutting-edge spatial precision, separation and clarity of the Lyra Kleos.

Bernard Li tells us that the Reference Two is not the end of his analog journey and that another cartridge – with a square wound coil generator – is on the drawing board, promising more resolution and dynamic contrast. Li's hope is that it will be released in the latter part of 2016. Watch for a review as soon as it is available.

As a proud supporter of Canadian audio, I had to purchase the review sample of the Reference One, but wherever you hail from, if your taste mirrors mine, you will be just as proud to add it to your analog arsenal. ●

The Charisma Audio Reference One and Two Phono Cartridges

MSRP: \$1,975 and \$2,695

MANUFACTURER

Charisma Audio

CONTACT

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PERIPHERALS

Turntable

Michell Engineering Gyrodec

Tonearm

Jelco SA-250

Phonostage

iFi iPhono

Amplification

McIntosh MC275 amplifier/
C2200 preamplifier

Speakers

Focal Electra 1028 Be

