



Charisma Audio MC-1 moving coil cartridge

by Jimmy Hughes

We all know high-end moving coil pickup cartridges tend to be expensive – sometimes ruinously so. But, a really exceptional MC pickup calls for precision micro engineering, top quality ingredients, inspired design, plus a certain indefinable *je ne sais quoi*...

Charisma Audio's MC-1 cartridge isn't exactly cheap, but it's certainly not stratospherically priced. It features an open-construction alloy body, and delivers an output voltage of about 0.4mV at 3.54cm/s. It weighs in at a substantial 13.6g, and will therefore benefit from a tonearm having a fairly heavy counterweight. The extra body mass is deliberate, and helps impart greater stability: something enhanced by the wide body shape. It also reduces resonances, resulting in a more neutral sound. The 'open' nature of the body helps avoid cavity resonances, but leaves the coils exposed. So, a degree of care is needed when handling. But in truth you'd need to be fairly careless and heavy-handed to do damage.

The cantilever is made from annealed INOX steel, and the stylus is a line contact nude diamond. Dynamic compliance is given as 15µM/nM, and the suggested tracking force is 1.9g +/- 0.1g. At 315Hz, tracking ability is rated at 80µM.

Recommended loading falls between 100 Ohms and 1k Ohms, and the claimed frequency response goes from 20Hz to 20kHz, +/- 1dB.

The MC-1 delivers a sound that combines clarity and fine detail, with excellent neutrality and an attractive tonal bloom. It has that relaxed stability and sense of authority you expect from the best pickups, sounding solid and focused, without seeming closed-in or constrained. Bass was solid and full, while the upper frequencies seemed airy and spacious.

I was immediately impressed by the way the cartridge revealed tiny nuances of tone colour and dynamics. It delivers a finely shaded sound that is at once satisfyingly analytical and detailed, yet natural and real. Tonally, the sound is not overly rich or warm, yet neither is it cool and acidic. There's a certain 'rightness' about the MC-1 that's hugely beguiling.

In terms of clarity, focus, and tonality, the MC-1 exhibits all the qualities of a thoroughbred pickup. It easily stands comparison with some of the best pickups out there. But while

I can't truthfully say it beats all comers, I think you'll find it's only truly bettered by the really exotic alternatives on the market – and at a price that's (probably) disproportionate to the degree of improvement offered.

Sonically, it offers a nice compromise between the warmth and euphonic richness of, say, a Koetsu, and the cool slightly distanced analytics of, say, a Lyra. Surface noise was low, and the impression created was one of fluid musicality allied to stability and security – like the best CD player you never heard. It's also a good tracker, and even known difficult LPs were handled with ease.

For my money, good tracking ability is vitally important. Having grown thoroughly used to the sheer consistency of CD, I'm not tolerant of vinyl's 'dark' side – be it excessive surface noise or sudden breakup/distortion during loud passages, and at end of side. Anecdotally at least, these things are getting worse with new vinyl; the combination of old pressing plants and the upturn in LPs fortunes has made for some relatively poor albums. But fortunately the MC-1 sounds impressively secure and stable, and seems able to ride the grooves with complete assurance.

It doesn't seem to be one of those pickups that's terribly sensitive to dust; you're not forced to keep cleaning the stylus due to dust build up. There's plenty of clearance between the body and the disc surface, so warped or dished LPs should not cause any problems. The cantilever is quite long, so cueing tracks is made easier; it means the stylus tip is quite visible.

The MC-1 is capable of great subtlety and delicacy too. It offers that winning combination of relaxed assertiveness only top-notch vinyl seems to deliver. The sound is immediate, without seeming aggressively forceful or unpleasantly forward. At the same time, there's an abundance of fine detail that 'tells' in a very beguiling manner.

Stereo separation is likewise wide and stable, while soundstaging is broad and (on the right record) vivid and holographic. When you factor in the relatively reasonable selling price of the cartridge, such qualities make it something of a bargain. You'll have to pay a lot more to get better performance, and even then it's unlikely you'll get superior results in every single aspect.

You've always had to pay dearly for the best quality cartridges. And while the Charisma MC-1 isn't exactly inexpensive, it's very reasonably priced in terms of the performance offered. Partner it sympathetically, and your vinyl collection will sound totally transformed and magnificent. And that's a promise! +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Cartridge Weight: 13.6 g
Cantilever: annealed INOX steel
Stylus: line contact nude diamond 5 x 150 µm
Vertical Tracking Angle: 20 degrees
Coil: pure iron crossed-coil with 6N OCC copper
Output Voltage: 0.4 mV at 3.54 cm/sec.
Internal Impedance: 15 ohms
Frequency Response: 20 – 20,000 Hz ± 1 dB
Channel Balance: better than 0.5 dB
Channel Separation: better than 30 dB
Dynamic Compliance: 15 µm/mN
Recommended Loading: 100 – 1,000 ohms
Recommended Tracking Force: 1.9 g ± 0.1 g
Tracking Ability at 315 Hz / 2 g: 80 µm
Recommended Tonearm Mass: medium
Break-in Period: 50 hours
Price: £750
Manufactured by: Charisma Audio
URL: www.charismaaudio.com

Distributed by: Real Hi-Fi

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