



AUDIOGON

Review: Clearaudio Maestro Cartridge

To put this review of the Maestro into perspective, I had tried out a couple of MM's – Garrett P77 and Empire 1080 LT after following some of the input on Raul's now gargantuan MC/MM thread. In brief while I thought that for the money these two cartridges delivered good results, after extended listening to both cartridges to my ears they fell short of delivering the realism I got with MC's, most notably the Transfiguration Orpheus and later Phoenix models (it must be said at far greater prices). I experimented with set up and followed Raul's advice to good effect with the Empire. The Empire sounded the better balanced of the two but lacked that "you are there" sensation I got with the MC's. This was particularly so with live recordings where the lack of ambient detail robbed the recordings of the atmosphere I had experienced with the Transfigurations. After the suspension of my Orpheus mysteriously collapsed, I went down the MM path as I really didn't want to spend nor at the time could afford to spend thousands on another Orpheus, or other top MC's that were in the mix. In the end I settled on a used Phoenix, apparently with no more than 50 hours on it and this improved in my system for another 50 hours. I had this mounted primarily in a Tri Planar on a GPA Monaco but also used it in my Basis Debut Vacuum/Vector 4 combination. It sounded excellent in both systems.

Due to some pressing financial issues revolving about a new business venture I was forced to sell my beloved Debut and as the new owner wanted a cartridge to go with it I sold him the Phoenix. This left me with only the MM's to play with and while I was going to use some of the proceeds of the sale of the Debut to get an Orpheus L or something in that league I balked at the cost and I thought I would give a well regarded and currently manufactured MM a go. I got a reasonable price on a new Maestro wood body that many rate very highly and I thought I could sell it on for about the same

price if I did not like it. I would then go to plan B and reluctantly shell out the ready for a top MC and be done with MM's.

I mounted the Maestro on the Tri Planar and aligned it using Yip's excellent Mint LP protractor. The long cantilever on the Maestro makes setting the cart far easier than is the case the Transfigurations and many other cartridges. I set the arm tube to parallel with the record surface (neutral VTA) and set the VTF at the recommended 2.2 grams. I loaded it at 200 pF on my Audia Flight phono. While the data sheet that comes with the Maestro recommends 220 pF – 270 pF I presume this means inclusive of the cable capacitance but this is not stated. The AF allows for loading at 50 pF increments up to 600 pF. I found 150 to be just a little too lean and 250 just a little too closed in. At 200 pF in my system the balance was very good indeed. Being very light, I could not use the weight on the anti-skate that I had used on the minimum setting with the Phoenix. I removed the weight and gave it a go with no (or at least very minimal) anti-skate as I have not removed the mechanism and it does have the mass of the bar sans weight. In any event it tracks beautifully without any anti-skate and I have experienced no mis-tracking on any LP. As an aside I removed the damping trough from the Tri Planar soon after I bought it. For those familiar with the Tri Planar I have left the nylon string of the anti skate mechanism in place as I thought it might be less likely to resonate left this way. Ultimately the anti skate mechanism may need to be removed.

I now have over 50 hours on the Maestro with the greatest change being evident at around the 44 hours mark when it really hit its straps but right out of the box the Maestro sounded excellent. It has a very weighty presentation and images have real body. Instruments and voices are placed very precisely in the sound stage and in this respect it was better than the Phoenix and the Orpheus (non L version). I held off listening to live performances until the Maestro had reached 10 hours as this had been the Achilles heal of the other two MM's I tried. I needn't have been so apprehensive as the detail retrieval of the Maestro was well ahead of the Empire and Garrott. As an example the live performance "Friday night in San Francisco" featuring Al Di Meola, John McLaughlin and Paco De Lucia sounded great via the Phoenix but spectacular via the Maestro. Very dynamic! This dynamic nature is in my view a characteristic of good MM's but in the Maestro's case the added detail adds significantly to the mix.

Bass performance of the Empire in particular was not up to what I had experienced with MC's. This is not the case with the Maestro. Bass is full and deep yet well controlled and articulate. I think, however this is where the Monaco/Tri Planar exhibits one of its key strengths as it does not do bloat. Bass performance surpassed the Phoenix in this particular combination. I cannot say that other listeners on other systems will necessarily have the same experience and I could imagine the Maestro's bass being seen as over blown with some systems.

I'm a big jazz fan and horns sound spot on via the Maestro with sax reproduced with full body and trumpets with that bite I like to hear. Not hot, just the way trumpets sound. I'm also a fan of jazz guitar and Kenny Burrell has never sounded better!

So, it's pretty clear that I am sold on the Maestro. I think it is a superb cartridge. Past the 50 hours mark I now listen without thinking about the system. I can simply immerse myself in the music. The table/arm/phono stage and cartridge are all doing their job and I think it is probably in that order. Synergy is all important and I think I have excellent synergy with this vinyl play back chain.

In absolute terms I believe the top MC's do retrieve more detail from the discs than does the Maestro but the Maestro mixes a high level of detail with great dynamics and impact and outstanding placement of performers within the sound stage to deliver a very well rounded performance at a significantly lower RR price point. The Orpheus L, Titan I, Ortofon MCA90 etc. may well outperform the Maestro but at what cost? More than I am willing to spend at the moment, particularly when I am enjoying what I am hearing so much. I do not in the least feel short changed and this review is not a post purchase rationalization. I was quite prepared to sell it on but I won't be doing that.

The Maestro has made a believer out of me. An exceptional MM can mix it with the best MC's at a very much lower cost. Its cost is still significant but not absurd and most importantly unlike with some other highly rated MM's you don't have to scour the world to maybe pick up a NOS or lightly used version which may or may not work. You can just go down to the shop and buy one and it's under guarantee!

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