

Cartridge or Turntable?

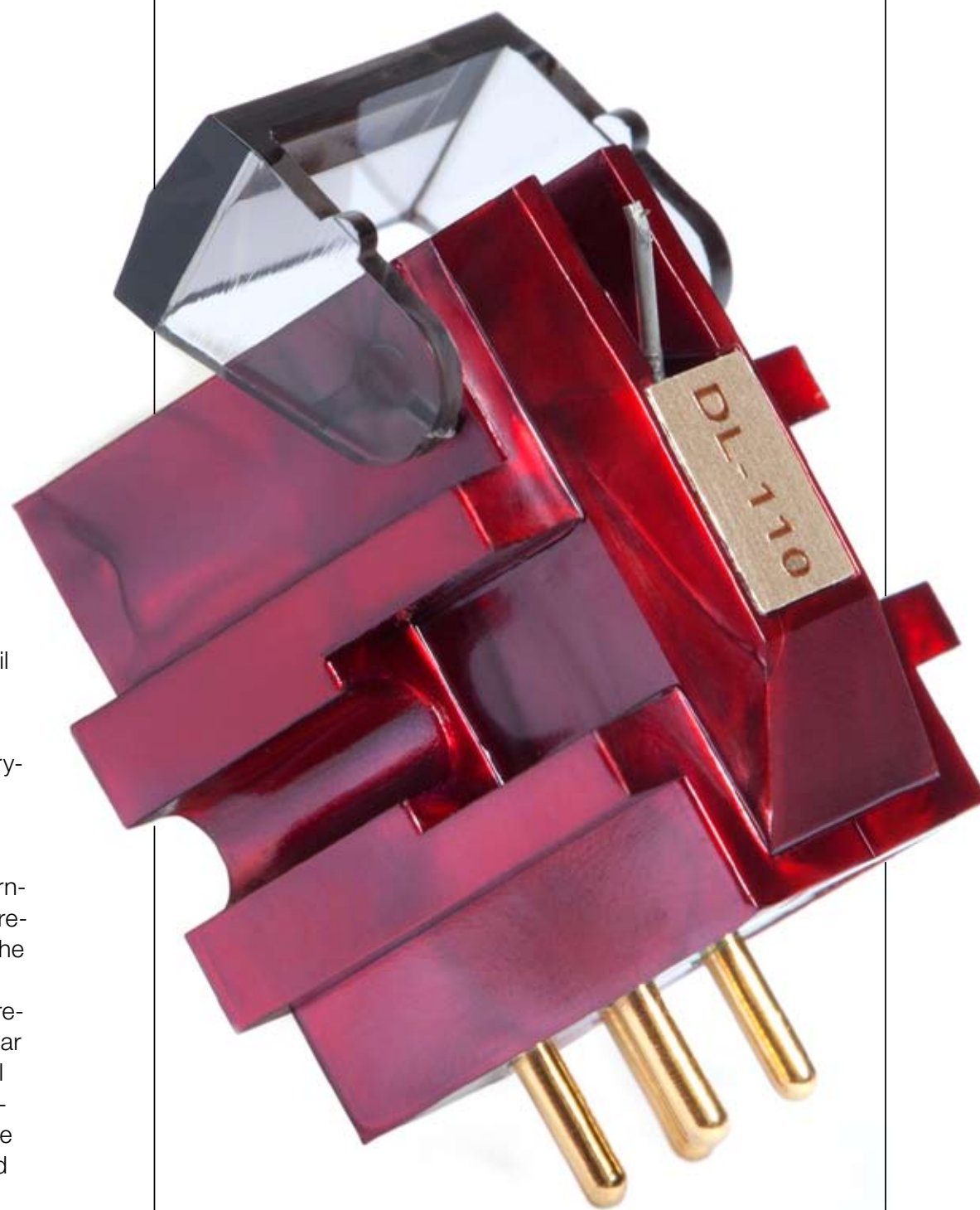
By Jeff Dorgay

The budding turntable enthusiast is greeted with a handful of obvious choices when it comes to \$100-\$150 safe-bet phono cartridges: the Shure M97xe, Grado 2M Red, and Ortofon Red (standard on the Project Carbon turntable). However, the \$139 Denon DL-110 and \$100 Nagaoka MP-110 MM represent two alternate courses of action. Neither breaks the bank, and both provide very good sound, albeit with a different flavor.

Each cartridge got auditioned on an AVID Volvere SP turntable with SME 3009 tonearm so that the headshells could be easily moved to a Technics SL-1300, recently acquired on eBay for under \$100. A last swap to the Rega RP6 was made as an interim step between the other 'tables. Initial listening in my reference system showed just how much performance the models offer in a situation wherein the 'table and phono preamplifier were not limiting factors. An Audio Research REF Phono 2 was used for comparisons between the SL-1300 and the AVID; final listening was performed with a \$175 Rega Fono Mini preamp.

The change from the AVID to the Technics (and back) repeatedly convinced me the turntable is the most influential contributor to the sound of your system until you advance up the food chain. Advice to the value-conscious analog enthusiast: Pick a great inexpensive phono cartridge and don't even think about spending more money until you have a better turntable and phonostage.

Also, even if you have an entry-level turntable, master its set-up procedure. Knowledge is power. You can build upon these skills, should you ever upgrade your turntable. Even a \$100 eBay special responds well when you optimize the cartridge. All you need is a MoFi Geo Disc (\$49), patience, and a record or two you can afford to wear out. I suggest something like Earl Klugh's *Finger Paintings* or Spandau Ballet's *True* on MoFi. They're pressed on JVC "super vinyl" and you can play the hell out of them without much wear. I use Gino Vanelli's *Powerful People*, which is \$4 in mint shape.



Denon DL-110

A high-output MC design, the DL-110 will integrate into your current system with out a moving-coil step-up device. Output is claimed to be 1.6mv, but I suspect it is higher, as there was minimal signal drop from the 5mv- and 6mv-output MM cartridges in use before the Denon. The DL-110 also works well with the standard 47k impedance loading of nearly all MM inputs, regardless of phonostage.

The DL-110 acquits itself as a good tracker. Vide, the high-amplitude screams in "Never" from the *Grape Jam* album are always tough to capture. The record's open, bluesy feel is punctuated by fairly loud vocal excursions that often flummox a poor setup. The music's wide, super-stereo sound also plays to the Denon's other strength: excellent separation.

Not as sumptuous as the Denon DL-103r, the DL-110 nonetheless offers a very palatable midrange and a smooth top end that is a smidge rolled off, but in a good way, like a Dynaco Stereo 70. Depending on your system, the slightly soft/romantic high-frequency response may get dull if you have a Technics or Dual 'table with stock wiring, as they're notoriously dark.

The DL-110's bass response is adequate but not terribly weighty, and yet, the unit shines due to its overall balance. This cartridge has such wonderful balance between the top and bottom of the frequency range (along with excellent tonality), you don't really sense the lack of weight. No, you won't really care, and if you pair it with a vintage system that's a little warm and perhaps tubey, you'll also never notice. *(continued)*

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FEATURE

of changing the loading to 68k or even 100k, you will be rewarded with a smoother, more open high-frequency response.

The MP-110 comes across grain-free and sounds much more refined than most of the other inexpensive MM designs I've experienced. Tracking is nearly equivalent to that of the Denon, with less low-frequency energy. A few of my favorite rock records from Pink Floyd, the Who, and Led Zeppelin lack some punch and immediacy.

What the MP-110 loses in weightiness, it gains in midrange smoothness. Zipping through Pure Pleasure Records' pressing of Cassandra Wilson's *Blue Light Until Dawn* proves sultry and inviting, with a round, warm midrange. But the Gibson SG guitar on the *Grape Jam* is not as dynamically convincing. The MP-110 is a great all-rounder, but does not offer the dynamic swing of several cartridges I've heard in this price range.

Rubber Biscuit?

Elwood Blues once said, "What do you want for nothing—rubber biscuit?" And while it might be easy to think that you need a foot-high pile of twenties to get great sound, these cartridges are great performers—and very reasonably priced.

Where the Denon DL-110 might suit a slightly more resolving system that can take advantage of its extra dynamics, the MP-110 would feel more at home with a system built around a solid-state integrated to tame some of the brightness inherent to its design. ●



Nagaoka MP-110

The moving-magnet Nagaoka MP-110 also features an elliptical stylus design. Its higher (than the Denon) output of 5mv shouldn't overload even the oldest receivers, as most of the cartridges produced back in the 60s and 70s featured output in the 5-7mv range. Suggested loading is 47k. However, the cartridge feels a little flat there, and if you have a way