

Absolute ANALOG



Correct Sound and the Conundrum of Neutrality

Ortofon MC Windfeld Phono Pickup

Paul Seydor

The Danish company Ortofon, which coined its name from a combination of the Greek words, *orto*, meaning “correct,” and *fon*, meaning “sound,” has been manufacturing phono pickups since the introduction of vinyl records in 1948. About a decade later, it introduced the legendary SPU, the first stereo pickup in which a pair of crossed coils moved within a magnetic field. Ortofon had already pioneered moving-coils in its mono cartridges, but it was the SPU that drew the line in the sand, soon dividing audiophiles into two camps: moving coils versus moving magnets, the latter for their tracking ability, flat frequency-response, natural tonal-balance, and low coloration; the former for their transparency, resolution, detail, and lack of grain. But despite branching out to offer several excellent moving magnets, pickups for DJ use, and even such mass-market products as P-mounts, Ortofon never wavered from its conviction that the moving coil is *the* route to “correct sound.”¹

¹I was astonished to discover that Ortofon still makes the SPU. And the company's Japanese subsidiary still manufactures the Ortofon arms that were designed expressly for the SPU.

I recount this brief history to provide a context for what is for me the best moving-coil pickup it's been my pleasure to hear or review: Ortofon's new flagship, the MC Windfeld. Designed by the company's Chief Officer of Acoustics and Technology, Leif Johannsen, the Windfeld is named in honor of Per Windfeld, Ortofon's recently retired (at 75!) Chief Engineer of thirty years, author of a few patents, and *auteur* of the MC 20, Concorde, Rohmann, Jubilee, and Kontrapunkt series, among others—in other words, some of the finest phono pickups ever made, by Ortofon or anybody else.

No other moving coil in my long experience sounds quite so neutral or natural in tonal balance as the Windfeld, while most come nowhere close, regardless of price (\$3400 retail). In every practical sense it yields nothing in these areas to the best moving magnets and it also tracks superlatively. Within scant moments of cueing it for the first time—in a Basis Vector 4 arm on the 2200 turntable—its essential lack of identifiable personality was evident. The source was Speakers Corner's reissue of the John Coltrane/Johnny Hartman collaboration. What I noticed



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immediately is how smooth Hartman's voice is, how consistent in timbre it remains throughout its range, with no subtle shifts in color, character, or even position. When Coltrane enters, smack in the left channel—this is early stereo—the effect is the same: I found myself listening to how he plays off Hartman's vocals. It is important to understand that what I was concentrating on was not the way his voice was being reproduced; rather, I was appreciating the *voice itself*.

The distinction goes to the essence of what is so special about this pickup. One afternoon my wife took our fifteen-month-old daughter on an outing. So I wasted no time sitting down with my pen, notepad, and a stack of LPs, a typically varied mix of vintage pressings and audiophile reissues, including *Belafonte at Carnegie Hall*, Sinatra's *Nice 'n' Easy*, *Water Music*, Gerhard's *The Plague*, Sonny Rollins' *Way Out West*, *Kind of Blue*, the Vegh's late Beethoven quartets, Bernstein's *Vienna Op. 131*, Karajan's Berlin *Grosse Fugue*, Ali Akbar Kahn's *Morning and Evening Ragas*, and The Great Jazz Trio's *Autumn Leaves*. Three hours later my note pad was virtually blank...but I had had a wonderful time listening to a lot of great music! That pretty much describes almost every listening session during the three-month review period.

The Windfeld neither enhances nor detracts from the reproduction in any way I am able to discern. In fact, it's easier to talk about what it doesn't do. It doesn't accentuate presence or exaggerate width and depth. It doesn't make every sharp transient a hair-trigger pistol shot. It doesn't turn every bass drum thwack into a detonation. It doesn't immerse you in the sonic equivalent to a warm salt bath. Its clarity doesn't blind, its detail doesn't assault. And yet, it will do each and every one of these things and anything else *if* the recording, so to speak, "tells" it to.

Well-recorded bass is reproduced with outstanding definition yet with none of that excessive "tightness" which robs strings of their natural warmth and depth of tone or bass drums and tympani of their resonant richness and power. The midrange is so effortlessly revealing that during "Matilda," when Belafonte has his rhythm men sing, I felt as if I could differentiate their voices one from another as well as ever, perhaps better; and on Kings College Advent-Sunday recording [Argo], I could make out the words the choir was singing through the highly resonant acoustics more clearly than usual, maybe more than ever. (The "resolution is everything" boys should have no complaints.) Up top? On the aforementioned Sonny Rollins, cymbals sound just right, metallic but smooth, and, well... just right, dammit. Sorry about that, but neutrality defeats even the fattest thesaurus.

Yet the conundrum presented by this pickup raises issues beyond the semantic. Is this quality of absence, this lack of personality or what might be called interventionism, in a word, this neutrality for everybody? Many audiophiles seem to like when their components add a sprinkle of sugar or spice, a dash of salt or pepper to the listening mix. A little extra second-harmonic distortion will certainly ripen up the presentation in a pleasing way. Like a greater impression of depth? A Gundry dip is just the thing. Want to smarten up the definition and detail? A tipped-up top usually does the trick. Tight bass you're after? Jack up the midbass some, cut back in the warmth region, and *voilà!*

Nor are such preferences confined to audiophiles. Though a quarter century has passed, I have never forgotten a review by a very distinguished British critic, who wrote that the Sota Sapphire

was preferable to his own Linn-Sondek if "a high degree of neutrality is desired," and his intention was most emphatically *not* to flatter the American turntable. That phrase has haunted me ever since: when, I wondered, is a high degree of neutrality *not* desired—at least when the goal is the reproduction of countless different sources? Evidently by quite a few: In the years since I've read more variations than I can count on the same theme, most recently just last month by a reviewer who admitted that whenever he hears something described as "musically natural," he thinks, "Yeah, and boring."

Attitudes like this doubtless help explain why so many people run moving coils unloaded. "Loading makes them sound like moving magnets," complains a friend of mine. Precisely: Ever wondered why almost every time you read about some professional or other comparing what is on an LP he's pressed to the mastertape, the pickup is a moving magnet (typically some iteration of the Shure V15)? It's the frequency response, stupid, in other words, the tonal neutrality!

Still, it's easy enough to understand why so many audiophiles want to guild their vinyl lilies with exaggerations that sound more "real"—or more exciting or simply prettier—than whatever reality lies in the grooves. Recorded music listened to at home can never truly replicate the live experience, and it is long known that an accurate system will not necessarily create an effect of realism if the recording does not supply it. Which is why I'm not about to argue with anybody who prefers the liveliness of a Dynavector or the dynamics of a Clearaudio. Past reviews of mine, not to mention some Golden Ear Awards, amply testify to the enthusiasm with which I greeted these fine products (which I still hold in high regard).

But in audio—as so often in life also—somehow I always find myself returning to first principles. The first principle of sound reproduction, because it *is* reproduction, must be tonal neutrality, which I define as flat frequency-response, low coloration, and low distortion. These are not sufficient conditions for accurate reproduction, but they are absolutely necessary ones. The MC Windfeld isn't the sexiest pickup around and it won't give you the most romantic, lively, and glamorous presentations if romance, liveliness, and glamour are missing from the source. What it will give you is the closest approach to what Ortofon promised the moment it came up with its name: the correct sound. This is my new reference pickup. **TAS**



SPECS & PRICING

Output: 0.3mV
Frequency response:
20-20kHz+/-1dB
Recommended tracking force:
2.6 grams
Internal impedance: 4 ohms
Loading: Up to 100 ohms, 40 recommended
Weight: 13 grams
Price: \$3400

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