

Transfiguration Proteus cartridge by Jason Kennedy

Cartridges are an essential and subtle part of the vinyl replay chain, yet many consider them to be the most significant, the part that makes the most difference. This isn't really the case: turntables and tonearms arguably have more of a bearing (no pun intended) on the absolute resolution of a record player, but cartridges usually have the most obvious tonal character. In the case of moving coils, this is because they are typically hand-made, using materials that are sensitive to variations in temperature and humidity, and because enthusiasts seem to like certain characteristics in their vinyl front ends. All of which is fine if you are trying to create a specific sound, but 'character' in audio hardware is effectively a barrier between the listener and the recording. High fidelity is all about breaking down that barrier. This is an ethos that Seiji Yoshioka, the man behind Transfiguration, seems to understand better than many in the small world of cartridge builders.

Yoshioka-san's company is called Immutable Music. 'Immutable' means 'unchanging', but given the steady evolution of Transfiguration cartridges, it seems inappropriate. Yoshioka-san has been making ring magnet-based MCs since the early 1990s and, while they have remained similar in appearance, the underlying coil and magnet assembly design has been substantially revised and refined. When Yoshioka-san started building cartridges, the ring magnet was a new thing: it is less so now, but the way he uses it produces some specs that are still out of the ordinary. Internal impedance, for instance, is a mere one Ohm: a state of affairs that reflects what must be the bare minimum of coil windings in high purity silver wire, and returns a low, but manageable, 0.2mV output.

The Proteus is the top model in a small but conservatively formed range of MCs. It looks like the next model down, the Phoenix S, but looks are misleading. Although both have a boron cantilever and diamond tip, the one in the Proteus is higher quality; the core is 3S μ -metal, rather than Phoenix S's permalloy, and the lead-out wires are glued down to reduce vibration. Also, the connector pins are rhodium-plated, rather than gold, and a different damper material is used.

Installing and setting up the Proteus is straightforward, except for the fact that its cantilever is very short and a long way from the front of the aluminium body. This makes it hard

to see, but a Petzl head torch makes installation easier, and the threaded inserts are a real boon if you are used to nut and bolt fixings. I started out by installing the Proteus in an SME V arm onboard the Model 20/3 turntable from the same company. If only all arms were this easy to set up!

I gave the Proteus a few hours run-in before listening, and then put on Patricia Barber's *Modern Cool* [Premonition], where the track 'Company' grabbed me and wouldn't let go; it was the scale, dynamics, and textures that did it. I don't think this track has ever sounded more real and vivid. The double bass has so much timbral resonance, and the trumpet so much expression, it's uncanny, and the voice has a presence in the room that makes it seem real. The Proteus produces a lot of extremely coherent and solid energy in a fashion that seems entirely without character. This much is not immediately obvious, but unveils itself over time, because each record you play uncovers so many of disc's own idiosyncrasies.

One of my favourite recordings of recent times is Mike Valentine's direct-to-disc cut of 'The Four Seasons' [Interpreti Veneziani, *Chasing The Dragon*]. You are always aware that it's played on original instruments, but never have those instruments displayed so much depth of tone and character. It's a crude and colourful sound by the standards of modern strings, but no less enjoyable as a result. These instruments are equally adept at portraying the gusts and swells of 'Autumn', that's for sure, because dynamics are outstanding with the Proteus. As is detail retrieval – it's so easy to follow different instruments and voices; for instance, on Leo Kottke's 'The Other Day (near Santa Cruz)' [*Great Big Boy*, Private Music] there are bells, percussion, two guitars, and voice. These are rendered as a group of instruments playing perfectly in time yet available for individual attention should you wish to focus in that way: apparently "there are no chicks in Santa Cruz", by the way.

For contrast, I installed the Proteus in another remarkable turntable, the Rega RP10. This brought the music further into the room and presented it with a degree of stereo solidity that is rare. Now, it was the voices of the Grateful Dead singing 'Crazy Fingers' [*Blues for Allah*, Audio Fidelity] that provided the distraction. Nowhere was this more apparent than on the chorus, where you could distinguish multiple voices and the high degree to which they harmonise. The transparency,



the resolution, and natural unforced nature of this cartridge made it quite difficult to take off a good slab of vinyl, too. This happened with Tom Wait's *Swordfishtrombones* [Island]; I put on the title track and couldn't take the LP off until the last refrain of that side. This album is remarkably well recorded for its genre and era (1983); the vibes, piano, congas, and ultimately the voice are superbly reproduced. There is so much life, nuance, and depth here that your appreciation for the composition and playing is effectively doubled. This repeated itself with virtually every album that I played: check out the horn arrangements on Joni Mitchell's 'The Dry Cleaner From Des Moines' [Mingus, Asylum], because it turns out Jaco Pastorius wasn't only a bass god. Who knew?

That Transfiguration makes neutral, transparent cartridges is firmly established, but in achieving this, Yoshioka-san also transforms a vinyl groove into *the* most effective means of reproducing a musical signal. The Transfiguration Proteus is as good a conduit to the language of music as anyone needs, and is way better than most I have ever heard. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Low output moving coil phono cartridge.

Stylus/Cantilever: PA (3×30µm) diamond stylus with 0.3mm boron cantilever

Tracking Force: 1.7g – 2.2g optimum 2.0g

Load: >10 Ohms

Compliance: 13 × 10⁻⁶cm/dyne.

Output (at 1 kHz @ 3.45cm/s): 0.2 mv

Weight: 7.8g (without stylus cover)

Price: £3,299

Manufacturer: Immutable Music Inc

Distributor: Decent Audio

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URL: www.decentaudio.co.uk