



Clearaudio Concept MC

Here's a German company with a passion for all things vinyl, and the massive product portfolio and prolific work-rate to back it up. The Concept MC here is its current 'entry-level' moving-coil [first reviewed *HFN* Apr '11], but doesn't give away its reasonably humble origins under close examination. The Clearaudio is well presented and sports a finely finished – albeit rather utilitarian looking – ceramic-coated aluminium-magnesium alloy body. The idea is to make it light but rigid, and indeed the cartridge weighs in at 8g. Inside, you find oxygen-free copper in the generator coils; it has a rigid boron rod cantilever and micro line-contact stylus.

With its neatly oblong body, the cartridge is very easy to fit, and there's a sensible and effective stylus guard (the process of removing or refitting these can sometimes put the 'needle' in more mortal danger than not bothering with one at all). The recommended tracking force is 2g \pm 0.2g; I found it worked best a fraction over the median figure. A two-year warranty completes an attractive, well crafted package.

THE ALL-ROUNDER

Clearaudio cartridges have traditionally sounded transparent and incisive (the clue's in the name), although some have proved less engaging on a musical level than rivals. This could not be said of the Concept MC, which presented as a wonderfully well balanced device with an easy-to-listen-to yet revealing sound. Instead of doing one particular thing brilliantly at the expense of the rest, it proved the best all-rounder here. Tonally, it was warm and smooth and sported a generous soundstage with accurately placed images. Fat sounding analogue synthesisers on the Leftfield track had a real sense of body, for example, yet high frequencies were atmospheric and sparkled in a way that all but the OC9 couldn't match.

Moving to the Sonny Rollins track, and the Concept let the music

RIGHT: Traditional aluminium-magnesium alloy body design has threaded lugs and is easy to align

swing nicely, never impeding the progress of the song. It captured the subtle dynamic inflections of the saxophones effortlessly, and syncopated them beautifully with the double-bass and drums. The drum kit was rich and sonorous, those vibrant yet finely etched cymbals reminding me just how great jazz can sound on vinyl. And bass was tasty too, with a real sense of rhythm down south – the sound bounced along in a nicely fluid and mellifluous way. Here it bettered the OC9 by sounding more 'organic', while the Sumiko sounded forced and the Ortofon slightly bland.

Although not quite the widest here in terms of soundstaging, Handel's *Messiah* came over in a highly realistic way. The sense of perspective it brought to orchestral music was satisfying, the cartridge's innate detail allowing an excellent feel for the acoustics of the Edinburgh hall itself. Its fine treble gave excellent filigree detailing to massed strings, and brass had an authentic rasp.

Sound Quality: 80%

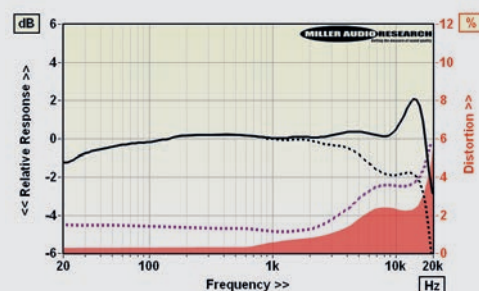


ABOVE: The rigid boron cantilever and Micro Line stylus are core features of Clearaudio's entry-level Concept MC



HI-FI NEWS LAB REPORT

Clearaudio's Concept MC offers almost exactly the specified 420 μ V (0.42mV) output (re. 5cm/sec) at precisely the specified 0.5dB channel balance. The low 9cu compliance was not met, however, and the asymmetric 28cu lateral and 12cu vertical figures (the former with a +13dB resonance) are also reflected in similar variations in the lateral and vertical responses. The former, dictating the balance of central in-phase images, is impressively neutral with only a slight loss in low bass and a mere +2dB/15kHz peak while the latter, reflecting the tonal balance of the peripheral soundstage, shows a declining presence and treble (–2dB/10kHz). The micro line contact stylus is accurately mounted to achieve a 24° VTA and tracking is first-rate – left and right 80 μ m grooves were successfully navigated while distortion at +18dB/315Hz (re. 0dB/11.2 μ m) was a mere 0.6%. PM



ABOVE: Frequency response (black) vs. distortion (red); lateral (L+R, solid) and vertical (L–R, dashed)

Generator type/weight	Moving Coil / 8.0g
Recommended tracking force	1.8-2.2mN (2.0mN)
Sensitivity/balance (re. 5cm/sec)	425 μ V / 0.52dB
Compliance (vertical/lateral)	12cu / 28cu
Vertical tracking angle	24 degrees
L/R Tracking ability	>80 μ m / >80 μ m
L/R Distortion (–8dB, 20Hz-20kHz)	0.30–5.4% / 0.25–9.2%
L/R Frequency resp. (20Hz-20kHz)	+1.9 to –2.9dB / +2.3 to –2.0dB
Stereo separation (1kHz / 20kHz)	30dB / 16dB