

Clearaudio Goldfinger Statement

Clearaudio's Goldfinger Statement cartridge certainly makes a statement thanks to the liberal use of exotic materials in its construction. Is its beauty more than skin deep?

Review: Adam Smith Lab: Paul Miller

There is no doubt that the high-end cartridge market is enjoying something of a resurgence at the moment; an occurrence that might have been virtually inconceivable ten to 15 years ago. With the likes of the TechDAS TCD01 Ti at £8750 [*HFN* Sep '14], the £5000 Ortofon MC Anna [*HFN* Oct '12] and the £7495 Lyra Atlas all having fairly recently appeared on the scene, it was only a matter of time before German analogue-*meister* Clearaudio upped its game. In respect of price and appearance, the glittering result leaves both its competition and its other models somewhat in the shade.

POINTING THE FINGER

The new Goldfinger Statement hits the market at £8995 and it is not difficult to see where much of that cost lies. The body itself is made from a solid piece of 14-carat gold which endows the cartridge with undeniable wow factor. In theory, it offers benefits in terms of absorbing internal resonances yet, conversely, it's also a slightly strange choice due to the material's concomitant downsides.

The first of these is sheer mass. The next model down in Clearaudio's range, the Titanium V2, weighs 9g, which is perfectly standard. The Goldfinger Statement nearly doubles this to 16g, thus limiting the potential range of compatible arms. Of greater concern, however, is the softness of the material itself. On the Mohs scale of mineral hardness, gold comes

in at a paltry 2.5-3, compared to 4-4.5 for steel and 6 for titanium. I was not surprised at Sound Foundations' (Clearaudio's UK distributor) concern that I not over-tighten the mounting screws on this one-and-only review sample. If you adhere to the 'Linn' mindset of cartridge tightening (along the lines of 'as tight as you can, then keep going until the Allen key starts to bend'), I would humbly suggest that the Goldfinger Statement is possibly not for you!

The external 'bling' is rounded off on the front of the cartridge by a diamond – and not the one on the end of the cantilever. Instead, a rather larger gemstone takes pride of place on the front of the cartridge body just like its predecessor, the Goldfinger Diamond V2.

One could perhaps argue that this is to aid stylus positioning when cueing, but given the 'nude' nature of the cantilever, this is a bit of a stretch. Frankly, it's all a bit 'Elizabeth Duke at Argos' for my liking but it

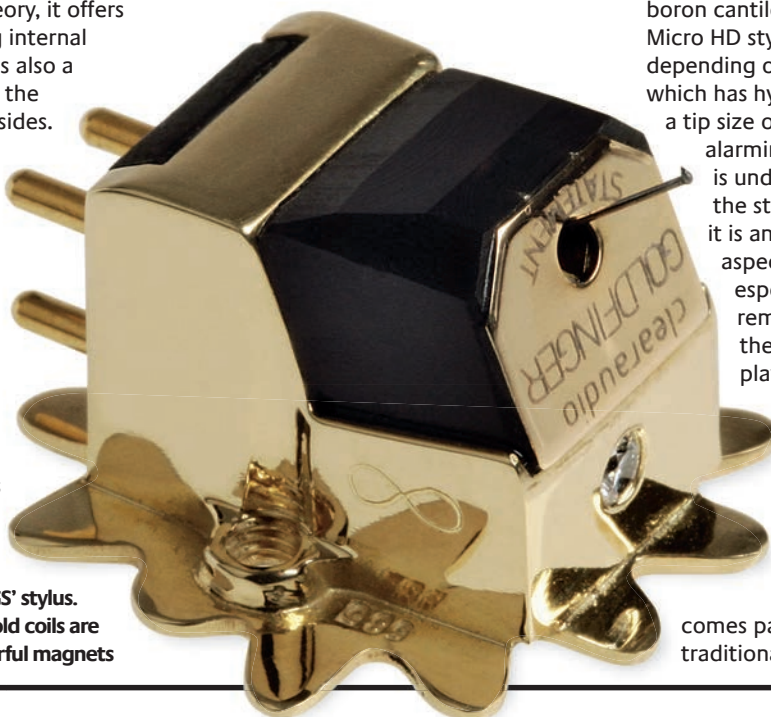
undeniably makes the Statement stand out: no bad thing. Digging deeper, however, the use of gold in the cartridge's 'engine room' continues, but here things start to make more sense. The coils themselves are 24-carat gold and composed of wire that is 30% thinner than previously, permitting a lower moving mass. So that this does not adversely affect sensitivity, Clearaudio's patented ring magnet array now boasts 12 individual magnets: up from the eight of the Diamond V2.

As a result, output level remains at a quoted 0.7mV and the cartridge's internal impedance remains unchanged at 50ohm. Another bodywork feature is that this is its first production cartridge to feature EMC screening. Clearaudio claims this pays dividends in terms of both clarity and dynamic range.

FORCEFUL TRACKING

At the business end of the cartridge, a boron cantilever supports Clearaudio's Micro HD stylus (or polished 'GS', depending on which literature you read), which has hybrid parabolic geometry and a tip size of 4x84µm. It tracks at a rather alarming nominal 2.8g. While this is undoubtedly good for locking the stylus firmly into the groove, it is another slightly disconcerting aspect of the Goldfinger Statement, especially for those who remember the Shure designs of the '70s and '80s which often played well at mere fractions of a gram. Still, it is easier to damage a record groove by tracking a stylus at too low a force than too high, even though it makes that unprotected stylus feel extra vulnerable when in use.

The Goldfinger Statement comes packed in Clearaudio's traditional small pyramidal case and



RIGHT: Clearaudio's long and exposed boron cantilever is used in all its MCs, fitted here with a 'GS' stylus. Inside the Statement, fine 24k gold coils are surrounded by a ring of 12 powerful magnets



LEFT: Clearaudio's iconic 'flower' mounting plate is hewn from 14k gold – harder than 24k gold but take care not to strip those threaded lugs. The embedded diamond is pure bling!

an acquired taste in appearance terms; it's no walk in the park to install and align; it tracks at a disconcertingly high value; and it requires your arm's counterbalance weight to be set further back than you have ever seen it before. By now you might be wondering, as I was – is it really worth it? Fortunately, the answer is 'yes'.

CLEAN AND PURE

I'm going to cut straight to the chase here with a 'statement' of my own: the Clearaudio Goldfinger Statement is one of the finest cartridges that I have heard to date. The alignment woes and the downforce concerns simply evaporated as soon as I started listening. This is a cartridge that sounds exactly as one might expect given its mass and tracking weight. Put simply, it has a big, bold, enveloping sound and dynamic abilities that absolutely take your breath away. It brings performers right to the fore, laps up complex bass lines, images with pinpoint perfection and yet can rustle up the most ethereal sense of delicacy when required.

I always like to commence auditioning with a few old favourite tracks and the cut of choice for this review happened to be The Eagles' 'New Kid in Town' from *Hotel California* [Asylum AS53051]. The Goldfinger Statement pulled the studio, the performance and the individual players out from the depths of the grooves like a master. Randy Meisner's guitar underpinned the track with concrete-like solidity while Don Henley's vocals surged forth from my speakers with scale, feeling and incredible passion.

I had only intended to listen to the one track from this particular album but, as the last bars faded out and I rose from my listening chair, I found myself sitting back down again promptly as 'Life In The Fast Lane' started. Once again, the Clearaudio

gripped the underlying track with an iron fist and really punched the bass line out with aplomb. However, above it was a glorious sense of insight and real emotion to the performance. I am gradually becoming a convert to the magnificent clarity of high resolution digital sources but all too often I find them accompanied by a distinct flatness of timbre and a poor sense

this in turn sits in a rather lovely wooden box. Inside are a screwdriver and fixing hardware, both metal and plastic – the latter just in case you don't trust yourself with traditional alloy fixing bolts.

A bundle of paperwork includes the instruction manual, plus a lovely close-up photograph of the stylus and a full test report for the cartridge [see Lab Report, p53]. Also included is a large, solid and heartily reassuring plastic stylus guard.

Installation of the Goldfinger Statement showed that the slightly irregular body shape makes alignment a little less easy than usual, compared to more conventional designs with square mounting surfaces. In terms of setup, the Clearaudio demands more of the user than any cartridge I have

ever encountered: azimuth, VTA and bias must all be tuned to their respective (and narrow) sweet spots before the device really sings. None of these can be guessed.

Having installed innumerable cartridges over the years, I can usually have one set to around 95% optimum by simply using the instructions, eyes, ears and trusty stylus gauge.

With the Goldfinger Statement, I realised fairly early on that test LPs and some form of basic metering would really be required, and the difference these made was not at all subtle. So I would say it's essential your dealer is suitably equipped to do this job for you.

To sum up so far then: the Goldfinger Statement is not cheap; it is decidedly

'The Statement's ebullience was positively grin-inducing'



PRECIOUS BODIES

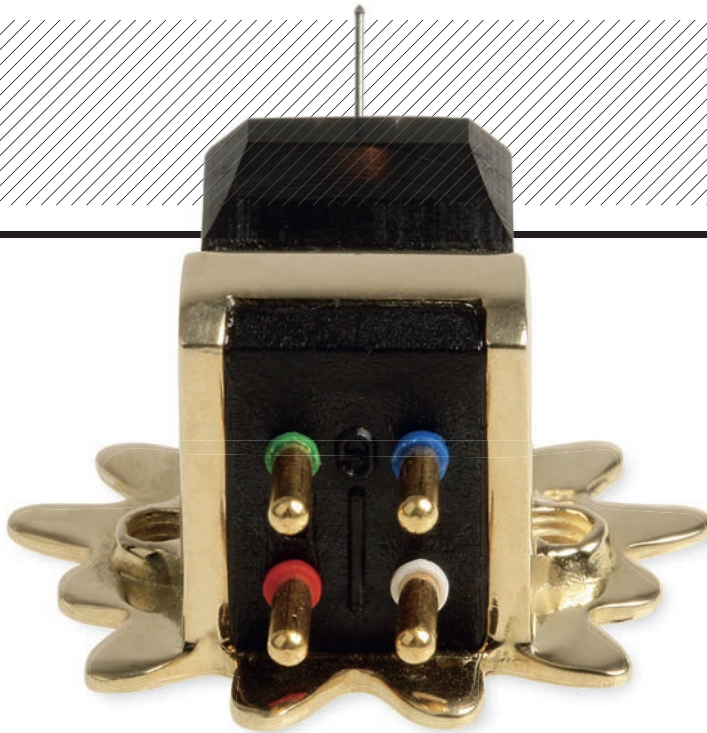
Clearaudio's use of gold follows a tradition among exotic MCs that typically feature novel and often precious body materials. Goldbug's 80s Brier range featured wooden bodies hand-carved by Japan's only female pipe maker, and Kiseki was renowned for its use of mineral exotica including Lapis Lazuli. Koetsu has made extensive use of onyx as well as coral, jade and yet more exotic woods. Ortofon also utilised both black and white 'sapphire' for the likes of the MC-2000 and MC-3000. Even today, it is not difficult to find an exotic-bodied cartridge design. Koetsu and Kiseki are still going strong and Ortofon has moved on to make increasing use of Selective Laser Melting to fuse fine metallic powder into its range-topping models. In the USA, Soundsmith use composite bodies for its Hyperion and Zephyr cartridges, and acrylic for the Otello model. Finally, if all this material choice is too much, the likes of EMT, Van den Hul and Lyra can help, offering 'nude' cartridges that have virtually no body at all!

LAB REPORT

CLEARAUDIO GOLDFINGER STMT.

Despite proprietary 'tweaks' – the 24-karat gold coils and increase from eight to 12 magnets in the generator assembly – the Goldfinger Statement's performance is still recognisably similar to that of Clearaudio's Concerto [HFN Sep '06], Stradivari v2 [HFN Aug '10] and Talisman v2 Gold [HFN Jul '12]. Once again the frequency response is consistently *different* from that offered by Clearaudio. Measured at the specified 2.7g downforce, we see the same emboldened bass, gently rolled-off presence/treble (-4.4dB/20kHz lateral; -5.9dB/20kHz vertical) and mild HF resonance (here at 15kHz) from this generator with its long boron cantilever. I make no quality judgement here – it is what it is – and the fact that Clearaudio has achieved such a close match in the lateral/vertical response *shape* is likely of far greater subjective significance [see Graph 1, below].

Output is generous at 650µV (re. 1kHz/5cm/sec into 500ohm) with a channel imbalance of just 0.28dB. Its 16g shell is also matched by an appropriately low 11/15cu (vertical/lateral) dynamic compliance. Distortion follows Clearaudio's established trend – the unequaled 1kHz/5cm/sec figure is not 'low' at 3.8% but it's a benign 2nd harmonic while the equalised trace hovers between 1-5% through bass and midrange at -8dB [see Graph 2]. This heavyweight MC is a good tracker (as it should at 2.7g!) surmounting the 80µm groove pitch, sailing through the +15dB band and just breaking loose at the maximum +18dB (315Hz lateral cut, re. 11.2µm). Readers may view a comprehensive QC Suite test report for the Goldfinger Statement MC by navigating to www.hifinews.co.uk and clicking on the red 'Download' button. PM



ABOVE: The cartridge pins are gold-plated and well spaced to accommodate most tonearm leads/tags. High 16g bodyweight may limit your choice of tonearm

of warmth and musical cohesiveness. Somehow the Goldfinger Statement managed to combine the best aspects of analogue, yet imbue performances with a positively 'high-res' sense of cleanliness and purity.

GOES BACK IN THE SLEEVE

This purity was demonstrated most ably by Mazzy Star's 2013 LP, *Seasons Of Your Day* [Rhymes of an Hour Records Rhymes 004] and the track 'In Your Kingdom'. The song began with some subtle and atmospheric organ work and Mazzy Star's traditional sweeping guitars, before the backing drums came in with an impact that seemed almost at odds with the delicacy of the other instrumentation.

Lead singer Hope Sandoval's voice has been described in the past as both 'languid' and 'sorrowful' and the Clearaudio dug right to the heart of it. She was located gloriously centre-stage and every single inflection of her performance was vivid and breathtaking.

Moving on to something a little more up-tempo I did discover a small chink in the Goldfinger Statement's armour. It is one which concerns less than perfect pressings or recordings. Budget cartridges usually fail to cope with these; better ones seem more able to manage. However, while true high-end designs such as this Clearaudio certainly make imperfect source material eminently listenable, I often find that subconsciously you are always aware of what else the cartridge is capable of. Consequently, the urge to sideline those lesser recordings and head for

the better ones that really let the transducer perform can become very strong indeed.

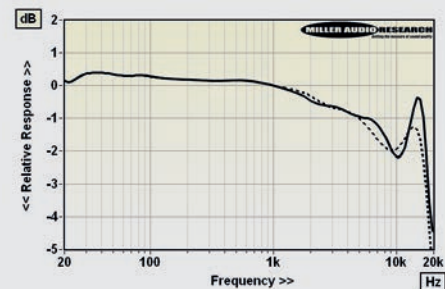
In my case the track in question was the 12in single version of Phil Fearon and Galaxy's 'Dancing Tight' [Island 12ENY-501]. The rhythmical ebullience that I hoped for from the Clearaudio was present, correct and positively grin-inducing, but the rather ragged and compressed nature of the rest of the recording meant that I didn't make it to the end. Instead, I went in search of something better engineered.

It seems a little ironic that the level of expenditure required by the Goldfinger Statement might well mean you are less likely to play a few of your existing records. It seems a shame, but is a potential risk that must be considered. Speaking personally, however, I think it would be unlikely to stop me from wielding the credit card... ☹

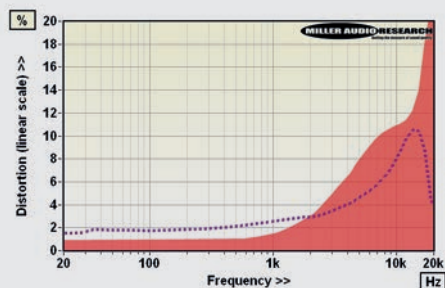
HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

The Clearaudio Goldfinger Statement is heavy, shiny and it demands a high level of attention to detail in terms of setup and alignment. Get this right, however, and the cartridge transfixes from the first listen. It has stupendous dynamism and scale but coupled with a surprising delicacy when required. It could cause you to lose days at a time as you rediscover your record collection!

Sound Quality: 86%



ABOVE: Frequency response curves (-8dB re. 5cm/sec) lateral (L+R, solid) versus vertical (L-R, dashed)



ABOVE: Lateral (L+R, solid) and vertical (L-R, dashed) tracing and generator distortion (2nd-4th harmonics) vs. frequency from 20Hz-20kHz (-8dB re. 5cm/sec)

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Generator type/weight	Moving coil / 16g
Recommended tracking force	2.6-2.8mN (2.7mN)
Sensitivity/balance (re. 5cm/sec)	650µV / 0.28dB
Compliance (vertical/lateral)	11cu / 15cu
Vertical tracking angle	26 degrees
L/R Tracking ability	80µm / 80µm
L/R Distortion (-8dB, 20Hz-20kHz)	1.0-21% / 1.1-12.4%
L/R Frequency resp. (20Hz-20kHz)	+0.5 to -4.4dB / +0.2 to -6.2dB
Stereo separation (1kHz / 20kHz)	26dB / 21dB