



The Lyra Argo Moving-Coil Cartridge

by Jimmy Hughes

Although by no means the most expensive Lyra cartridge, the Argo is a very impressive performer. My overwhelming first impression was one of sharpness, attack, and immediacy. The tonal balance was very open; lucid and detailed, rather than rich or warm. High frequencies sounded very extended, giving the top-end a crisp highly articulate quality. Musical presentation was analytical rather than smooth or beguiling, though don't take this to imply a lack of refinement.

As so often with pickups that dispense with body covering, the Argo has a lovely openness - a complete absence of coloration. Tonally, the treble sounds very natural and extended. Transient attack was excellent; percussion instruments had impressive attack and immediacy. At the same time there's an equally impressive sense of sounds stopping. Musically, this creates a tight 'abrupt' quality. There's nothing lazy or flaccid about the Argo. It sounds very immediate and purposeful.

All this makes the Argo excellent on LPs that ordinarily sound dull and/or compressed. During the review period I played quite a few '70s pop records, and was surprised and impressed at the way the Argo managed to open-out the sound and reveal lots of hidden detail. Stereo separation was very wide, creating a broad soundstage that had excellent width as well as depth. Despite having a sharp extended treble, surface noise was very low.

Given a reasonably good LP, the music seemed to emanate from an inky-black silent background. Of course on LPs that are scratched or damaged there will inevitably be some disturbance. But the Argo is not a pickup that emphasises problems. Rather, it has a happy knack of finding the 'quiet' part of the record groove. As a result, low-level groove 'mush' (the general hubbub of gentle

ticks swishes and rustles) is minimised - even on those dodgy pressings from the '70s!

In this context the Argo proved very good at getting the most out of compilation LPs with long sides cut at lowish levels. Now you might say such LPs aren't of true hi-fi standard, and you'd be dead right. But, being able to extract a vivid strongly-profiled three-dimensional sound from a mediocre LP speaks volumes for a pickup's resolving ability at low modulation levels. It doesn't lose low-level resolution, meaning quiet passages retain plenty of presence and colour.

Output is not excessively high (0.45mV ref 5cm/s) but the general liveliness of the sound coupled with excellent transient attack creates the subjective impression of power and immediacy. I fitted my review Argo to Rega's RB-1000 arm on an Avid Volvere Sequel turntable, and felt the combination delivered outstanding quality of reproduction. As already stated, overall presentation was lucid, and detailed: sharp and analytical, rather than warm and beguiling.

In the early stages, while the cartridge was still bedding in, I wondered if the top-end was sometimes a little too frisky - creating a slightly exposed upper treble. But such notions diminished with extended use. Nevertheless, the Argo may sometimes exhibit a slight sting in the tail. For example, some original early '60s Decca classical LPs were sometimes a wee bit 'toppy' with this pickup - though isn't that simply the cartridge responding to the way such records were mastered and pressed?

It's funny, but some of my prized

vintage Decca LPs that sounded really fabulous on the hi-fi equipment I had (say) twenty-five years ago, now seem less impressive when played on the best modern gear. In cases where I've got the same Decca LP in early and late pressings, the extra smoothness of the latter now seems preferable to the brilliance and immediacy of the former. Not always, of course, but generally those early Decca LPs can easily sound over-lit.

Actually, judged over a wide range of musical material with records from

the recent and distant past, the Argo's a pretty good all-rounder. It's lucid articulate qualities aid recordings that lack sparkle and immediacy, while its innate naturalness and refinement ensure that bright-sounding LPs usually don't sound too edgy or out of control. No pickup can

be all things to all men, but this one gets closer than most. It gets a lot off every LP, no matter what it is, or how good.

Bass proved very solid and at times surprisingly powerful. But (perhaps because the treble is so crisp and open) you tend not to notice the bottom-end until it's there. Sometimes the Argo sounds deceptively light and spacious, giving an engagingly fresh open airy sort of presentation. Then, suddenly from nowhere, a bass drum comes in, or perhaps a deep organ pedal. And it surprises you. Given a good arm and turntable, bass quality should be very lucid and detailed.

Tracking ability is good. Lyra recommend a downforce of between 1.7g and 1.8g, and at these pressures the Argo copes with most records. At times you could almost be listening to CD, ►



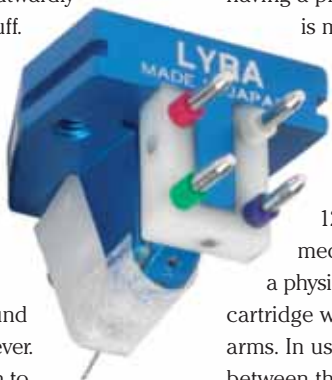
▶ such is the general feeling of security and freedom from background noise. The Argo certainly sounds as if it's in control; even during loud passages it retains an impressive sense of ease and refinement that is very reassuring. You rarely sense it's experiencing trouble.

The stylus seems to keep itself clean too - even when it outwardly picks up dust and fluff.

I try to keep my LPs as dust-free as possible, but it's impossible to achieve 100% cleanness. Sometimes, after a few sides, I'd notice a build-up of fluff around the tip of the cantilever.

Yet this did not seem to affect the quality of reproduction - at least not in any way I could discern. Once dusted clean, the stylus tip always seemed to keep free of contamination - deposits didn't seem to build up.

A practical drawback with many open-bodied pickups is that no stylus guard is supplied - there being nothing to physically attach it to. However, not



the Argo; it's supplied with a large clear plastic cover that protects the exposed tip. Because the cover is generously oversized you don't feel anxious fitting it, worrying in case you accidentally prang the cantilever while sliding it into place. With so many modern turntables not having a protective lid, having a proper stylus guard

is mighty useful.

The cantilever is made from solid boron, and it's thin - very thin; you have to look hard to see it!

Compliance is approximately 12cu - on the low side of medium - and this coupled with a physical weight of 6.5g means the cartridge works well in medium-mass arms. In use there's plenty of clearance between the exposed body housing and LP surfaces. And the pickup is physically stable - there's no tendency to oscillate or tremble on warped records.

Because any pickup cartridge's performance is profoundly affected by its partners - the tonearm and turntable - it's not always easy to isolate specific attributes. Nonetheless, I felt the Argo

was very good in terms of timing. Certainly, the combination of Volvere Sequel, Rega RB-1000, and Lyra Argo created very cohesive results musically. There was something very focussed and purposeful about the sound in musical terms; the results were very involving.

From all I've written above, you might intimate that I really rather liked the Lyra Argo. I certainly did! It's a cartridge I could happily live with, being impressively open, detailed, and focussed, with excellent clarity, good tracking ability, and low surface noise. It's an outstanding all-rounder, being crisp and lively on pop and rock, while able to offer all the refinement and naturalness needed for classical music. It's top-end detail and energy might not suit bright-sounding systems. But other than that I can't see it being anything other than a pleasure to listen to. ▶+

Price: £849

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The Koetsu Black Moving-Coil Cartridge

by Roy Gregory

Tell a non-audiophile friend you're planning to spend £1000 on a pickup cartridge. He'll look at you as if you're crazy. But of course, in Audiophile terms, £1000 is far from being a huge sum to spend on a pickup. Indeed, in the Koetsu range it represents entry level. But it's all relative; with Koetsu prices peaking at just under £8000, the Black is comparatively cheap and affordable - big emphasis on the word 'comparatively'! Older readers may recall the original Koetsu Black. Although a steady seller for over a decade, it was dropped from the Koetsu range in 1997 or thereabouts. Now some six years later it's being

reintroduced although whether the design has changed in that time I cannot say. The pickup comes in a nice wooden box, and - that's more or less it; no mounting hardware, no descriptive leaflet telling you suggested playing weight or compliance, etc. Minimalism lives!

My guess is, the new Black does differ from the early Blacks I recall from the '80s. The original was sharp and brilliant, with a crisp open tonality and plenty of impact. The new Black strikes me as an altogether more relaxed cartridge. It's not exactly lacking in brilliance or immediacy, but overall the

presentation is notably more cultured and refined. There's a smoothness and ease I don't recall with the original cartridge; bass-treble extremes seem better balanced.

Playing one of the Lorin Maazel/DG New Year's Day concerts recorded live in Vienna, I was struck by how sweet and meliflous this early digital LP sounded. In 1983, when the disc was released, contemporary equipment made the recording seem somewhat tight and airless, with acidic string tone and a distinct lack of richness and warmth. There seemed to be very little dimensionality to the stereo ▶