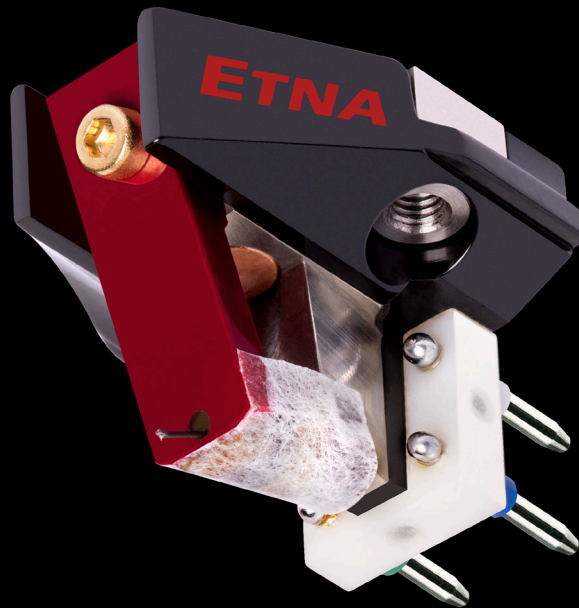


# the absolute sound

## Lyra Etna SL Phono Cartridge



## Addictive

by Jacob Heilbrunn

**O**ver the years, the Lyra line has been a mainstay in my stereo system. I've had everything from a Titan Mono to a Helikon to an Atlas. Each seemed to improve on the previous one, with the Atlas offering prodigious dynamics and bass slam. I remain quite smitten by the Atlas, which offers a healthy 0.56mV output and really brought to life big orchestral recordings with a vividness and immediacy that were difficult to resist. I knew Lyra had brought out an Etna cartridge that some preferred to the Atlas, but I wasn't convinced I wanted to transfer my affections to it.

Then came word about a year ago that Lyra had come out with a super-low-output version of the Etna. Like the Atlas, the Etna uses a titanium center structure, but it also features an outer body constructed from aircraft-grade aluminum, which is supposed to help reduce vibrations. It's a line contact stylus with a diamond-coated boron cantilever. I set the tracking force at 1.72 grams, as Lyra recommends.

 symmetry

t: 01727 865488

e: [info@symmetry-systems.co.uk](mailto:info@symmetry-systems.co.uk)

w: [www.symmetry-systems.co.uk](http://www.symmetry-systems.co.uk)

The reduced windings and lower internal impedance of the Etna are supposed to improve resolution and detail, though a step-up transformer or phonostage capable of supplying sufficient gain are musts. Memories of the Helikon SL and its superior performance started to flit through my mind. How could I not take the Etna for a test drive? A few months ago a phone call ensued to importer Joe Harley of AudioQuest. A day later a spanking new Etna SL was on my doorstep. All that remained was to install it and break it in. Or so I thought.

The truth is that immediately upon installation the Etna SL mesmerized me, even before it had logged some real playing time. I plopped on an album of French trumpeter Maurice Andre and his brother Lionel playing Albinoni duo concertos on the Angel label. I have always adored this LP, which I procured as a lad at the late lamented National Record Mart—remember when record stores were ubiquitous?—in Pittsburgh, PA, but more for the music and the verve with which the Andres played than for the sonics. Nutty as it may sound, I've always been hoping that I could hear these tracks in their full glory, sans distortion and fuzziness. The Etna SL pulled it off. Brass is always treacherous to reproduce on LP—the explosiveness of the bore of trumpets seems often to engender a bit of haze and smearing—but the transient precision of the Etna SL was so accurate that it nailed the trumpets in each channel. There was also a blackness to the background and a creaminess to the midrange that seems to suppress noise while widening the dynamic envelope.

**"The truth is that immediately upon installation the Etna SL mesmerized me."**

I heard similar qualities on an EMI pressing of Andre playing piccolo trumpet of concertos by Telemann and Johann Wilhelm Hertel. The layering of the soundstage seemed to open up as the oboes echoed the trumpet. Each instrument was firmly located in its space rather than wavering, thereby adding a notable sense of verisimilitude to the proceedings. Nor did the cartridge fracture the sound in the highest reaches of the piccolo trumpet, an area where Andre excelled. The Etna SL focused the image to such a degree that I felt it was coming a lot closer to the lithe and jaunty sound that I recall hearing from attending several concerts by Andre several decades ago when he was in his prime.

The Etna SL also doesn't appear to give up anything on dynamics. I place a premium on "jump factor." It's what makes music come alive. The Etna benefits from its superbly low noise floor. By playing softly so well it sets up the terrain for thunderous fortissimos to emerge as something of a surprise.

I found the Etna so easy to listen to that it had me reaching for albums that I either haven't heard or forgotten about. One such LP was Trinity on the Inner City Records label. It was recorded in 1975 and features an all-star cast of Tommy Flanagan, Ron Carter, and Roy Haynes.

On the tune "52nd Street Theme," I was taken aback both by the increased clarity of the cymbal swishes and the refulgent power of the drums, which the Etna conveyed with ease. Haynes has never been shy about cutting loose, and the Etna displayed his prodigious whacks to great effect. On the next cut "Smooth As the Wind," the sound had an ineffable quality to it that seduced me into listening through the rest of the album out of sheer curiosity—just to hear how the Etna would fare.



The same thing occurred on a Duke Ellington LP on the Fantasy label simply called *The Pianist*. Some of my favorite jazz recordings are of Ellington with small groups. On this album he plays for the most part with John Lamb on bass and Sam Woodyard on drums. The percussive effects of Ellington's piano playing came through very well and the bass lines were firm and solid. So relaxed was the Etna that I found myself listening to both sides almost before I knew it.

It was the ease of listening to the Etna that I found most riveting. The greatest contrast between the Etna and Atlas comes down to musicality. The overt excitement of the Atlas does come at a bit of cost. In comparison, I would have to concede that the Atlas does sound a bit hyped on some recordings.

Consider piano. On a Deutsche Grammophon pressing of Wilhelm Kempff playing the Goldberg Variations, I was bowled over by the delicate shadings and colors that the Etna extracted. One step closer to what Kempff really intended when he produced this recording. Above all, it's the ability of the Etna to render a true pianissimo with utter clarity that makes it such a breathtaking cartridge. There is a gravity to the sound—unrushed, unhurried, unforced—coupled with great resolution. If the transients are precisely sounded, it's also the case that the decays seem to linger on a pinch longer than with the Atlas. The sound, for lack of a better word, is more analog. This lack of grain endows the Etna with a sense of gliding through the grooves rather than tracking an LP. A sense of space and time is suspended, leaving only music hovering in the air.

Nowhere was this more poignantly conveyed than on a Harmonia Mundi recording of Bach's cantata *Actus Tragicus*. If voice is the most difficult instrument to capture, then the Etna came through with flying colors. I'm not ashamed to admit that I was deeply moved listening to the legendary Dutch soprano Elly Ameling singing about the transience of life—her voice rendered with greater fidelity by the Etna than I have ever heard before. To hear her consummate artistry reproduced at this level was simply riveting.

While the name Etna may bring to mind volcanic eruptions, the fact is that this cartridge's greatest strength is its ability to permit your system to capture the most ethereal aspects of a recording. It may require a waiting time to acquire one as Lyra can only produce a limited number. But ultimately your real concern is likely to be whether you can pull yourself away from it. The Etna SL is the most addictive cartridge I have heard.

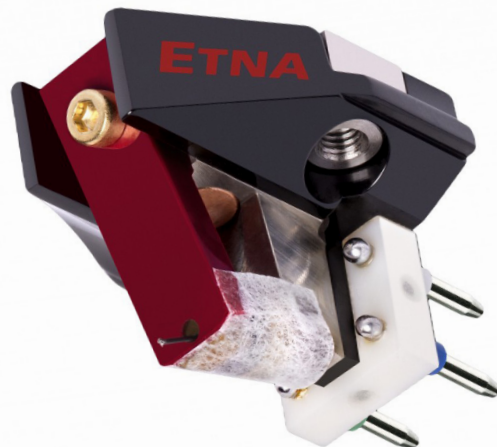
## Specificatons

Type: Moving coil

Output: 0.25mV

Frequency response: 10Hz–50Hz

Cartridge weight: 9.2g



 symmetry