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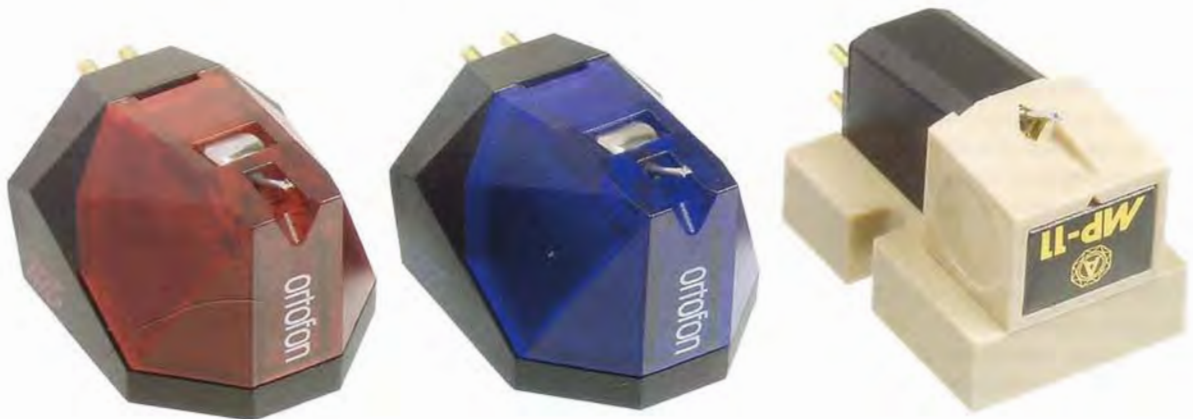
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8 PAGES OF YOUR HI-FI QUESTIONS ANSWERED

Progress Report

Vinyl replay has come a long way since the 1970s, with new developments seemingly every month. Ortofon's brand new 2M Red and Blue moving magnets are the company's latest cartridge offerings, promising far superior sound to the old 520 range. So how do they compare to a thirty year old classic budget MM, such as Nagaoka's MP11? Noel Keywood couldn't resist finding out...



It is not everyday that Ortofon announce a new range of budget moving magnet cartridges. In fact, the last time this happened was well over a decade ago, and whilst the brand has been very strong with moving coils, their MMs never really made the same impact. In fact, you need to go as far back as the late nineteen seventies, when the likes of the FF15E and VMS20E were automatic choices for those seeking high quality affordable moving magnets, to find Ortofon leading this particular market.

Britain is a tough retail environment for cartridge manufacturers, as local boys Goldring have a small range of easy to use and inexpensive moving magnet cartridges that sound superb - and it is this brand that has caused Ortofon trouble of late. Back in the eighties however, the must-have budget moving was the Nagaoka MP11. This was a really decent little device, but seemed to disappear from view in the nineties. So when we spotted this old name on the Musonic website, we were surprised to say the least.

At £30 it is about as cheap as they come - so inexpensive that you might wonder whether it will damage your records - but many moons ago I found Nagaoka cartridges were clever designs and was impressed.

The surprise realisation that they were still on sale here in the UK meant that a reappraisal was hard to resist, and what better product to put these brand new 'state of the art' Ortofons in context?

Was the current MP11 a true unreconstructed oldie I wondered (Denon DL103 style), or had Nagaoka tweaked it here and there to keep up form? Only tests would tell. Nagaoka (and Denon) may well be content to offer today products they were making last century, but others have moved on. The Ortofons are bang up to date in their sound. Their price is a little more serious too, at £60 for the 2M Red and £120 for the 2M Blue. So we're not quite comparing like with like in this little review, so much as taking a close look at what you can get without spending a fortune and asking whether the march of progress actually brings any benefits. As cartridges have now become acceptable second-hand buys on eBay, our letters pages show, this review also identifies what to expect from an oldie.

Cartridges are characterful things with their own strengths and drawbacks, as any user of a Decca London Blue can attest. At this budget level I tend to ask myself whether a cartridge masks or reveals

the loveliness of LP played properly - and whether it causes damage or not! And whilst I choose to use an Ortofon Kontrapunkt b moving coil with an Eastern Electric Minimax valve phono stage, I have a lot of time and regard for moving magnet cartridges, being something of a Goldring fan. They may not have the see-through clarity of MCs, nor the delicacy of reproduction, but good ones can be a lot of fun to listen to, yet cost peanuts, as this review shows...

ORTOFON 2M RED AND BLUE

Both Ortofon 2M cartridges have neat synthetic bodies, with parallel sides that facilitate accurate alignment in the headshell. The area behind the stylus is sculpted away. They are compact designs that will physically fit any headshell easily, and the weight is right too, at 6.5gms being a value any arm can balance out. The stylus assembly has a removable cover, that removes easily when you know how; it takes a little study.

As in any moving magnet design, the stylus is removable to enable easy replacement. Ortofon suggest you remove the stylus assembly before fitting the cartridge, but the cover is usually sufficient if you have an arm with a removable headshell and steady hands. Another useful

feature is that the 2M bodies have tapped holes for fixing screws, eliminating the need for fiddling with small spanners and nuts, and making fitment easier.

The budget Red has an elliptical stylus mounted on a rondel to distance the stylus cantilever from the record surface so that fluff and rubbish don't collect easily, to cause mistracking. The more expensive Blue is for those who can afford an LP cleaner and are likely to use it as well! The stylus is 'nude', meaning it is bonded naked to the cantilever tube. The makes the cartridge more sensitive to dust on discs, but it isn't a problem if they are given a quick wipe before use. The benefit is lower tip mass and better tracking, although the Blue isn't enormously better than the Red in this respect.

The most significant feature of these new cartridges was revealed by measurement: frequency response is such that they will possess none of the warmth in their sound of old designs. As is common, the less expensive model, the Red, has been engineered for a less bright and more forgiving sound than the more expensive Blue, but by any standard do not expect either to sound warm. You can expect the Blue to have better resolved treble too, from a more sophisticated stylus profile.

SOUND QUALITY

Listening to this little group, there was no doubt which were the new 'cutting edge' cartridges, and which was the nineteen seventies classic. The difference in presentation was marked, and throws what Ortofon are trying to do with the new 2M series into sharp relief. The 2M Blue is a cartridge that reveals what's on a disc with a ruthlessly forensic approach that is a world away from the classic Nagaoka, or most other cartridges if it comes to that.

This £120 moving magnet gave me Tracey Chapman in vivid detail, close in front of me

singing 'Talking 'Bout a Revolution.' There was seemingly little I could not hear of this performance. Bass was tightly controlled and there was plenty of timbral character to be heard within instruments, instead of the generous but not especially informative bass of the Nagaoka. As usual I felt the cartridge worked well in the Rega RB250 arm we use for budget designs, its rigid tube ensuring the 2M Blue gave good stereo across the lower midband, as well as firm bass.

With Phil Collins 'Hello I Must be Going' album there was a brightness to backing horns that ensured they cut through the mix with a vigour that you will not hear elsewhere at this price, if with some lightness of body about them. Not surprisingly cymbals had a ringing presence too. Here I get to an interesting caveat with this cartridge: it possesses little ability to gloss over mediocre recordings.

With a modern cut like The Scissor Sisters 'I Don't Feel Like Dancin', from an album that spins at 45rpm no less, I got the freshest delivery I've ever heard, short of a moving coil. This track had a clarity in its vocals and a speed to its bass that defies price rivals, but whilst the 2M Blue's balance suits such material, it's less flattering with run of the mill oldies that are less than perfect. For example, I spun The Waterboys 'Preparing to Fly', from their 1993 album 'Dream Harder' - not a paragon of good sound quality, granted - and it sounded light in its bass, although extremely well resolved

in its vocals. Moving to 45rpm singles with accentuated bass, such as the Goldfrapp 'Ooh La La', another modern pressing with good recording and cutting quality, and the Blue delivered the most



composed and tightly ordered sound I've heard from any moving magnet cartridge.

So Ortofon's new 2M Blue is very much a modern day, high resolution cartridge, especially suitable for modern recordings. It stands in stark contrast to a golden oldie like the Nagaoka MPI I, which would gloss over the poor balance of the Waterboys album when the Blue tells it like it is. The MPI I is not a revealing cartridge - quite the reverse

VERDICT [5 stars]

2M RED
Ultra modern design that brings new levels of detail to the price, but lacks richness that some crave.

FOR
- ease of fitment
- tracking
- detail

AGAINST
- lacking in richness

VERDICT [5 stars]

2M BLUE
Exceptional insight and smoothness allied to fine tracking makes this a great buy for those seeking a modern sound.

FOR
- ease of fitment
- tracking
- superb insight

AGAINST
- lacks warmth

ORTOFON 2M RED	£60
ORTOFON 2M BLUE	£120
Distributed by Henley Designs	
☎ +44 (0)1235 511166	
www.henleydesigns.co.uk	

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

A notable feature of the new Ortofon 2M Moving Magnet cartridges is a frequency response that tilts slowly upward as frequency rises. I have never seen such a trend before in any cartridge. It suggests they will sound forward and detailed, certainly lacking the traditional warmth of MMs. The £60 budget Red has a little less upper treble than the Blue, so the latter will be a tad more incisive and revealing.

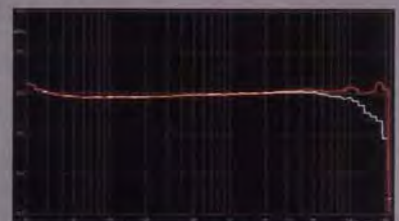
Midband tracking was much the same with both, the top torture track being negotiated, but only just, with a little mistracking on one channel. In the midband, the Blue has a more obvious advantage, due to the lower tip mass of its stylus assembly, where a nude diamond is used. Vertical tracking angle was high with both, which raised vertical modulation distortion to 5%. The Blue was a little better here measuring exactly 30 degrees against 33 of the Red. Output was high from both models, measuring 7mV at 5cms/sec rms.

Expect a forward, highly detailed sound from these cartridges, possibly with some brightness. They measure well, following modern trends toward a bright balance that delivers detail and insight. NK

Tracking force	1.8gms
Weight	6gms
Vertical tracking angle	
Red/Blue	33/30degrees
Frequency response	20Hz - 20kHz
Channel separation	25/23dB

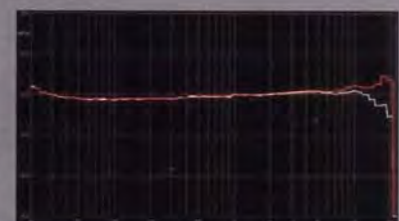
Tracking ability (300Hz)	
lateral	80µm
vertical	45µm
lateral (1kHz)	
	20/23cms/sec.
Distortion (45µm)	
lateral	Red/Blue
vertical	1.4/0.8%
vertical	5.4/5%
Output (5cms/sec rms)	
	7mV

FREQUENCY RESPONSE 2M RED



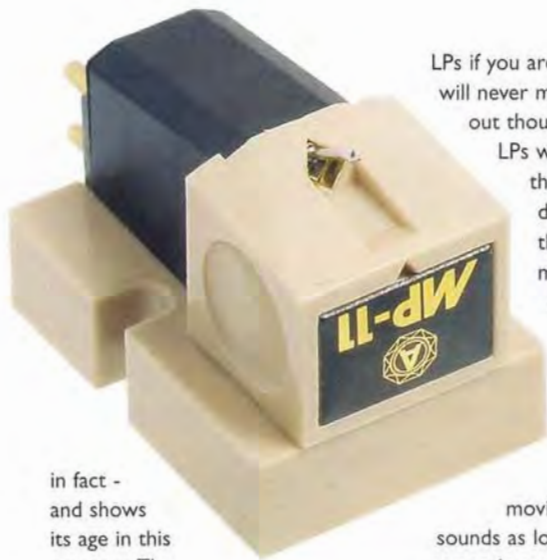
Red - Outer grooves
White - Inner grooves

FREQUENCY RESPONSE 2M BLUE



Red - Outer grooves
White - Inner grooves





LPs if you are cash-strapped, as it will never mistrack. I ought to point out though, that if you play old LPs with a new cartridge like this you may well hear the damage imprinted into the groove walls by the mistracking of previous cartridges.

SOUND QUALITY

As we've shown, the Nagaoka MP11 is no match for either of the Ortofon 2M moving magnets, but it still sounds as lovely as ever. It is truly romantic sounding device, giving a sepia-tinted, soft outlined picture rather than an in-your-face presentation, 2007-stylee. The class of its act is very apparent in some areas. It comes across as superbly relaxed and in control, a real effortless delivery that demands a visit to the port cabinet and perhaps ignition of a big, fat cigar (I don't touch either, but somehow it all seems appropriate) as you relax to listen to your record collection.

There's no edginess or insecurity to be heard here, largely as a result of its fabulous tracking ability and that rolled off treble, at least, through an Eastern Electric Minimax valve phono stage with no additional capacitive loading applied. In an SME M2-10 arm there was oodles of bass and its quality wasn't too bad. I might say slightly fulsome and rounded, but not as gloopy as I have heard. I suspect the Japanese like large bass though, as the MP11 reminds me a little of the Denon here. Stereo images were firm and stably positioned on a stage that was wide. However, the warmth of the sound was apparent and there was no great focus to images, just believable solidity. Nor was there any great detail in the treble to be heard.

Some might say the MP11 lacks real pace, but what you lose on the swings you simply get back on the roundabouts with this design. It is creamy smooth sounding, admittedly a bit opaque by modern standards, totally relaxing and supremely confident. It also clean and dynamic in a most unchallenging way. Much like Shure's

similarly long-in-the-tooth M97xE the smooth sophistication of the sound is a treat, if not for the critical of ear. This is one to go with the carpet slippers. As such it is £30 well spent insofar as you will relax and enjoy what you hear, although it is a long way off what is possible from a £120 Goldring quite frankly, and in a different world to the analytical Ortofons.

Run through a solid-state Trichord Diablo phono stage with 400pF loading applied internally across the input sockets the MP11 predictably sounded brighter, but still opaque and less smooth. Some may prefer it but the MP11 doesn't become a Koetsu. Those with a soldering iron and a few 400pF capacitors may like to try this all the same.

CONCLUSION

I really liked the sound of this cartridge. It was blissfully smooth, broad staged and dynamically powerful. You don't get high levels of insight or detail, but all the same for £30 there's plenty of enjoyment to be had. In summary then, the Nagaoka MP11 proved a dramatic counterpoint to the new Ortofon 2Ms - residing at opposite ends of the scale. One is warm, fluffy and romantic, the others are forensically revealing and intensely communicative. One is already a classic, while the other two deserve to be so in thirty years time.

in fact - and shows its age in this company. The new Ortofons really do show how vinyl has moved on, in recording quality as well as replay ability.

The inexpensive Red was a very interesting proposition at its low price. It lacks the top end bite, but also top end detail of the Blue's stylus, yet it still comes over as clear and open in its sound, with a fine tone on good material. Surprisingly, it also has more powerful low bass, making it muscular and weighty on well recorded discs.

In a nutshell then, the new Ortofon 2M Blue and Red moving magnet cartridges offer a thoroughly modern sound that suits today's albums. Both are highly revealing and an engaging listen that is nothing other than very impressive at the price.

NAGAOKA MP11

One look at the MP11's bodywork is enough to convince any potential buyer that this little cartridge is from the functional design school and not a candidate for any Museum of Modern Art. Never mind though, as those boxy parallel sides are just what is wanted for accurate alignment in an arm's headshell. Skew in the headshell raises distortion considerably, from around 1% up to 2% or more, so the MP11's boxiness is no bad thing. Weighing in at 6.8gms it is also a perfect match for the balancing system of every arm, as all can cope with 6-10gms.

At the price the Nagaoka's MP11 comes in simple packaging by Shure standards, but this is of little consequence in itself, as it's the cartridge that matters and here Nagaoka, I found, have maintained standards. Tests showed that at the recommended tracking force of 2gms - very close to Goldring and Ortofon's use of 1.8gms, note - the MP11 sailed through all tracking tests with an ease that few can match at any price. Consequently, the MP11 is a fine choice for preserving valuable

VERDICT ●●●●●
Budget classic with fantastic tracking and cuddly, warm sound. A starter cartridge that cannot be beaten.

NAGAOKA MP11 £30
Musonic (UK) Ltd.
+44 (0)208 950 5151
www.musonic.co.uk

FOR
- confident, relaxed sound
- superb tracking
- low price

AGAINST
- lacks insight

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

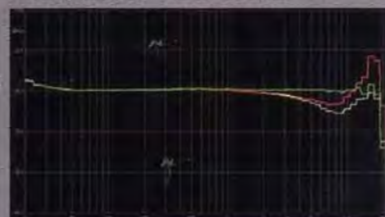
The MP11 has amazing tracking ability for a budget cartridge: it cleared all test tracks with ease, even torture tracks few cartridges can manage, with a secure and undistorted performance at 2gms downforce in an SME M2-10! It will sound confident and relaxed even on loud vocal passages. This will be helped by a warmth in its sound imposed by the falling treble due to generator losses, as our frequency response graph (red trace) shows. Here, the MP11 betrays its age; modern MMs like Goldrings don't suffer this anymore. However, with 400pF loading, the frequency response measured ruler flat (green trace), so the MP11 can be tweaked to become unusually accurate in its basic tonal balance.

A vertical tracking angle of exactly 22degrees resulted in unusually low distortion on vertical modulation (left and right images), making this a low distortion cartridge overall. Output was high at 5.4mV and channel separation also high at 33dB.

The MP11 measures exceptionally well. It is a superb cartridge at the price and will give a fine sound if properly loaded. NK

Tracking force	2gms
Weight	6.8gms
Vertical tracking angle	>30degrees
Frequency response	20Hz - 20kHz
Channel separation	32dB
Tracking ability (300Hz)	
lateral	90µm
vertical	45µm
lateral (1kHz)	25cms/sec.
Distortion (45µm)	
lateral	0.85%
vertical	1.3%
Output (5cms/sec rms)	5.4mV

FREQUENCY RESPONSE



Red - Outer grooves
White - Inner grooves
Green - Outer grooves + 400pF