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ZYX R50 BLOOM 3 PHONO CARTRIDGE

REVIEW / ZYX / R50 BLOOM 3 PHONO CARTRIDGE (LOW OUTPUT)

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Distributor: Pure Music Group
\$1300 RRP

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In Full Bloom

I don't know what one hand clapping sounds like; but leaving aside the Zen elements of audio appreciation, in the real world I know what one loose screw does to the sound of the new ZYX R50 Bloom 3, moving coil cartridge.

After installing the Bloom 3 on an SME V tonearm gracing a newly acquired SME 20/2 turntable, I was expecting to hear good things from a system made up of an Elektra pre/power amplifier driving Wilson Audio Sasha speakers.

Something wasn't quite right. The sound failed to snap into focus so I went about the routine of checking cable phasing, turntable levelling and all the other audio trifles I usually obsess over.

Audiophiles know this parody really well. Most will tell you it's usually the most obvious thing that's out of sync. They'll also tell you mischievously, what's most obvious usually turns out to be opaque, and the last thing that springs habitually to mind.

So it went for days until I noticed the finger lift on the SME V was slightly askew. Buzzer!

I'd tightened one screw, but for some scatter-brained reason not the other. Cartridge screw tightening isn't an exact science. But I won't forgive the horde of UK based reviewers who advocated tightening these vital screws to within a mm of their working life. That was back in the 70's and I won't list the number of cartridge bodies I destroyed following this "advice".

I'm pleased to report turntable gurus the calibre of Stereophile's Mike Fremer take a more adult view of the process, these days. Their advice? Tight but not stupidly tight. Duh.

I reinstalled both screws, careful not to overdo the amount of pressure applied via my Allen key.

Within microseconds, the ZYX Bloom 3 locked into focus. Relieved I allowed the system to warm up and started the breaking in process, before the review could be said to begin.

The ZYX has now had about 50 hours of playtime. Whilst hardly broken in it sounds decidedly nicer than it did spanking new. I won't swear the differences heard are the proverbial chalk and cheese. They're not in the order of magnitude so audible a layman could pick the sound of the brand new cartridge, from the same one that's clocked up 50 hours of hugging a vinyl groove.

"Burning in" is much more subtle than that. With electronics and speakers it exhibits as sweeter higher frequencies, more detail overall and a tighter bass.

With cartridges, it's all of the above along with a "rightness" to the sound that has to be heard, rather than described.

The caveat is, good cartridges and great gear in general benefit from burning in. But inferior products will sound just as lousy as they did new, even if the owner spent an eternity running them in. Proving in audio and life, you can't buff a turd.

A Little Company History

ZYX is a Japanese company. This should tell you its bona fides (which is Latin for honesty and sincerity of intention), is in my book, an automatic lock.

I travelled to Japan several times a year for 25 years in my role with the Herald Sun newspaper, mostly visiting audio video manufacturing plants. What I saw was an almost bordering-on-fanatical national commitment to quality control I've not seen rivalled anywhere else. Not even Germany, a country whose manufacturing ethos is stunningly high.

The soul of the company is founder Mr. Nakatsuka San, who is also president and chief engineer. He has worked extensively in audio and his achievements include the development of the first optical cartridge and a stint in Denmark with Ortofon, where he designed a signature model MC-20.

ZYX takes its name from the analogue three-dimensional elements comprising Time (Z), Amplitude (Y) and Frequency (X). The company website lists three series called the Ultimate, R50 and Mono series encompassing ten cartridges, three of which are mono. Prices range from \$1300 to \$12,600. Price tags that should put the Bloom 3's performance per dollar in perspective. Simply, this newbie ZYX cartridge at \$1300 will give music lovers much more than they pay for.

The Technicalities

The Bloom 3 has a tracking force of 2 grams and a channel balance of 0.5dB (1kHz). It's a medium compliance model with an internal impedance of 4 ohms and a recommended load impedance of 100 ohms.

With a net weight of 5 grams, the Bloom 3 has a rigid black aluminium cantilever fitted with a line contact stylus. All important output voltage is 0.24mV and the frequency response is 10Hz-100kHz. The Bloom 3's cartridge case is non-metallic and made of a sturdy plastic synthetic material. ZYX gives

The R50 Series consists of just one model, the Bloom 3 and the subject of this review. A cartridge name I like to think, was inspired by Japan's famed cherry blossoms that must be seen to be believed. In a memorable scene from *The Last Samurai*, the diminutive Tom Cruise asks the head samurai, Ken Watanabe why he's meditating on the blossoms on a cheery tree. His response: "You could spend your whole life looking at the blooms of a cherry tree. And it wouldn't be a wasted life." I like that.

a number of reasons for its rejection of a metallic case. One of these is a synthetic case stops eddy currents forming in the case that would otherwise affect the generator output signal.

Scanned under a stereomicroscope, the Bloom 3's cantilever and stylus are top quality and so is the skill used to assemble this cartridge, by hand. Reiterating my point about Japanese manufacturing quality. Up close this cartridge leaves little to be desired build wise, at its price point.



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Setting Up

Tuning in a cartridge to the tonearm carrying it relative to the turntable platter is a tiresome and exacting chore. There are no shortcuts. My procedure is to mount the cartridge and set a horizontal tracking angle before moving on to the vertical tracking weight and bias force.

Normally I opt to give a cartridge a tracking force at the higher end of the range recommended by the manufacturer. The tool I use to begin the process is a decades old but still pristine Hi-Fi News and Record Reviews Test Disc. But I need to stress this disc is simply a good guide but not the final arbiter of tracking weight, bias force and horizontal tracking angle. I align my cartridges to sound best playing my albums, not a test disc. My routine includes looking at the rake of the stylus under a microscope before I mount the cartridge on the tonearm.

This gives me a rough guide to the horizontal tracking angle. But largely I do the final adjustments by ear using albums and tracks I know intimately. The same applies to cartridge loading.

The ZYX Bloom 3's tracking weight gave the best sound at its manufacturer's recommended tracking force of 2 grams. It also required the arm to be slightly higher than horizontal which meant the back of the Bloom 3 was raised relative to the record on the platter because I felt this cartridge needed a little more sparkle in the treble.

Raising the back of most cartridges highlights treble but at the expense of some thinning of the midrange and bass. Conversely, lowering tonearms below their horizontal axis can bring a more fulsome midrange and bass but the price paid is a rolled off treble.

The idea, for cartridges that require the tonearm to be slightly raised or lowered from the horizontal position, is to make this adjustment in tiny increments stopping as soon as you hear mid and bass frequencies affected.

As for bias adjustment, I settled on 1.8 grams and adjusted the SME V so it had the barest of silicon dampening applied. The ZYX leaves the factory superbly dampened to reduce resonances.

The user adjustable settings on the never less than excellent RCM Sensor 2 phono stage allows endless experimentation. With the Bloom 3 and in the context of my system, the manufacturer's specification of 100 Ohms sounded best.



Sound Quality

Eric Bogle's album *Not The Worst Of Bogle* carries the unforgettable, anti-war Australian anthem called, 'The Band Played Waltzing Matilda'. It's an easy tracking chore for any cartridge, but it was chosen for its ability to shine light on tonal quality and detail retrieval.

The elements of this song are twofold: Bogle's voice and piano. The Bloom 3 preserved Bogle's Scottish accent to a tee, highlighting his pronunciations of consonants that require sibilance to be created through the use of the mouth and tongue.

The sound was full of detail and I could imagine a little spittle escaping the Bogle mouth during a live performance. As for tonal purity, the Bloom 3 had the uncanny ability to reproduce the purity of each piano key including any tonal overhang. As for detail, you could tell precisely where the piano was facing relative to

Bogle. You simply peered into the deep, wide soundstage and listened where each of the piano's 88 keys were.

Moving on to **Neil Young's** album, *After The Gold Rush* and the glorious track called 'Birds' to see what the Bloom could bring in the way of imaging, proved a revelatory experience for a cartridge at this price point.

Picture Young's voice against a background of interweaving vocals supplied by Danny Whitten, Nils Lofgren and Steve Stills and the effect is almost hallucinatory. So much so I stopped taking notes and imagined I was back in my undergrad years with my friends, rolling one on the cover of **Floyd's** *Atom Heart Mother*.

A cartridge has to do more than present detail, provide a soundstage, preserve timing and pace, elicit a natural tonal quality and respond to transients like

a mountain gazelle to earn my recommendation. It must keep all these elements together without drawing attention to any single element of the aural picture etched in your listening room.

The Bloom 3 qualities that should command your attention were its poise, solidity and its organic presentation of the music. Nothing seemed to be highlighted which is another way of saying the Bloom 3 has a well-balanced sound.

But can this mid-priced offering from ZYX rock as well as stroll through the music? Undoubtedly as the torturous track 'Biscuit' from the **Finks** album, *Wheels Turn Beneath My Feet* amply displays.

Biscuits is a menacing track carried by evil amounts of percussion aided by a driving, relentless rhythm and disarming lyrics. The new ZYX dug into the groove and seemed to fling

the lyrics and accompaniment straight in your face. So much so, I had to turn down the volume a little as I winced at the amount of attack coming my way from the ZYX.

Such is the name of the reviewing game that Fink was followed by the **Vegh Quartet's** playing of the *Late Beethoven String Quartets*, and in turn came some Joni Mitchell, Jesse Winchester, The Blue Nile and some early Dylan. Anything except jazz is grist for my reviewing mill.

Whatever I played, the ZYX didn't disappoint cementing its ability to delve in to all genres with an even hand. If I had to describe the leading features of its character, I'd say it was poised and truly refined. It never gets flustered, is slightly tonally warm and it digs out heaps of detail. But it isn't perfect.

In Comparison

Equipment designers eventually have to trade off some aspects of performance. With amplifiers, it might be speed and attack at the expense of hardness. With the ZYX I'm guessing Mr. Nakatsuka San voiced the Bloom 3 to reproduce nearly the entire frequency range with neutrality and precision. But perhaps limited by price constraints that are not a consideration with ZYX's top models, something had to give, and my feeling is that "something" relates to the highest frequencies.

I confirmed this by doing a comparison with my older ZYX

R50 Bloom H/tb cartridge that was similarly priced at about \$1300. The importer, Pure Music Group, says the Bloom 3 should have been dearer but exchange rates kept the price down.

A rare, recently refurbished Kiseki Purple Heart which these days is about \$5000 was also pitted against the Bloom 3 to highlight at what point the law of cartridge diminishing returns kicks in.

The Bloom 3's uppermost frequencies are not rolled off, and they're populated by plenty of subliminal detail. But they lack a subtlety that cartridges

such as the much costlier Lyras, Dynavector 17D and the Purple Heart have. It's an almost subliminal ability to accelerate and give the most delicate higher frequencies a sheen or spark, that is only micros of a second in duration.

A performance parameter that catches you by surprise when you hear it for the first time, and miss it when it's absent. If anything highlights the law of diminishing returns in audio, it's this cartridge characteristic. Which shows, as you move up the price points from the Bloom 3 at \$1300 to say \$3000, the

gains are subtle but some buyers see them as non-negotiable.

Both ZYX's cartridges had the same family sound that features a slightly warm but still very natural tonal quality. Both retrieve stacks of detail and track well. But compared to the new Bloom 3, my older ZYX has noticeably less treble vibrancy and doesn't delve quite as deeply in the bass frequencies. Not fatal. But still audible in a side-by-side shoot out.

With the Bloom 3 you gain more of everything and the gains are audible.

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

TECHNICAL DATA			
Type / Moving Coil (Dynamic) "REAL STEREO" Generator System	Channel Separation / >30dB (1kHz)	EQ Compliance vertical / 12×10-6cm/dyne	Contact Radius, Life Time / 6µm×35µm, 2000Hour/2.0gm
Cryogenic Treatment / Temperature: -196 °C (-320oF)	Channel Balance / <0.5dB (1kHz)	Internal Impedance / 4.0Ω	Output Terminals / φ1.25mm gold plated (EIA)
Output Voltage / 0.24mV (3.54cm/sec, 1kHz)	Recommended Tracking Force / 2.0gm (20°C-25°C)	Load Impedance / >100Ω	Terminal Board / Glass Epoxy Plate
Frequency Response / 10 Hz - 100 kHz	Tracking Force Range / 1.7gm - 2.5gm	Coil Wire / 6N OFCφ0.035mm	Dimensions / 16.2mm(W)×19.7mm(L)×x17.6mm(H)
±1dB / 20 Hz - 20 kHz	Trackability / >60µm/2.0gm	Cantilever Material / Black ALMg5 tube φ0.45×φ0.30mm	Net Weight / 5.0gm, 7.7gm(TB), 9.5gm(SB)
	EQ Compliance horizontal / 15×10-6cm/dyne	Stylus / Line-contact Solid Diamond 0.1mm	



Conclusion

Cartridge buyers should approach the Bloom 3 for the thoroughbred model that it is. Sonically it punches well above its price point. The Bloom 3 is a kosher audiophile grade moving coil cartridge that will more than satisfy anyone lusting after a high-end cartridge, without the high-end price tag.

Moreover it will work nicely with a broad range of tonearms, and once installed won't provide a minute of grief thanks to its low anxiety, solid Japanese build quality.

Highly recommended.

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