

Skyanalog P-1M & P-1G: absolute bargains

Monday, August 19, 2024
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Skyanalog P-1M & P-1G MC cartridges

Cartridges are right at the sharp end of groove information retrieval, in every sense of that phrase. Whether it's a wax cylinder, 78rpm shellac disc or a vinyl record, the cartridge is where the music starts. Stylus tip shape is an often-debated subject too, and many engineers have spent a lot of time trying to work out which tip shape is best. I think the real answer lies in which stylus shape fits which particular groove profile. As a basic get out of jail a spherical stylus will probably do a creditable job in most circumstances, but once you strive for replay nirvana, it's almost a case of a different shape for each record label (loud sound of can of worms being opened).

Similarly, cartridge generator technology comes in many forms, from strain gauge, squeezing crystals, and waving either a coil in a magnetic field, or a magnet within a set of static coils. And now the (not-so-new) kid on the block is the optical cartridge (though it was first patented in the 1930s) which obviates some of the electro-mechanical vagaries of some of the other technologies.

Enter Skyanalog

Skyanalog was founded some 25 years ago in Jiangmen, southern China. Such was the quality of their early work that they soon became a favoured OEM manufacturer for a number of worldwide brands, and in the process refined and honed their own research and core technologies departments. In 2019 they brought out the Skyanalog name, and launched a cartridge range – the G' series' – to critical acclaim. Building on the the belief that the audio system should serve the musical art their range has slowly expanded, including their own reference models, and a little lower down in the range, the P series.

The P-series is a small range of finely-crafted MC cartridges. There are four models; the P-1, P-2, P-1M and P-1 Green. Here I'm taking a peek at the P-1M and the G(reen) as the earlier P-1 and P-2, though fine cartridges in their own right are being discontinued. Both the cartridges in this review have the (claimed) benefit of the new Yan damping system. This has been the result of a number of carefully-thought-through enhancements. These include optimising the spring in the cantilever support, carefully-chosen damping materials which preserve the audio signal rather than detract anything from it. The rubber compound is actually quite stiff but has been chosen so as to not compromise frequency response (and also to reduce any unwanted resonances) or transient capability, nor to compromise trackability. We shall see.



In general I'm unhappy doing comparison reviews where a number of similar items are compared and contrasted. However, in this case the only real difference between the P-1G and the P-1M is the stylus shape. If you check out the specs you'll see that the stylus dimensions are $5 \times 150 \mu\text{M}$ and $5 \times 250 \mu\text{M}$ respectively. Their outputs are virtually identical at 0.35 and 0.4mV. The only other spec of note is the frequency response which is 20-20k in the P-1M and 20-25k in the P-1G.

In use I employed both MC_step-up transformers into an on-board phono stage, and also a couple of MC phono stages. The recommended loading is 100-220 Ohms but even 30 Ohms didn't audibly affect performance, and nor did 500 Ohms, so there's a degree of flexibility in how you use them. A number of arms were used in their evaluation, namely an SME 3012, a Supatrac Blackbird and a Groovemaster 4. The turntable remained my stalwart SME 20.

Sound quality

The P-1G hit the grooves first (both cartridges having been used for a couple of weeks prior to dedicated listening), to give both a fair run-in period. (Skyanalog recommend 30 plus hours).





The P-1G is a very open, insightful and clear cartridge. Its recommended tracking force is a low 1.1 to 1.4 grammes. I eventually settled on a shade under 1.3 which seemed to allow the cartridge to perform at its best. It managed to portray a very stable stereo image on two-channel material, and a very solid central image on mono material.

Mussorgsky's *Night on a Bare Mountain* (CFP101 – a much underrated performance in my view) with the LPO conducted by Mackerras has much to commend it. There's a real rasp to the brass, and the bass drum and lower strings have a real weight and dexterity to them. The P-1G didn't fault at all, remaining transparent throughout (despite the busyness of the performance) and even the strings playing *sforzando* failed to unsettle it. Included on the same disc is Tchaikovsky's *1812* with the much revered cannon fire. Again the P-1G performed flawlessly. It's not as dynamic a disc as the revered Telarc rendering, but creditable nevertheless. There was an obvious contrast between the thump of the cannon shot and the ringing tones of the tubular bells, neither being compromised by the other in the aural mix.

The next album was the Louis Bellson Big Band's *Night Flight* from their album *London Scene*, recorded live in 1981. Really well recorded on Concord Jazz (CJ-157) the frenetic pace of this track is beautifully captured and portrayed by the P-1G. Despite the complex mix and latino rhythms the P-1G remained poised, refined and laid bare the shrill brass and the fast attack and timbral nuances of Tristan Fry's percussion (especially in his solo). The cymbals were realistically portrayed – no mean feat – with the side drum and rim shots adding excitement to a fantastically engaging performance.

Many regard the female voice as the acid test of whether a cartridge can perform. I didn't inflict Florence Foster Jenkins on either variant this time – there's a time and place for everything, and this, frankly, wasn't it. However, Kiri Te Kanawa's schmalzy album *Blue Skies* on Decca (414 666-2) presents a more mellow side of the female voice. Despite being a digital recording (proudly boasted on the cover) this has a really nice analogue feel. Nelson Riddle's arrangements are really quite exceptional, and while it's easy-listening stuff the recording is really rather fine. Crooning her way through a variety of songs Te Kanawa's voice is velvety, warm, engaging and pure.

Riddle's orchestration and arrangements are sympathetic, insightful and complement Te Kanawa's voice perfectly. It's quite interesting to see how an accomplished opera singer can weave magic into songs from another genre. Beguiled? You bet! Anyway, The P-1G wove its magic too. Everything was beautifully clear. Riddle's strings had a wonderful sheen, extended upper reaches and lovely weight at the lower end. Te Kanawa's voice was verging on the intimate (especially the very last track), and with the volume level appropriately set it was genuinely possible to close your eyes and imagine that she was in your room, singing for you.

The last test was a series of mono records. After all, despite a lot of earlier mono material being re-released these days I'm never quite sure whether the re-releases are true mono (a single lateral-only groove) or whether the signal has been fed to a stereo cutter head running in mono and giving two identical channels. There seems to be a significant lack of clarity on that subject.

Anyway, Sibelius on Decca (*Symphonies 3 and 5*, LSO, Collins ACL181) is a wonderful mono recording. Remarkably transparent, full of dynamic contrasts and with a wonderfully well-informed performance, again, in my view a rather underrated LP. The P-1G coped well. It was

Skyanalog P1-M & P-1G

evident this was an older recording from the sound quality – the upper reaches weren't perhaps as open and refined as we're used to with more modern recordings, but nevertheless, the P-1G retrieved and presented the upper echelons with clarity, attack and ease. The bottom end was similarly of its time, but none the worse for that. The only issue was that there was a noticeable increase in the noise floor compared with stereo recordings. I suspect this is as a result of the



slightly wider lateral-only groove, so the stylus is sitting rather lower in the groove. It was not intrusive, but as a comparison with later pressings I was just aware of it a tad more.

I then tried *BG The Small Groups*, a Benny Goodman compilation on RCA Victor (RD-7775). This is a stunning set of recordings. Full of huge dynamics, massive transient attacks and deep heavy bass lines. When the brass blow, they blow and the P-1G gave a superlative representation of the musical events captured in the grooves. There really was nothing to fault at all. The slight increase in surface noise (most noticeable between tracks), didn't really show itself during musical parts (except in a couple of more-exposed quieter sections) and the overall effect was of being drawn into the music, dragged into tapping your feet and almost humming along with BG himself.

What about the P-1M

Which one you end up with is a very nuanced decision. The P-1M is a superlative performer. Where the P-1G is open and transparent, the P-1M is slightly less so, but it's marginal. It's slightly warmer, the highs' don't feel quite so extended (but I'm aware that's a very subjective comment). There's the same openness about its presentation, and there's no difference in its ability to convey dynamic contrasts or the weight at the bottom end. To use the old Shure determinant trackability, I set the downforce of the P-1M at just a tad over the 1.3 grammes – it seemed' happiest there – and I couldn't get it to mistrack at all. In fact, I failed spectacularly in getting either to mistrack.

Both cartridges fall well within the recommended weight limits of the arms used, and despite the 3012 being supposedly fussy about having an MC at the sharp end, both performed really well in it. Although the arms I used do have a different sonic signature, one from another, the cartridges have a remarkably consistent sound. However, both are serious contenders, and compete with other manufacturers' cartridges at rather higher price points.

The major difference – and even then it was a marginal one – was that the P-1M exhibited slightly less background noise when playing the older mono records. This could possibly be because its major dimension was slightly greater. It might be because it sat slightly higher in the groove. It might be because originally those LPs would have been played with a spherical stylus with a diameter of around 0.001" (254 μ M) so is actually very close to the P-1M's major dimension.

Conclusion

The level of performance that these Skyanalog MCs offer represent a serious challenge to other cartridges at twice the price. The differences between the two are marginal at best, and almost come down to whether you prefer a slightly warmer presentation, or a slightly leaner one. Both have aluminium-bodies, share a common set of electrical specifications (loading etc) and only really differ in cantilever material (aluminium for the P-1M and boron for the G) and stylus profile.

When I went back to my own much more esoteric cartridge I was disappointed to find that it really wasn't that much better, so I'm now looking forward to having a play with Skyanalog's better cartridges in due course. The P-1G and P-1G are an absolute bargain, and worth every penny. It's clear that Skyanalog has learned a great deal from years spent manufacturing cartridges for other people, and its own offerings are a fine example of how to put learned experience to good use. Rather more than heartily recommended.

Specifications

P-1M

Type: moving coil cartridge

Body: aluminium

Cantilever: aluminium

Stylus: conical

Tracking Pressure: 1.9g

Input load impedance: 100 Ohms – 1kOhms

Internal impedance: 4 Ohms

Nominal output voltage: 0.4mV @3.54cm/s

Channel Balance : > 1dB

Separation : > 30dB @1kHz

Mass: 10gm

Warranty: 2 years

P-1G

Type: moving coil cartridge

Body: aluminium

Cantilever: boron

Stylus: elliptical

Tracking Pressure: 1.35g

Input load impedance: 100 – 220 Ohms

Internal impedance: 6 Ohms

Nominal output voltage: 0.35mV @3.54cm/s

Channel Balance : > 1dB

Separation : > 30dB @1kHz

Mass: 10gm

Warranty: 2 years

